



# Machbeth

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## Introduction

*Macbeth*, written in 1605-6, was the last of Shakespeare's great tragedies. The first performance of the play is believed to have taken place at Hampton Court in 1606 as part of the entertainment provided by King James the First for his visiting brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark. *Macbeth* is loosely based on the life of a real historical figure, as recorded in Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. Many of Shakespeare's additions to the original account of Macbeth's life have no basis in history. Of course, as a dramatist, the greatest addition Shakespeare made to the original story was to explore the inner lives of the central characters, in particular the struggle between good and evil in their individual minds. Along with *King Lear*, *Macbeth* is the darkest of Shakespeare's tragedies. This play is a concentrated study of the nature of evil.

Similar to all of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Macbeth* portrays the downfall of a once-great man. At the root of Macbeth's moral decline is his fatal flaw – ambition. The Macbeth we meet at the start of the play is Scotland's saviour, a warrior of awesome courage and ferocity and a hero whose loyalty to his king appears to be above question. By the close of the play the man initially described as 'Bellona's bridegroom' and 'noble Macbeth' and (by Duncan himself) as 'a peerless kinsman' has become a 'hellhound' and 'butcher'. One of the most interesting aspects of the play is how Shakespeare retains a degree of sympathy for his protagonist through to the end of the play. Initially a reluctant murderer, Macbeth becomes increasingly desensitised to killing. In the course of the play Macbeth murders Duncan, his king, cousin and guest; has his close friend Banquo assassinated; and has Macduff's entirely innocent wife and children slaughtered. Yet, remarkably, Shakespeare ensures that we are never entirely alienated from his blood-soaked protagonist.

Macbeth's 'dearest partner in greatness' is his wife. Lady Macbeth is ruthlessly ambitious, suppressing her conscience so that she will be able to do whatever is necessary to achieve 'the golden round' for her husband. While her prayer to the forces of darkness to fill her 'from crown to toe top-full of direst cruelty' is chilling, it also points to her humanity. She (no less than Macbeth) is not innately evil. Husband and wife fail to anticipate the consequences of their evil deeds – following the murder of Duncan, neither ever again experiences any inner peace.

The struggle between good and evil and the contrast between appearance and reality lie at the heart of this drama. These themes are universal and timeless. Another intriguing aspect of this play is the manner in which Macbeth's moral flaw not only corrupts him, but also ultimately poisons the entire state of Scotland. When Macbeth murders Duncan, he shatters a variety of natural bonds (Macbeth was Duncan's subject, kinsman and, on the night of his murder, his host), with the result that the entire moral or natural order is turned on its head. The state becomes sick ('the

sickly weal') with a usurper on the throne and will only be healed when the usurper is removed and the rightful king of Scotland accedes to the throne.

Over the years *Macbeth* has become surrounded by a great deal of superstition, and those involved in staging the play tend to refer to it as 'The Scottish Tragedy'.

*Macbeth* retains its appeal for the modern audience. It is first and foremost a compelling tale, rich in dramatic incident. It explores a range of themes that are enduringly relevant. The appeal of the play is heightened by its strong supernatural dimension, with witches, a ghost, a floating dagger and apparitions. The protagonist engages and always retains our interest because he is such a complex character, equally capable of ruthless savagery on one hand, and philosophical reflection and expression, which at times is almost poetic, on the other.



MENTOR BOOKS

## Scene-by-Scene Summary and Commentary

### ACT 1 Scene 1

The play opens in a dramatic manner with three witches on a heath. The witches are symbols and agents of evil, establishing a sinister atmosphere from the beginning. The cat ('Graymalkin') and the toad ('Paddock') to which the witches refer are associated with evil and witchcraft. The thunder and lightning point to the disorder that will shortly engulf Scotland. Macbeth is introduced to us in an atmosphere of evil. The fact that the witches plan to meet with him

suggests that Macbeth's destiny is, from the outset, linked with these evil creatures. The witches' paradoxical chant ('Fair is foul and foul is fair') conveys their rejection of normal moral values. The idea that 'fair is foul' may also suggest the contrast between appearance and reality – what appears to be good may in fact be evil. The 'fog and filthy air' which is the witches' natural element is suggestive of an environment where vision (in this instance moral vision) is often obscured, making it difficult to distinguish between good and evil, appearance and reality.



