Background Info

**Author Bio**
Full Name: William Shakespeare  
Date of Birth: 1564  
Place of Birth: Stratford-upon-Avon, England  
Date of Death: 1616

**Brief Life Story:** Shakespeare’s father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King’s Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

**Key Facts**
- **Full Title:** The Tragedy of Macbeth  
- **Genre:** Tragic drama  
- **Setting:** Scotland and, briefly, England during the eleventh century

Plot Summary

Norwegians, aided by Scottish rebels, have invaded Scotland. The Scots successfully defend their country and their beloved king, Duncan. One Scotman in particular, Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, distinguishes himself in fighting off the invaders. After the battle, Macbeth and his friend Banquo come upon the weird sisters, three witches who prophesy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, and one day king. They further prophesy that Banquo’s descendants will be kings. The men don’t at first believe the witches, but then learn that the old Thane of Cawdor was actually a traitor helping the Norwegians, and that Duncan has rewar ded Macbeth’s bravery on the battlefield by making him Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth immediately fantasizes about murdering Duncan and becoming king, but pushes the thought away. Later that day, Duncan announces that his eldest son, Malcolm, will be heir to his throne. As Macbeth begins to succumb to his ambition, Duncan decides to spend his time in celebration at Macbeth’s castle of Inverness.

Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband about the prophecy and Duncan’s imminent arrival. She decides her husband is too kind to follow his ambitions, and vows to push him to murder Duncan and take the crown that very night. Macbeth at first resists his wife’s plan, but his ambition and her constant questioning of his courage and manhood win him over. That night they murder Duncan and frame the men guarding Duncan’s room. The next morning, Macduff, another Scottish thane, discovers Duncan dead and raises the alarm. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pretend to be shocked and outraged. Macbeth murders the guardsmen of Duncan’s room to keep them silent, but says he did it out of a furious rage that they killed the king. Duncan’s sons think they may be the next target, and flee. Macbeth is made king, and because they ran, Duncan’s sons become the prime suspects in their father’s murder.

Because he knows the witches’ prophecy, Banquo is suspicious of Macbeth. And because of the prophecy that Banquo’s line will reign as kings, Macbeth sees Banquo as a threat. Macbeth gives a feast, inviting many thanes, including Banquo. Macbeth hires two murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance as they ride to attend the feast. The men kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes. At the feast, Macbeth sees Banquo’s ghost, though no one else does. Macbeth’s behavior and the death of Banquo make all the thanes suspicious. They begin to think of Macbeth as a tyrant. Macduff refuses to appear at the royal court at all, and goes to England to support Malcolm in his effort to raise an army against Macbeth.

Macbeth visits the three witches to learn more about his fate. They show him three apparitions who tell Macbeth to beware Macduff, but also that no “man born of woman” can defeat him and that he will rule until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane (a castle). Since all men are born of women and trees can’t move, Macbeth takes this to mean he’s invincible. Yet the witches also confirm the prophecy that Banquo’s line will one day rule Scotland. To strengthen his hold on the crown, Macbeth sends men to Macduff’s castle to murder Macduff’s family. Meanwhile, in England, Macduff and Malcolm prepare to invade Scotland. When news comes to England of the murder of Macduff’s family, Macduff, weeping, vows revenge.

While the English and Scottish under Malcolm march toward Dunsinane, Lady Macbeth begins sleepwalking and imagining blood on her hands that can’t be washed off. Macbeth has become manic, cruel, and haughty—many of his men desert to Malcolm’s side. In Birnam Wood, Malcolm and his generals devise a strategy to hide their numbers—they cut branches to hold up in front of them. As Macbeth prepares for the siege, Lady Macbeth dies, perhaps of suicide. Macbeth can barely feel anything anymore, and her death only makes him give a speech about the meaninglessness of life. Then Malcolm’s forces appear looking like a forest marching toward the castle. Malcolm’s forces quickly capture Dunsinane, but Macbeth himself fights on, mocking all who dare to face him as “men born of woman.” But Macduff reveals that he was “untimely ripped” from his mother’s womb (a caesarean section). Macduff kills Macbeth, and Malcolm is crowned as King of Scotland.

Characters

**Macbeth** – Lady Macbeth’s husband and a Scottish nobleman, the Thane of Glamis. He is made Thane of Cawdor for his bravery in battle, and becomes King of Scotland by murdering the previous King, Duncan. As Macbeth opens, Macbeth is one of the great noblemen in Scotland: valiant, loyal, and honorable. He’s also ambitious, and while this ambition helps to make him the great lord he is, once he hears the weird sisters’ prophecy Macbeth becomes so consumed by his desire for power that he becomes a tyrannical and violent monster who ultimately destroys himself. What’s perhaps most interesting about Macbeth is that he senses the murder will lead to his own destruction even before he murders Duncan, yet his ambition is so great that he still goes through with it.

**Lady Macbeth** – Macbeth’s wife. Unlike her husband, she has no reservations about murdering Duncan in order to make Macbeth King of Scotland. She believes that a true man takes what he wants, and whenever Macbeth objects to murdering Duncan on moral grounds, she questions his courage. Lady Macbeth assumes that she’ll be able to murder Duncan and then quickly forget it once she’s Queen of Scotland. But she discovers that guilt is not so easily avoided, and falls into madness and despair.