#### KEY POINTS

- Witches are symbols and agents of evil.
- Witches reject normal moral values.
- Macbeth's destiny is connected with these evil creatures.

### ACT 1 Scene 2

In this scene the audience learns about Macbeth through a wounded officer's account of his heroic exploits on the battlefield. As the captain delivers his report to Duncan, it is apparent that Macbeth is Scotland's saviour. Macbeth has defeated all of Duncan's enemies, both internal and external. He has ruthlessly put down a rebellion from within Scotland led by Macdonwald and has also repelled an attack by the Norwegian king (who was assisted by the treacherous Thane of Cawdor). Macbeth is portrayed as a fierce warrior who hacks his way through the ranks of his enemies – we are told that his sword 'smoked with bloody execution'. When he reached the treacherous Macdonwald, he 'unseamed him from the navel to the chops'. Macbeth is held in very high regard, respected for his courage, nobility and loyalty. He is described in admiring tones as 'brave Macbeth',

'noble Macbeth', 'valour's minion', 'Bellona's bridegroom' and 'worthy gentleman'.

The blood imagery in this scene indicates that this play is set in a very violent age. This is literally a blood-soaked play. The captain who reports on the battle is seriously wounded ('reeking wounds'), while Macbeth's exploits on the battlefield are described in gory detail.

This scene introduces the themes of loyalty and betrayal. Duncan's kingship is secure because of Macbeth's loyalty to his king and ferocity on the battlefield. Banquo is also described as the epitome of loyalty and courage. In contrast, Duncan was betrayed by the Thane of Cawdor, who will be executed for his treachery. Declaring that 'What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won', Duncan rewards Macbeth with the title of Thane of Cawdor.



## KEY POINTS

- Our first impression of Macbeth is a very positive one – he is described as brave, loyal and noble.
- Banquo is similarly described as loyal and courageous.
- This play is set in a very violent age – note the repeated use of images of violence and blood.
- Themes of loyalty and betrayal are introduced.

### ACT 1 Scene 3

In this scene we again meet the witches. We see them as cruel and vengeful as they conjure up an evil spell to punish a sailor whose wife refused to share her chestnuts with one of them. However, the witches' power over man is very limited. While 'the weird sisters' have power over the wind and can render the sailor's passage home more difficult, they do not have the power to directly harm him.

The connection between Macbeth and the witches is reinforced in our minds when Macbeth describes the day as 'foul and fair', unknowingly echoing the witches' earlier chant. The witches are strange, hideously ugly creatures. Banquo is startled by their unnatural appearance, wondering if they are human since they 'look not like the inhabitants of the earth, and yet are on it'. He is equally uncertain as to their gender. He thinks that they are women, but their beards naturally put a doubt in his mind: 'You should be women, and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so.'

The most interesting aspect of this scene is the contrasting responses of Macbeth and Banquo to the witches' prophecies. The witches address Macbeth as Thane of Glamis (his present title) and as Thane of Cawdor (his new title – although he does not yet know it), before prophesying that he 'shalt be king hereafter'. Macbeth's shocked, fearful reaction (Banquo asks why he seems to 'fear things that sound so fair') suggests that he has already thought about being king. He immediately becomes lost in his own thoughts, with Banquo twice describing him as 'rapt' in the aftermath of the prophecy. The witches

tempt Macbeth – they are aware of his tragic flaw (ambition) and exploit this weakness to bring about his downfall. They know that this seemingly most loyal Scottish lord already harbours ambitions to be king. Macbeth's ambitious nature is underscored by his intense interest in the witches' prophecy – he begs them to remain and tell him 'more'. In contrast to Macbeth, Banquo expresses little interest in the witches. He regards them with scepticism and caution: 'Speak then to me who neither beg nor fear your favours nor your hate.' He does not respond to the prophecy that he will be the father of kings ('Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none'). Unlike Macbeth, Banquo seems to be relatively unaffected by his encounter with the witches.

Shortly after the witches mysteriously vanish, messengers inform Macbeth that the title of Thane of Cawdor has been bestowed upon him. Following so soon on the witches' prophecies, Macbeth is incredulous: '...why do you dress me in borrowed robes?' This news reinforces Banquo's perception of the witches as innately evil beings: 'What, can the devil speak true?' The effect of this news on Macbeth is immediate and dramatic. Once again, he becomes lost in his own ambitious thoughts and is now convinced he will become king: 'The greatest is behind.' Banquo warns Macbeth that the witches are evil and may simply be ensnaring him in order to ultimately betray him: 'And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequence'. While the witches tempt Macbeth, the murderous thoughts that now form in his mind are entirely his own:

‘ . . . why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair, and make my seated heart knock at my ribs against the use of nature.’ The idea of murdering Duncan horrifies Macbeth – but it is an idea that he cannot get out of his mind (another indication that the idea of murdering Duncan was deep-rooted in his mind even before his encounter with the witches). For the moment Macbeth consoles himself with the thought that he might become king by chance: ‘If chance will have me king, why, chance may

crown me without my stir.’

At the close of this scene, Macbeth suggests to Banquo that they should both reflect on all that has happened and later speak to each other in an honest, open manner: ‘ . . . let us speak our free hearts each to other.’ Here again we see Macbeth’s deep interest in the witches’ prophecies. Despite what he says to Banquo, Macbeth never again speaks honestly or openly to his good friend as his finer qualities are gradually undermined and corrupted by ambition.



### KEY POINTS

- The witches tempt Macbeth with their prophecies, but have no power over him.
- Macbeth’s shocked, fearful reaction to the prophecies indicates that he has already thought about being king.
- Macbeth and Banquo react in contrasting ways to the witches’ prophecies – while Macbeth is intensely interested in the prophecies, Banquo is sceptical and wary of the witches.
- Banquo warns Macbeth that the witches are evil and may trick and betray him.
- Murderous thoughts start to form in Macbeth’s mind – even though such thoughts horrify him.

### ACT 1 Scene 4

Malcolm reports that the Thane of Cawdor has been executed for his treachery. Cawdor redeemed his reputation in the manner in which he conducted himself at his execution, publicly repenting his treachery and showing no fear of death. As Duncan reflects on Cawdor’s treachery, he realises that it is impossible to judge by appearances: ‘There’s no art to find the mind’s construction in the face.’ Duncan had complete trust in a man who went on to betray him: ‘He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust.’ The theme of loyalty and betrayal is central to this play, as is the theme of appearance and reality. While Duncan is a virtuous king, he seems to be rather trusting and gullible. It is very ironic that Duncan now places his faith in Macbeth, never suspecting that his

‘worthiest cousin’ has designs on his crown and murder on his mind.

We are struck by Macbeth’s hypocrisy when he declares to Duncan: ‘ . . . our duties are to your throne and state, children and servants.’ Throughout the play, evil is intrinsically linked with falseness. Duncan’s announcement that Malcolm will be his successor (with the title of Prince of Cumberland) has a dramatic impact on Macbeth’s thinking because he cannot now become king by ‘chance’. We see how darkness is associated both with evil and deception when, in a menacing aside, Macbeth appeals for the light of the stars to be extinguished: ‘Stars, hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires.’ At the close of this scene, the unsuspecting Duncan ironically describes Macbeth as ‘a peerless kinsman’.

**KEY POINTS**

- The Thane of Cawdor's treachery points to some of the key themes of this play: the theme of loyalty and betrayal and the theme of appearance and reality.
- Duncan's nomination of Malcolm as his heir has a dramatic impact on Macbeth's thinking.
- The evil, deep-rooted nature of Macbeth's ambition to be king is captured in his reference to his 'black and deep desires'.
- This is a scene rich in irony. Duncan refers to Macbeth as his 'worthiest cousin' and describes him as 'a peerless kinsman'. Having been betrayed by the previous Thane of Cawdor, Duncan will shortly be murdered by the man upon whom he has just bestowed this title – Macbeth.