**Banquo** – A Scottish nobleman, general, and friend of Macbeth. He is also the father of Fleance. The weird sisters prophesy that while Banquo will never be King of Scotland, his descendants will one day sit on the throne. Banquo is as ambitious as Macbeth, but unlike Macbeth he resists putting his selfish ambition above his honor or the good of Scotland.

Because he both knows the prophecy and is honorable, Banquo is both a threat to Macbeth and a living example of the noble path that Macbeth chose not to take. After Macbeth has Banquo murdered he is haunted by Banquo’s ghost, which symbolizes Macbeth’s terrible guilt at what he has become.

**Macduff** – A Scottish nobleman, and the Thane of Fife. His wife is Lady Macduff, and the two have babies and a young son. Macduff offers a contrast to Macbeth: a Scottish lord who, far from being ambitious, puts the welfare of Scotland even ahead of the welfare of his own family. Macduff suspects Macbeth from the beginning, and becomes one of the leaders of the rebellion. After Macbeth has Macduff’s family murdered, Macduff’s desire for vengeance becomes more personal and powerful.
King Duncan – The King of Scotland, and the father of Malcolm and Donalbain. Macbeth murders him to get the crown. Duncan is the model of a good, virtuous king who puts the welfare of the country above his own and seeks, like a gardener, to nurture and grow the kingdom that is his responsibility. Duncan is the living embodiment of the political and social order that Macbeth destroys.

Malcolm – The older of King Duncan’s two sons, and Duncan’s designated heir to the throne of Scotland. Early in the play, Malcolm matures, and with the help of Macduff and an English army, Malcolm eventually overthrows Macbeth and retakes the throne, restoring the order that was destroyed when Macbeth was murdered.

Weird Sisters – Three witches, whose prophecy helps push Macbeth’s ambition over the edge, and convinces him to murder Duncan in order to become King. The witches’ knowledge of future events clearly indicates that they have supernatural powers, and they also clearly enjoy using those powers to cause havoc and mayhem among mankind. But it is important to realize that the witches never compel anyone to do anything. Instead, they tell half-truths to lure men into giving into their own dark desires. It’s left vague in Macbeth whether Macbeth would have become King of Scotland if he just sat back and did nothing. This vagueness seems to suggest that while the broad outlines of a person’s fate might be predetermined, how the fate plays out is up to him.

Fleance – Banquo’s teenage son. Macbeth sees him as a threat because of the weird sisters’ prophecy that Banquo’s descendants will one day rule Scotland.

Lady Macduff – The wife of Macduff and the mother of Macduff’s children (and the only female character of note in the play besides Lady Macbeth). She questions her husband’s decision to leave his family behind when he goes to England to help Malcolm save Scotland from Macbeth.

Young Macduff – Macduff’s son, still a child.

Lennox – A Scottish nobleman.

Ross – A Scottish nobleman.

Angus – A Scottish nobleman.

Donalbain – King Duncan’s younger son and Malcolm’s brother.

Fate

From the moment the weird sisters tell Macbeth and Banquo their prophecies, both the characters and the audience are forced to wonder about fate. Is it real? Is action necessary to make it come to pass, or will the prophecy come true no matter what one does? Different characters answer these questions in different ways at different times, and the final answers are ambiguous—as fate always is.

Unlike Banquo, Macbeth acts: he kills Duncan. Macbeth tries to master fate, to make fate conform to exactly what he wants. But, of course, fate doesn’t work that way. By trying to master fate once, Macbeth puts himself in the position of having to master fate always. At every instant, he has to struggle against those parts of the witches’ prophecies that don’t favor him. Ultimately, Macbeth becomes so obsessed with his fate that he becomes delusional: he becomes unable to see the half-truths behind the witches’ prophecies. By trying to master fate, he brings himself to ruin.

Violence

To call Macbeth a violent play is an understatement. It begins in battle, contains the murder of men, women, and children, and ends not just with a climactic siege but the suicide of Lady Macbeth and the beheading of its main character, Macbeth.

In the process of all this bloodshed, Macbeth makes an important point about the nature of violence: every violent act, even those done for selfish reasons, seems to lead inevitably to the next. The violence through which Macbeth takes the throne, as Macbeth himself realizes, opens the way for others to try to take the throne for themselves through violence. So Macbeth must commit more violence, and more violence, until violence is all he has left. As Macbeth himself says after seeing Banquo’s ghost, “blood will to blood.” Violence leads to violence, a vicious cycle.

Nature and the Unnatural

In medieval times, it was believed that the health of a country was directly related to the goodness and moral legitimacy of its king. If the king was good and just, then the nation would have good harvests and good weather. If there was political order, then there would be natural order. Macbeth shows this connection between the political and natural world: when Macbeth disrupts the social and political order by murdering Duncan and usurping the throne, nature goes haywire. Incredible storms rage, the earth tremors, animals go insane and eat each other. The unnatural events of the physical world emphasize the horror of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s acts, and mirrors the warping of their souls by ambition.