**ACT 1 Scene 5**

Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth's letter telling of his meeting with the witches and their prophecies. Her soliloquy provides us with important insights into both of the central characters. Macbeth's ambitious nature is underlined by the fact that he addresses his wife as his 'dearest partner of greatness', and by her acknowledgement that he is 'not without ambition'. The insights that this soliloquy provides into Lady Macbeth's character are rather chilling – we see her as fiercely ambitious and utterly unscrupulous. She seems to share the witches' perverted sense of morality. While they believe that 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair', she regards kindness and humanity as weaknesses. She believes that her husband is 'too full of the milk of human kindness' to 'catch the nearest way' to the throne, fearing that he lacks the ruthlessness ('illness') that should accompany ambition. She plans to remove every moral and psychological obstacle that 'impedes' (blocks) Macbeth's route to the crown ('the golden round'). Lady Macbeth is determined to do all that is necessary to make her husband king.

Lady Macbeth's appeal to the forces of darkness to deny her womanly nature is especially chilling: '... unsex me here, and fill me from

the crown to the toe top-full of direst cruelty.' She wants to be 'unsexed' so that such typically female qualities as kindness and gentleness do not prevent her from doing what she deems necessary for her husband to accede to the throne. She wants to be possessed by evil spirits to ensure that she is not troubled by any qualms of conscience or by feelings of remorse. It could be argued that if Lady Macbeth were innately (naturally) evil, this prayer to the forces of darkness would be unnecessary. The audience's overriding impression is of a driven, ruthless woman who will sacrifice her very soul in order that her husband may become king. Lady Macbeth even thinks in terms of committing the murder herself: 'Come thick night, and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes . . .'

When Macbeth arrives back at Dunsinane, he informs his wife that the king is to stay with them that night. Lady Macbeth now becomes the real driving force behind the evil conspiracy to murder Duncan. She urges Macbeth to 'look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it', again suggesting how evil is inextricably bound up with falseness and deception. She takes it upon herself to plan the murder: '... you shall put this night's great business into my dispatch'.

**KEY POINTS**

- Lady Macbeth is ambitious and utterly unscrupulous.
- She has a perverted sense of moral values, seeing Macbeth's kind nature as a weakness.
- Her appeal to the evil spirits to possess her is particularly chilling – she is seemingly prepared to go to any lengths to see her husband on the Scottish throne.
- It is Lady Macbeth who plans the murder.

**ACT 1 Scene 6**

Duncan and his followers arrive at Macbeth's castle. It is ironic that Duncan should regard Macbeth's castle as pleasant and inviting ('This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses') since it is in fact a place of evil. Indeed, irony pervades this entire scene. Once again we note the contrast between appearances and reality with Duncan continually referring to Macbeth and his wife as his host and hostess ('Fair and noble hostess, we are your guest tonight'). For the audience, the repeated description of

Macbeth and his wife as Duncan's host and hostess accentuates their duty to look after their special guest. The deceptiveness of appearances is again underlined as Lady Macbeth plays the part of the devoted hostess to perfection, extending a warm welcome to the king. As she takes his hand and leads him into the castle, the trusting Duncan feels secure and happy in the company of his hosts and trusted 'friends'. He has no reason to suspect the evil reality lurking behind their show of warm hospitality – it is here, in the castle of his 'peerless kinsman' Macbeth, that Duncan will meet his death.

**KEY POINTS**

- Much of the irony in the play has to do with the contrast between appearances and reality – Macbeth's seemingly pleasant, inviting castle is in fact a place of evil.
- Duncan's continuous references to Macbeth and his wife as his host and hostess serve to remind the audience of their responsibilities towards him, and of the enormity of the planned crime.
- Duncan is seen as noble and trusting.