Also note the way that different characters talk about nature in the play. Duncan and Malcolm use nature metaphors when they speak of kingship—they see themselves as gardeners and want to make their realm grow and flower. In contrast, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth either try to hide from nature (wishing the stars would disappear) or to use nature to hide their cruel designs (being the serpent hiding beneath the innocent flower). The implication is that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, once they’ve given themselves to the extreme selfishness of ambition, have themselves become unnatural.

Manhood

Over and over again in Macbeth, characters discuss or debate about manhood. Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth when he decides not to kill Duncan, Banquo refuses to join Macbeth in his plot, Lady Macduff questions Macduff’s decision to go to England, and on and on.

Through these challenges, Macbeth questions and examines manhood itself. Does a true man take what he wants no matter what it is, as Lady Macbeth believes? Or does a real man have the strength to restrain his desires, as Banquo believes? All of Macbeth can be seen as a struggle to answer this question about the nature and responsibilities of manhood.

Symbols

Symbols are shown in red whenever they appear in the Plot Summary and Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.
Summary and Analysis

The color-coded bars in Summary and Analysis make it easy to track the themes through the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section. For instance, a bar of green indicates that all five themes apply to that part of the summary.

Act 1, scene 1

As a storm rages, three witches appear, speaking in rhyming, paradoxical couplets: "When the battle's lost and won" (1.1.4); "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.10). They agree to meet again on the heath (plain) when the battle now raging ends. There they'll meet Macbeth.

Act 1, scene 2

At a military camp, King Duncan of Scotland, his sons Malcolm and Donalbain, and the Thane of Lennox wait for news of the war. A captain enters, covered in so much blood he is almost unrecognizable. The captain tells them of the state of the battle against the invading Norwegians and the Scottish rebels Macdonald and the Thane of Cawdor. Two Scottish nobleman have been especially brave, Macbeth (the Thane of Glamis) and Banquo. Macbeth killed Macdonald ("unseemed him from the nave to th' chops") (1.2.22).

The Thane of Ross arrives, and describes how Macbeth defeated Sverno, the Norwegian King, who now begs for a truce. Duncan proclaims that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor shall be put to death, and that Macbeth shall be made Thane of Cawdor.

Act 1, scene 3

On the heath the witches appear. They call themselves the "weird sisters" (1.3.30) and brag of their dread and magical deeds such as killing swine and cursing a sailor to waste away.

Macbeth and Banquo enter. The witches hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and "king hereafter" (1.3.47). Banquo asks Macbeth why he seems to fear this good news, then questions the witches about his own future. They say that Banquo is "lesser than Macbeth and greater" (1.3.63) because though he'll never be king, his descendants will.

Macbeth asks how the witches know this information. But the witches vanish, making the two men wonder if they could have imagined the whole thing. Just then, Ross and Angus enter. They tell Macbeth that the old Thane of Cawdor was a traitor and that Duncan has made Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor.

Macbeth and Banquo are shocked. Macbeth asks Banquo if he now thinks that his children will be king. Banquo seems unsure, and comments that "instruments of darkness" sometimes tell half truths to bring men to ruin.

As Banquo talks with Ross and Angus, Macbeth ponders the prophecy. If it's evil, why would it truly predict his being made Thane of Cawdor? If it's good, why would he already be contemplating murder, a thought that makes "my seated heart knock at my ribs" (1.3.134-136)? Macbeth feels that he's losing himself, and hopes that if fate says he'll become king, he won't have to act to make it happen.

Ross and Angus think Macbeth's reverie is caused by becoming Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo agree to speak about the witches' prophecy later.

Act 1, scene 4

At a camp near the battlefield, Malcolm tells Duncan that the old Thane of Cawdor confessed and repented before being executed. Duncan notes that you can't always trust a man by his outward show. Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus enter. Duncan says that even the gift of Cawdor is not as much as Macbeth deserves. Macbeth responds: "The service and loyalty I owe, in doing it, pays itself" (1.4.22).

Duncan is pleased. He says: "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing" (1.4.28-29). Next, he announces that Malcolm will be heir to the Scottish throne (the kingship was not hereditary in Scotland at that time). Duncan then adjourns the meeting and decides to spend the night at Inverness, Macbeth's castle.

Macbeth goes ahead to prepare for the King's visit, but notes that Malcolm now stands between him and the throne. He begs the stars to "hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.51).

Act 1, scene 5

At Inverness, Lady Macbeth reads a letter in which Macbeth tells her of the witches' prophecy. Lady Macbeth worries Macbeth is too kind and honorable to fulfill his ambition and the prophecy. She decides to question his manhood to make him act.

A servant enters with news that Duncan will spend the night, then exits. Lady Macbeth says Duncan's visit will be fatal, and calls on spirits to "unsex me here... and take my milk for gall" (1.5.39-46).

Macbeth enters, and says Duncan will spend the night and leave the next day. Lady Macbeth says Duncan will never see that day. She counsels Macbeth to look like an "innocent flower," but be the viper hiding beneath it (1.5.63). Macbeth remains unconvinced. Lady Macbeth tells him to leave the plan to her.

In order to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth not only renounces her womanhood, she literally asks to be turned into an unnatural fiend!

Lady Macbeth is established as power-hungry. She sees honor as a weakness, and knows how to push her husband's buttons: question his courage.

Macbeth is still struggling against his ambition. Lady Macbeth's advice on how to hide one's true intentions involves exploiting nature. (Note: in the Garden of Eden, the devil hid himself in the form of a snake.)

Act 1, scene 6

Duncan, Malcolm, Donalbain, Banquo, Lennox, Macduff, Ross, and Angus arrive at Inverness. Duncan comments on the sweetness of the air. Banquo notes that martlets, a species of bird that usually nests in churches, have nested in the castle.

Lady Macbeth warmly greets the King and the thanes, though Macbeth is nowhere to be seen.

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Duncan comments about how good Macbeth seems to be, but Lady Macbeth has already laid plans to murder him.

Ironic that Duncan thinks the castle where he'll be murdered is beautiful. Also shows what beauty Macbeth loses when he gives in to his ambition.

At this point, the planned murder weight more on Macbeth than on Lady Macbeth.

Act 1, scene 7

Macbeth, alone, agonizes about whether to kill Duncan. He'd be willing to murder Duncan if he thought that would be the end of it. But he knows that "bloody instructions, being taught, return to plague the inventor" (1.7.10). Also, Macbeth notes, Duncan is a guest, kinsmen, and good king. He decides ambition is not enough to justify the murder.

Macbeth wrestles with his ambition and wits. He knows that murdering Duncan will only end up leading to more bloodshed, and ruin his honor, which he prizes.
Lady Macbeth enters, asking where he’s been. Macbeth tells her they won’t murder Duncan. She questions his manhood. Macbeth replies: “I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is none” (1.7.46-47). But Lady Macbeth continues: she says she has nursed his baby, but if she’d known her husband was such a coward she’d have rather “dashed [the baby’s] brains out” (1.7.56).

Macbeth asks what will happen if they fail. Lady Macbeth assures him they won’t fail if they have courage. She outlines the plan: she’ll give Duncan’s bedroom attendants enough wine to ensure they black out from drunkenness. Then she and Macbeth will commit the murder and frame the attendants. Macbeth, impressed by her courage, agrees.

Macbeth wishes that the knocking could wake Duncan.

Macbeth shows remorse.

Act 2, scene 1

It is after midnight in Inverness. Banquo talks with his son Fleance and notices the stars aren’t shining. He prays for angels to “restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose” (2.1.7-8).

Banquo enters. Banquo tells Macbeth his sleep has been troubled by dreams of the weird sisters. Macbeth claims never to think about them. But he prays for angels to “restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose” (2.1.7-8).

Lady Macbeth enters. She says she has nursed his baby, but if she’d known her husband was such a coward she’d have rather “dashed [the baby’s] brains out” (1.7.56).

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth debate about manhood and courage. She says it’s taking what you want. He says it’s the power to put responsibility before selfishness; the power to not take what you want.

Lady Macbeth’s tragedy is that she doesn’t realize that murdering Duncan will torment and ultimately destroy her. Macbeth’s tragedy is more profound: he does realize it, and still gives in to his ambition.

Banquo is open about the troubling “dreams” the witches have inspired in him. Macbeth, who has decided to act on his own selfish ambition, is not.

Banquo believes true manhood means acting honorably—just what Macbeth used to believe.

As Macbeth gets closer to the murder, nature starts to go haywire.

Interesting that in Macbeth, most of the violence happens offstage.

Act 2, scene 2

Lady Macbeth waits in agitation for Macbeth to do the deed. She comments that had she known Duncan not looked like her father she’d have killed him herself.

Macbeth enters. He’s killed Duncan and Duncan’s attendants. His hands are bloodstained and he’s upset that when one of the attendants said “God bless us” in his sleep, he was unable to say “Amen.” He also thought he heard a voice say “Macbeth does murder sleep” (2.2.34).

Lady Macbeth soothes him and tells him to wash his hands, but notices he’s still carrying the daggers he used to kill Duncan. Macbeth refuses to return to the scene of the crime. Lady Macbeth, furious, runs off to plant the daggers on the attendants.

A knock sounds, terrifying Macbeth. He worries that not all the water in the world could wash the blood from his hands.

Lady Macbeth returns, her hands now as bloody as Macbeth’s. But she’s calm, and identifies the “mysterious” knocking as someone at the south entrance. She says: “a little water clears us of this deed” (2.2.65), and tells Macbeth to go and put his nightgown on so no one will suspect them.

Lady Macbeth isn’t completely cold-blooded, foreshadowing her future feelings of guilt.

Bloodstained hands and sleeplessness: symbols of guilt. Macbeth is haunted: he knows the consequences of this murder.

Compare Macbeth’s nervousness to Lady Macbeth’s calm, collected behavior.

The knock at the door parallels the “knocking” of Macbeth’s heart in scene 1.3.