**ACT 1 Scene 7**

While the banquet in honour of Duncan is in progress, Macbeth reflects on the implications of the crime he is about to commit. This soliloquy provides the audience with important insights into the workings of Macbeth's mind. He is acutely (sharply) aware of the moral and spiritual consequences of murdering the king,

wishing that they could somehow be avoided: '... if the assassination could trammel up the consequence.' He lists compelling reasons as to why he should not kill Duncan. He realises that as Duncan's subject, relative and host, his duty is to protect him from any potential murderer, 'not bear the knife myself.' He also acknowledges that Duncan has been a good and just king: 'hath



borne his faculties so meek.’ Macbeth concludes that there is no justification for killing Duncan, accepting that his actions are motivated solely by ‘vaulting ambition’. He now changes his mind about the planned murder, informing his wife that they will ‘proceed no further in this business’. Macbeth is conscious of having been honoured by Duncan and of the high reputation he has achieved. He employs a clothing image to convey his desire to enjoy his elevated status: ‘He hath honoured me of late; and I have bought golden opinions from all sorts of people, which would be worn now in their newest gloss, not cast aside so soon’.

Lady Macbeth exercises a critical influence on her husband at this point. Determined that they should go ahead with the murder, she uses her formidable powers of persuasion to win Macbeth round to her way of thinking. Lady Macbeth is utterly unscrupulous in her attempts to manipulate her husband. She begins by questioning his courage (‘Art thou afeard?’), before using emotional blackmail in an attempt to make him feel guilty about breaking his word to her. She declares that she would sooner smash the head of

the child she was feeding than break her word to him. This nightmarish image underscores Lady Macbeth’s extraordinary resolve (determination). She has clearly won the moral argument when Macbeth ventures, ‘If we should fail?’ His wife’s response is unequivocal: ‘But screw your courage to the sticking place, and we’ll not fail’. Lady Macbeth’s plan for murdering Duncan is very unimaginative, but Macbeth is full of admiration for his wife’s strength of character (‘undaunted mettle’) and seems to be won over by the sheer force of her will. He suggests that she should only have male children (presumably because she displays such typically male qualities as ambition, determination and ruthlessness): ‘Bring forth men-children only’. By the close of this dramatic scene, Macbeth re-dedicates himself to killing the king: ‘I am settled, and bend up each corporal agent to this terrible feat.’ While Lady Macbeth clearly influences his thinking, Macbeth is ultimately responsible for his own moral choices. His closing remark at the end of this scene (‘False face must hide what the false heart must know’) accentuates the close connection between evil and deception.

### KEY POINTS



- Macbeth’s conscience is deeply troubled, and he decides not to go ahead with the murder.
- Following his wife’s intervention, Macbeth again resolves to kill the king.
- Lady Macbeth is a highly persuasive, unscrupulous and manipulative woman, changing her husband’s mind after a mere fifty lines of dialogue. However it must be remembered that Macbeth has free will and ultimately makes his own moral choices.
- Evil is inextricably linked with falseness and deception.

### ACT 2 Scene 1

This scene is set in the castle courtyard. Banquo and Fleance comment on the inky blackness of the night. Banquo’s reference to the starless night (‘There’s husbandry in heaven, their candles are all out’) creates a sense of foreboding. Banquo’s

opening speech suggests that he is wrestling with his conscience. He cannot sleep because the seed of ambition has taken root in his mind. Unlike Macbeth, Banquo is not innately ambitious – however, he too has been affected by the witches’ prophecies. In contrast to Macbeth,

## MACBETH

Banquo prays for help to resist evil thoughts: ‘. . . merciful powers restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose!’ When Macbeth arrives on the scene, Banquo tells him of Duncan’s pleasure at his warm reception and hands him a diamond that Duncan had given him as a gift for Lady Macbeth. Banquo admits to dreaming about ‘the three weird sisters’. However, Macbeth lies when he replies that he has not thought about the witches. We see further evidence of the corruption of Macbeth’s finer qualities when he vaguely sounds out Banquo in relation to his possible future support. Macbeth attempts to enlist Banquo’s assistance by offering him a veiled (thinly disguised) political bribe: ‘If you shall cleave to my consent when ‘tis, it shall make honour for you’. Here Macbeth seems to suggest that Banquo will be rewarded if he supports him at some unspecified point in the

future. Banquo’s guarded response suggests that he remains a man of principle and integrity as he insists on the primary importance of keeping his conscience clear and his loyalty untarnished: ‘So I lose none in seeking to augment it, but still keep my bosom franchised and allegiance clear’. When Macbeth is alone, he imagines that he sees a dagger floating in the air. This ‘dagger of the mind’ is an indication of the mental pressure that he now feels. Here we see Macbeth’s guilty conscience expressing itself through his vivid imagination. As he nears Duncan’s chamber, Macbeth remarks that ‘Now o’er the one half-world, nature seems dead’ – he is acutely aware of the horror of the crime he is about to commit and knows that it is utterly unnatural. However, when Lady Macbeth rings the bell to indicate that all is clear, Macbeth carries out the murder as planned.

### KEY POINTS



- Banquo struggles to resist the evil thoughts inspired by the witches’ prophecy.
- While Banquo admits to temptation and struggles to resist evil thoughts, Macbeth dishonestly pretends not to have thought about the witches.
- Macbeth is troubled and under great mental pressure before the murder – the floating dagger is a product of his guilty conscience and vivid imagination.

### ACT 2 Scene 2

This scene provides us with some indications that Lady Macbeth may not be the unfeeling monster she appears to be. She needs alcohol to give her false courage: ‘That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold.’ We see signs of humanity in her inability to kill the sleeping Duncan because he resembles her father: ‘Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done it.’ She is also on edge as she awaits Macbeth’s return, agitated by commonplace sounds. When Macbeth appears after committing the murder, she remarks, ‘I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry’.

It is significant that we do not see Macbeth killing the sleeping king. Perhaps Shakespeare

feared that his audience would lose all sympathy for his protagonist if they saw him cruelly stabbing the virtuous Duncan to death. Instead, we see Macbeth’s doubts beforehand, and his feelings of guilt, horror and regret immediately afterwards. The focus of the play is more on the anguish of the killer than the suffering of the victim. Macbeth is visibly shaken when he emerges from Duncan’s chamber; he is horrified and unnerved by what he has done. He appears to regret his dreadful crime, describing the blood on his hands as ‘a sorry sight’. Macbeth knows that his crime is a grave one and has cut him off from God: he could not reply to the prayer of the drunken guards. He tells his wife that he heard voices in Duncan’s chamber. The voice

that told Macbeth that he ‘doth murder sleep’ was the voice of his conscience expressing itself through his lively imagination. Macbeth is so overwhelmed by the horror of his crime that he forgets to attend to such practical details as leaving the bloody daggers with the guards and washing the blood from his hands. Speaking as if entranced, he stubbornly refuses to return to Duncan’s chamber: ‘I am afraid to think what I have done; look on it again I dare not’. His sense of guilt is so enormous that he imagines the blood on his hands turning the green seas red: ‘Will all great Neptune’s oceans wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.’ At the close of this scene the guilt-ridden Macbeth wishes that the knocking on the castle gate might wake the dead king: ‘Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!’

While Macbeth is close to a complete mental and emotional collapse in the immediate aftermath of the murder, Lady Macbeth remains remarkably composed. She focuses her energies on calming

her extremely anxious husband. She is the voice of practicality: ‘These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so, it will make us mad.’ This remark is charged with irony as it anticipates her own fate. Lady Macbeth’s awareness of the gravity of their crime is another indication that she is not as callous (unfeeling) as first impressions suggest. Her way of dealing with the murder of their king, cousin and guest is simply to refuse to think about it. Lady Macbeth focuses not on the moral implications of their crime, but on the practical details. Noticing her husband’s bloodstained hands, she urges Macbeth to ‘wash this filthy witness’ from his hands. She scorns his weakness, taking it upon herself to return the daggers to the scene of the crime. When she returns, she casually remarks that ‘A little water clears us of this deed’. This remark also proves to be powerfully ironic (later in the play she is haunted by the sight and smell of blood on her hands). In response to the knocking on the castle gate, Lady Macbeth tells her husband to put on his nightgown so that it will not appear as if they have been up in the middle of the night.