In the royal palace of Forres, Banquo states his suspicion that Macbeth fulfilled the witches’ prophecy by foul play. But he notes that since the prophecy came true for Macbeth, perhaps it will come true for him as well.
Macbeth enters, with other thanes and Lady Macbeth. He asks Banquo to attend a feast that evening. Banquo says he will, but that meanwhile he has to ride somewhere on business. Macbeth asks if Fleance will be riding with him. Banquo says yes, then departs. Once he's alone, Macbeth sends a servant to summon two men. As he waits for them to arrive, he muses that she has what she Macbeth murdered return to the castle to tell attack. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. The servant to summon two men. As he waits for them to then departs. Once he's alone, Macbeth responds: “We have scorched time alone. Macbeth echoes Macbeth's effort to control fate seats his doom. Fleance lives and Banquo's death makes the Thanes suspicious.

The ghost reappears and Macbeth, terrified, starts shouting at it. Lady Macbeth tries to play down her husband's strange behavior. The ghost again disappears. Macbeth is amazed that everyone could be so calm in the face of such sights. When Ross asks what sights, Lady Macbeth steps in and asks the guests to leave at once. The thanes exit.

Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth: “Blood will have blood” (3.4.121), and asks what Lady Macbeth makes of the fact that Macduff does not appear at the royal court. He decides to visit the weird sisters to find out more about his fate.

He says: “I am in blood / Stepped in so far” (3.4.135) that turning back is as difficult as continuing on.

Macbeth has become so warped he cannot tell the unnatural from the natural any more. Lady Macbeth sees lying is useless and chooses isolation: she tells the thanes to leave.

Macbeth’s desperation to keep power motivates him to visit the weird sisters. He has sacrificed everything for his ambition…

…new ambition and violence are all he has left, and he knows it.

Act 3, scene 2

After sending a servant to fetch Macbeth, Lady Macbeth waits, and muses that she has what she desires but isn’t happy.

Macbeth enters. She asks why he spends so much time alone. Macbeth responds: “We have scorched the snake, not killed it” (3.2.15). He fears someone might try to kill him as he killed Duncan, and seems envious of Duncan’s "sleep" (3.2.25).

Lady Macbeth reminds him to be “bright and jovial” at the feast. Macbeth tells her to act the same. But then Macbeth moans, “O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!” (3.2.37) because Banquo and Fleance are still alive.

Macbeth says that before the right is there shall be a “deed of dreadful note” (3.2.45), but adds that she’s better off being innocent until she can applaud what has happened.

Act 3, scene 3

The two murderers lie in wait a mile from the royal castle. A third murderer joins them, sent by Macbeth.

Banquo and Fleance enter. The murderers attack. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. The murderers return to the castle to tell Macbeth what’s happened.

Act 3, scene 4

Macbeth bids all the lords welcome to the feast. Just at that moment, he notices that one of the murderers is standing at the door. The murderer tells Macbeth that Banquo is dead but Fleance escaped. Macbeth comforts himself that Fleance will not be a threat for quite some time.

Lady Macbeth calls to Macbeth and asks him to return to the feast and sit. But Macbeth doesn’t see an empty seat at the table. When Lennox gestures at a seat, saying it’s empty, Macbeth sees Banquo’s ghost sitting there. Macbeth alone can see the ghost. He astonishes the thanes by shouting at the empty chair.

Lady Macbeth tells the thanes not to worry, that since childhood Macbeth has suffered fits. She pulls Macbeth aside and once again questions his manhood. The ghost disappears. Macbeth rambles about murders and spirits risen from the grave until Lady Macbeth reminds him of his guests. He echoes her story about his fits, then leads a toast to the missing Banquo.

Act 3, scene 5

The weird sisters meet with Hecate, the goddess of witches. She rebukes the sisters for meddling with Macbeth without first consulting her. But she says she’ll help them when Macbeth comes to see them tomorrow. She says that they’ll show him visions that will give him confidence and “draw him to his confusion” (3.5.29).

Many productions of Macbeth cut this scene. It introduces Hecate, and establishes that the witches truly are out to get Macbeth. Many productions of the play prefer to keep the witches’ motivations more vague.

Act 3, scene 6

Lennox and another lord talk sarcastically about Macbeth and the too great similarities between the murders of Duncan and Banquo, with Donalbain and Malcolm accused of the first and Fleance blamed for the second.

Macduff, the lord says, has gone to England to meet with Malcolm and try to get the English King Edward and his lords to gather an army to help them defeat Macbeth. The rumor is that Macbeth sent a messenger to Macduff. Macduff rebuffed the messenger, who turned his back as if to say that Macduff would pay for that decision.

Both men hope Macduff remains safe and soon returns with the armies of Malcolm and England to free Scotland from Macbeth.

Macbeth’s murder of Banquo, committed to control his fate, has had the opposite effects. Now the thanes see Macbeth for what he is: a tyrant.

Compare Macduff and Macbeth: Macduff will do anything for personal power; Macduff will do anything to save his country.

Ambition has made Macbeth a violent tyrant who holds the throne only through fear.

Act 4, scene 1

In a cavern, the weird sisters throw away ingredients such as “eye of newt and toe of frog” (4.1.14) into a cauldron full of a boiling brew. Hecate arrives, and all dance and sing. One witch cries out “Something wicked this way comes” (4.1.62); Macbeth enters. He commands the witches to answer his questions.

The witches conjure up three apparitions. First, a floating head appears and tells Macbeth to beware Macduff.

Next, a bloody child appears. The child says that “no man of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.95-96).

Finally, a child wearing a crown and holding a tree appears. It says that Macbeth will not be defeated until Great Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth is pleased: since forests don’t march, he must be invincible!

There is a resemblance between Macbeth and the witches now. All are wicked, all are unnatural.

The head symbolizes either Macduff’s rebellion or Macbeth’s fate.

The bloody child symbolizes Macduff’s birth by caesarian section.

The child with crown and tree symbolizes Malcolm.
Macbeth wants to know one more thing: will Banquo’s heirs have the throne? The witches perform a final conjuring. Eight kings appear walking in a line, the eighth holding a mirror, and all of them followed by Banquo’s ghost. Macbeth, furious at this sign that Banquo’s heirs will get the throne, demands answers. But Hecate mocks him and the witches vanish.

Lennox enters. He brings word that Macduff has fled to England. In an aside, Macbeth scolds himself for failing to kill Macduff when he wanted to earlier. He vows in the future to act on every impulse, and decides to attack Macduff’s castle and kill anyone connected to him: servants, wife, and children.

The king holding the mirror symbolizes King James who ruled England when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, and whose family traced its ancestry back to Banquo.

Ambition and fear have pushed Macbeth that final step: he is no longer targeting just his political enemies, but also their innocent families. Macbeth is now truly a monster.

It is night in Macbeth’s castle of Dunsinane. A doctor and a gentlewoman wait. The gentlewoman called the doctor because she has seen Lady Macbeth sleepwalking the last few nights, but she refuses to say what Lady Macbeth says or does.

When he killed Duncan, Macbeth thought he heard a voice say he had murdered sleep. Well, he did! Lady Macbeth’s sleep.

Lady Macbeth enters, holding a candle, but asleep. Lady Macbeth keeps rubbing her hands as if to wash them while saying “out, damned spot” (5.1.30). Then Lady Macbeth seems to relive her attempt to convince Macbeth to kill Duncan, concluding with the words: “yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him” (5.1.33-34)?

The horrified doctor and gentlewoman watch as Lady Macbeth then relives conversations with Macbeth after the murder of Banquo and hears an imaginary knocking and rushes off to bed. The doctor says the disease is beyond his power to cure, and that “unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles” (5.1.61-62). He also says he dares not speak about what he’s just witnessed.

Lady Macbeth, who once naively thought she could just wash her hands and forget Duncan’s murder, is now sleepwalking and so full of guilt that she imagines her hands are always covered in blood.

Another debate about manhood. Does a real man sacrifice the safety of his family for the good of his country?

Lady Macbeth’s guilt makes it impossible for her to hide the horrors that she and Macbeth have committed. Her conscience is rebelling against the unnatural (and that ambition has turned her into).

Lady Macduff enters. She tells the boy that his father is dead. The boy doesn’t believe her, but asks if his father is a traitor. Lady Macduff says yes, Macduff is a traitor: a man who swore an oath and broke it and now must hang. The boy thinks if traitors allow themselves to be hanged they must be fools, since there are undoubtedly more traitors than honest men in the world.

Macduff’s son is wise beyond his years, noting that those who put themselves above society for ornamental those who put the common good above their own selfish ambitions.

Macduff has ordered the murder of the innocent. His loss of humanity is complete, and the seeds of his self-destruction are sown.

Macbeth’s efforts to maintain power through violence have, in fact, turned people against him and made him weak.

Another debate about manhood. Does a real man sacrifice the safety of his family for the good of his country?

Macbeth dismisses all reports about Malcolm’s army, saying he’ll fear nothing until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane and mocking Malcolm as a man born of woman. He shouts for his servant Seyton to bring his armor, then muses how sick at heart he feels, how withered his life has become.

With the mention of Birnam Wood and Dunsinane, the audience can see that Macbeth’s fate is approaching.

Macbeth seems totally out of touch with reality. He is a man warped beyond any semblance of humanity.

Macbeth is lying in bed. Malcolm has come. Malcolm has come.

Macbeth laughs at the coming army, but seems bored by his lack of fear. Suddenly, a woman cries out. Seyton investigates, and returns with news that Lady Macbeth has died. Macbeth gives a speech about life: “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,” concluding that life is “a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing” (5.3.18-27).

Macbeth has become so numb because of his own terrible actions that he can’t even react when his wife dies. All he can do is comment on how meaningless life is.

Macduff enters. He tells Malcolm that if he invaded the Scottish people would line up to join his army against Macbeth. Finally, Ross tells Macduff his family has been murdered. Macduff cries out in anguish. Malcolm tells him to fight it like a man. Macduff responds that he must also “feel it like a man” (4.3.223). But they agree that Macduff’s anger and grief should be used to fuel his revenge.

Lennox and other Scottish lords and soldiers discuss the situation: Malcolm and his army are at Birnam Wood. Macbeth, in a constant rage verging on madness, is fortifying the stronghold of Dunsinane.