### KEY POINTS



- Lady Macbeth is not the ruthless monster she appears to be. She needs alcohol to give her false courage and cannot bring herself to kill the sleeping king.
- Macbeth is on the brink of a mental and emotional breakdown immediately after Duncan’s murder – he is filled with feelings of guilt, horror and regret.
- Lady Macbeth remains remarkably self-possessed, calmly attending to the practical details neglected by Macbeth.

### ACT 2 Scene 3

While the Porter scene with its bawdy wit seems to provide some light relief following the nerve-jangling tension of the previous scene, the humour in this scene is essentially dark. The porter’s speech touches on themes that are central to the play and contains images that recur throughout the drama. The fact that the

Porter imagines himself to be the porter at the gates of hell is grimly appropriate when viewed in the context of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s embracing of evil – the porter is, in a sense, opening the gates of hell when he responds to the knocking of Macduff and Lennox. His reference to ‘the equivocator ... who committed treason’ reminds us of the Thane of Cawdor’s

betrayal of Duncan and Scotland. The reference to treason also reminds us of Macbeth's crime. Equivocation (using double meanings to conceal the truth) is a key theme in the play – Macbeth is deceived and ultimately destroyed by double-meaning prophecies.

The Porter's tardiness in opening the gates of the castle to Macduff and Lennox gives Macbeth the time to regain his composure. Through Lennox we learn of the strange happenings that occurred during the previous night. He speaks of a violent storm that blew their chimneys down, and of 'strange screams of death' that were heard in the night. He also mentions earth tremors: '... some say the earth was feverous and did shake.' The natural world is profoundly disturbed by the unnatural murder of King Duncan.

It is Macduff who discovers that Duncan has been murdered. He underlines the gravity of the crime by describing it as 'most sacrilegious murder'. Since the king was seen as God's representative on earth, his murder is a crime against God. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth maintain a pretence (show / display) of shock and horror. In a speech designed to impress his audience with his loyalty and deep grief, Macbeth declares: 'Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had lived a blessed time'. While this speech may be dismissed as blatant hypocrisy, it may also be viewed as an expression of Macbeth's guilt. He is certainly correct when he states that, with the death of Duncan, 'renown and grace is dead'. When Lennox speaks of discovering the blood-covered and apparently guilty grooms, we realise that Macbeth has killed them to ensure their silence. These murders mark another step in Macbeth's moral decline, and are also the first murders he carries out without consulting with his partner in evil, Lady Macbeth. While Macbeth explains these killings by referring to his uncontrollable fury, Macduff is immediately suspicious: 'Wherefore did you so?'

At this point Macbeth starts to exaggerate and overact, speaking of Duncan's 'silver skin and golden blood'. When he states that Duncan's wounds 'looked like a breach in nature', we are reminded that this murder has violated the divinely ordained natural order. Lady Macbeth faints in order to draw attention away from her husband, fearing that his exaggerated expression of grief may point to their guilt. It has been suggested that her fainting may not be an act, and is instead a sign that the strain of events is beginning to affect her. However, there is no doubt but that by fainting at this precise moment she prevents Macbeth from arousing the serious suspicions of all in the castle. While Lady Macbeth's diversionary tactic appears to achieve its purpose, subsequent observations indicate that some already have serious doubts regarding Macbeth.

In the immediate aftermath of Duncan's murder, Banquo declares that the thanes should investigate the killing: '... let us meet and question this most bloody of work to know it further'. He appears to dedicate himself to fighting 'treasonous malice'. Malcolm and Donalbain are filled with suspicion and fear. Malcolm is sufficiently shrewd to see beyond appearances and seems to be speaking of Macbeth's elaborate display of grief when he observes: 'To show an unfelt sorrow is an office which the false man does easy'. Donalbain also realises that they are in a world of false appearances where people are not what they seem to be, pointedly suggesting that a relative has blood on his hands: 'There's daggers in men's smiles: the near in blood, the nearer bloody'. Realising that they are in grave danger, Duncan's sons decide to immediately leave Scotland with Malcolm departing for England and Donalbain for Ireland. Their decision to flee Scotland conveniently clears the way for Macbeth to become king, while drawing suspicion upon themselves.