The lords agree that Macbeth is tormented by his terrible actions, and that those who follow him do so out of fear, not love. The lords ride to join Malcolm.

Macbeth enters. He brings word that Macduff has fled to England. In an aside, Macbeth scolds himself for failing to kill Macduff when he wanted to earlier. He vows in the future to act on every impulse, and decides to attack Macduff’s castle and kill anyone connected to him: servants, wife, and children.

In Birnam Wood, Malcolm walks with Macduff, Siward, Young Siward, and others Scottish and English lords. Malcolm gives orders that to hide the size of their army, all soldiers should cut a branch from a tree and hold it upright as they march.

In England, near the palace of King Edward, Macduff urges Malcolm to quickly raise an army against Macbeth. But Malcolm says Macduff might actually be working for Macbeth, a suspicion heightened by the fact that Macbeth left his family behind and is working for Macbeth, a suspicion heightened by the fact that Macbeth left his family behind and is working for Macbeth.

Macbeth then adds that he delays attacking Macbeth because he fears that he himself would perhaps be even a worse ruler. Malcolm describes himself as so lustful, vicious, and greedy that he makes Macbeth look kind. Macbeth cries out in horror, and says he will leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Macbeth then reveals that none of his self-justifying would leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. In contrast to Macbeth, Edward is so virtuous his touch restores order to nature: it heals.

True manhood, Macduff realizes in his moment of anguish, involves not just strength, honor, and loyalty, but also emotion, feeling, and love.

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True manhood, Macduff realizes in his moment of anguish, involves not just strength, honor, and loyalty, but also emotion, feeling, and love.
A servant rushes in with news that Birnam Wood is marching toward Dunsinane. Macbeth rushes to see for himself, and realizes the witches tricked him. He feels fear for the first time, calls to raise the alarm, and says that at least he’ll die fighting.

Act 5, scene 6
Malcolm orders his men to throw down the branches they carry. The first charge against Dunsinane commences under Siward and Macduff.

Act 5, scene 7
In the fighting, Macbeth encounters and fights Young Siward. Though Young Siward is brave, Macbeth quickly kills him and says in a mocking tone, “I have no spur to mount him.”

Act 5, scene 8
Macduff searches for Macbeth, vowing to kill him to avenge his family.

Act 5, scene 9
Malcolm and Siward meet. They have easily captured the castle because Macbeth’s men barely fight back.

Important Quotes

Act 1 Quotes
Fair is foul, and foul is fair. — Witches, 1.1.12

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, The instruments of darkness tell us truths, Win us with honest trivialies, to betray’s in deepest consequence. — Banquo, 1.3.125

Stars, hide your fires! Let not light see my black and deep desires. — Macbeth, 1.4.52

Act 2 Quotes
Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee; I have thee not, and yet I see thee still. Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible To feeling as to sight? or art thou but A dagger of the mind, a false creation, Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? I see thee yet, in form as palpable As this which now I draw. — Macbeth, 2.1.33

Methought I heard a voice cry, Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep, — the innocent sleep; Sleep, that knits up the ravelled sleave of care, The death of each day’s life, sore labor’s bath, Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course, Chief nourisher in life’s feast. — Macbeth, 2.2.34

Act 3 Quotes
Nought’s had, all’s spent Where our desire is got without content. — Lady Macbeth, 3.2.7

I am in blood Steep’d in so far, that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o’er. — Macbeth, 3.4.142

Act 4 Quotes
By the pricking of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes. — Witches, 4.4.44

Act 5 Quotes
Out, damned spot! Out, I say! — Lady Macbeth, 5.1.34

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow Creeps in this petty pace from day to day To the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle! Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more. It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing. — Macbeth, 5.5.19
In a storm, three witches appear and agree to meet again with Macbeth after the battle currently raging ends.

King Duncan of Scotland waits for news of the battle against the Norwegians and the traitorous Thane of Cawdor. The Scots are in peril, and Macbeth was particularly heroic. Duncan decrees that Macbeth shall be the new Thane of Cawdor.

Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches after the battle. The witches greet Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and “king hereafter.” They tell Banquo that he will never be king, but his descendants will. Then the witches disappear.

Macbeth learns that he actually is the new Thane of Cawdor. Banquo comments that “instruments of darkness” sometimes tell half-truths to bring men to ruin.

Though disgusted by himself, Macbeth contemplates murdering Duncan to make the rest of the prophecy come true.

Duncan praises Macbeth, but makes his son Malcolm his heir to the throne. Duncan decides to spend the night at Inverness, Macbeth’s castle.

Macbeth goes ahead to prepare Inverness for the king, but notes that Malcolm now stands between him and the throne.

Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth’s letter about the witches’ prophecy, and vows to get Macbeth to murder Duncan.

When Macbeth arrives, he is unconvincing by Lady Macbeth’s arguments, but she tells him to leave the plan to her.

Duncan arrives at Inverness. Lady Macbeth greets Duncan and other thanes graciously, but Macbeth is nowhere to be seen.

Macbeth, agonizing, decides not to murder Duncan because he knows that “bloody instructions, being taught, return to plague the inventor.”

Lady Macbeth questions Macbeth’s manhood and outlines her plan to kill Duncan and frame his attendants. Macbeth agrees to murder Duncan.

Banquo notes that the stars aren’t shining, and begs angels to save him from the dark thoughts that have plagued him since he heard the witches’ prophecy.

Macbeth tells Banquo he never thinks of the witches’ prophecy, but vaguely asks Banquo to support him when the time comes. Banquo agrees to do that, as long as it does not cost him his honor.

Alone now, Macbeth sees the vision of the floating dagger. At the sign from Lady Macbeth, he goes to murder Duncan.

Lady Macbeth, waiting for Macbeth to return, says that she would have killed Duncan herself if only he didn’t look so much like her father.

Macbeth is guilt-ridden after the murder. While murdering Duncan, he thought he heard a voice say, “Macbeth does murder sleep.”

Lady Macbeth is not nervous. She plants the daggers on the attendants (which Macbeth forgot to do) and then washes her and Macbeth’s bloody hands. She says “a little water clears us of this deed.”

The porter answers the door at Inverness, and lets in Macduff and Lennox. Macduff goes to wake Duncan, while Lennox describes the terrible storms of the previous night.

Macduff discovers Duncan’s body. Macbeth kills Duncan’s attendants. Lady Macbeth faints when Macbeth asks why Macbeth killed the attendants.

Malcolm and Donalbain, realizing that they are probably the next target of the man who killed their father, flee.

Storms and unnatural events rage across Scotland. Because they fled, the other thanes believe that Malcolm and Donalbain were behind the murder.

Macbeth is made King by the other thanes. But Macduff does not attend, and instead goes to his own castle at Fife.

Alone in the royal palace, Banquo states his suspicion that Macbeth may have murdered Duncan because of the witches’ prophecy.

Macbeth, meanwhile, muses about the witches’ prophecy that Banquo’s descendants will be kings. He hires men to kill Banquo and Fleance.

Lady Macbeth knows she has what she desires, but feels unhappy.

Macbeth admits that his own mind is “full of scorpions,” but believes that once Banquo and Fleance are dead all will be better.

The murderers attack Banquo and Fleance. Banquo is killed. Fleance escapes.

Macbeth learns during a feast with the other thanes that Banquo has been killed but Fleance escaped.

As the feast progresses, Macbeth is terrified by the appearance of Banquo’s ghost. But only he can see the ghost, and the other thanes think that Macbeth is acting insane. Lady Macbeth tries to cover for him.

Later, Macbeth wonders why Macduff did not attend the coronation and Feast. He decides to visit the witches, and says “I am in blood / Stepped in so far” that turning back is as difficult as continuing on.

Hecate decides to help the witches ruin Macbeth.

Lennox and other lords suspect that Macbeth was behind the murders of Duncan and Banquo. They hope that Macduff—who has gone to England to meet with Malcolm and to try to get the English King Edward to gather an army to help them defeat Macbeth—is successful.

Macbeth visits the witches. They tell him to beware Macduff, that “no man of woman born shall harm” him, and that he won’t be defeated until Birnam Wood marches on Dunsmine. Macbeth thinks that this must mean that he is invincible.

Macbeth asks the witches if Banquo’s heirs will be kings, and to his horror learns that the answer is yes. The witches vanish.

Macbeth learns that Macduff has gone to England. He decides to kill everyone connected to Macduff.
– At Fife, Lady Macduff condemns Macduff for leaving her and their children behind when he left for England.
– Men sent by Macbeth overrun the castle and kill Lady Macduff, as well as Macduff’s children, and servants.

– In England, Macduff proves to Malcolm that he is first and foremost loyal to Scotland.
– Malcolm tells Macduff that King Edward of England is so saintly that he can cure disease with a touch.
– Macduff learns that Macbeth killed his family. He vows revenge.

– Lady Macbeth begins sleepwalking, during which she obsessively tries to rub off the blood she believes is covering her hands and relives moments of and just after the murders of Duncan and Banquo.


– Macbeth does not fear Malcolm’s army, and mocks Malcolm as a man of woman born. Yet Macbeth observes that he also feels heartsick.

– To hide the size of his army, Malcolm orders his soldiers to cut down trees and carry them upright as they march.

– Lady Macbeth commits suicide. Macbeth feels nothing, and gives the “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” speech. A servant runs in with the news that Birnam Wood seems to be marching on Dunsinane. Macbeth realizes that the witches tricked him, and vows to die fighting.

– Malcolm’s men attack Dunsinane under Macduff and the English lord Siward.

– Macbeth fights valiantly, and easily kills Young Siward.

– Macduff searches for Macbeth, vowing to kill him to avenge his family.

– Macbeth’s forces capture the castle easily because Macbeth’s men barely fight back.

– Macduff finds Macbeth. In response to Macbeth’s taunting, Macduff reveals that he was born by caesarian section.
– Macbeth refuses to fight until Macduff mocks him as a coward. Macbeth attacks. Macduff kills him.

– Malcolm becomes King of Scotland, and promises to heal the wounds that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth inflicted on Scotland.