Macbeth
reading guide
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by nico falk
Macbeth reading guide

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## Macbeth

### List of Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Duncan, King of Scotland</td>
<td>The King of Scotland when the play opens. A good and trustworthy man. Macbeth murders him at the beginning of the play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malcolm and Donalbain</td>
<td>Duncan's sons. They are seen as obstacles to Macbeth because they stand in the way to Macbeth becoming king.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>A brave warrior, a thane (a ruler of region of Scotland), and, eventually, king. He is a man with both driving ambition and a conscience. He commits murder to become king, but is racked with guilt for his bad deeds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Macbeth</td>
<td>Macbeth's wife. A remarkably ruthless woman at the beginning of the play who pushes Macbeth toward murder, and who breaks down toward the end of the play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banquo</td>
<td>Macbeth's companion and fellow warrior. He is loyal to Macbeth, but at the same time maintains a high level of integrity and does not support bad deeds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleance</td>
<td>Banquo's son.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross, Angus, Lennox, Macduff Menteith, Caithness</td>
<td>Noblemen of Scotland. Some come into conflict with Macbeth after he has risen to power, such as Macduff.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three witches</td>
<td>Unearthly creatures with the power of prophecy, amongst other strange abilities. They tempt and lead Macbeth onto his rise to—and ultimate fall from—power.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hecate</td>
<td>The queen of the witches.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Other minor characters</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Macbeth**

Map of Scotland with sites of important events in the play

- **Forres**: site of Duncan's castle; one battleground of the civil war at the beginning of the play.
- **Cawdor**: the Thane of Cawdor at the beginning of the play is a traitor, and Macbeth gains his title for bravely fighting him.
- **Inverness**: Macbeth's castle is here; this is the site of Duncan's murder.
- **Glamis**: Macbeth is Thane of Glamis when the play starts.
- **Macduff's Castle**: The site where Macduff's family is brutally murdered by Macbeth's men.
- **Birnham Wood**: a forest that is part of one of the last of the witches' prophecies which foretells the downfall of Macbeth.
- **Dunsinane Castle**: the castle where the Macbeths move near the end of the play. This castle is near Birnam Wood and on high ground. It is easier to defend than his other abodes.
Macbeth
Annotated act outlines
# Macbeth: Outline of the Acts

## Act I

The settings in Act 1 are: a heath (an isolated and desolate field); King Duncan’s camp near Forres; King Duncan’s palace at Forres; Macbeth’s castle at Inverness.

The main characters in Act 1 are: three witches; King Duncan; Malcolm; the Thane of Cawdor (he is never on stage, but his character is important); a nameless soldier; Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

At the end of Act 1 Macbeth has been promised kingship by the witches, he has risen in power by becoming Thane of Cawdor, and Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have a plan to murder King Duncan to further Macbeth’s hope of becoming king.

### The main events in Act 1 are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>event</th>
<th>act.</th>
<th>scene</th>
<th>line numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Three witches meet on a heath and make plans to meet with Macbeth.</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A soldier fighting in the ongoing civil war tells Duncan of Macbeth's bravery in battle. Ross tells Duncan that the Thane of Cawdor has proven to be a traitor. Duncan announces that Macbeth will take the title of Thane of Cawdor (Macbeth is not present and, therefore, does not know this).</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2.9-45</td>
<td>1.2.56-66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a heath, the three witches meet with Macbeth and tell him he will become Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King of Scotland. The first prophecy is already true, the second is true as well, but Macbeth does not know it, and the third prophecy refers to Macbeth's greatest hope.</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>1.2.73-77</td>
<td>1.3.50-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ross arrives to announce Macbeth will receive the title of Thane of Cawdor.</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3.109-112</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immediately, Macbeth thinks of murdering Duncan.</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>1.3.137-152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Duncan announces that his son, Malcolm, will be the heir to the throne. Macbeth again thinks of murder.</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>1.4.43-45</td>
<td>1.4.55-60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the Macbeths’ castle, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth. She resolves that Macbeth shall be king, but she worries that he is too meek to carry out the necessary action—i.e., the murder of Duncan.</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5.1-24</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth arrives at his castle. Lady Macbeth declares they will murder Duncan when he visits. She will take care of matters. Macbeth is nervous.</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5.65-81</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duncan arrives at the Macbeths' castle on a sunny, pleasant day.</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth leaves a banquet held in Duncan's honor. Macbeth is overwrought with worries about the plan and the possible negative consequences both in this life and the life after death.</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7.1-28</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady Macbeth finds Macbeth and talks him into continuing with their plan.</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.7.39-92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Macbeth: Outline of the Acts**

**Act II**

The settings in Act 2 are: the courtyard of Macbeth's palace; the gates of Macbeth's palace; King Duncan's bedroom at the Macbeths.

The main characters in Act 2 are: Banquo; Macbeth; Lady Macbeth; King Duncan; Macduff; Malcolm and Donalbain.

At the end of Act 2 Macbeth has murdered Duncan, Duncan's sons have been blamed for the crime, and Macbeth is crowned King of Scotland. Macduff, lacking faith in Macbeth, has returned home to Fife, fearing the changes that he believes are coming.

The main events in Act 2 are:

- Banquo and Macbeth meet. They discuss Duncan's happiness about being at Macbeth's castle. They agree to discuss the witches' prophecies later, although Banquo states he will not discuss anything that is dishonorable. 2.1.12-37

- Macbeth sees a dagger floating before his eyes. He believes this hallucination appeared in order to lead him to Duncan's chamber and to ultimately commit the murder. Nevertheless, he remains nervous and racked with worries and guilt. 2.1.40-71

- As Lady Macbeth awaits Macbeth's return from committing the murder, she expresses her own nervousness and guilt over the plan. 2.2.1-17

- Macbeth returns from murdering Duncan extremely distressed, crying that he will sleep no longer. He tells Lady Macbeth the two guards sleeping outside Duncan's room seemed to have heard something. Lady Macbeth returns to the chamber and murders the guards. 2.2.19 2.2.47-52 2.2.68-73 2.2.81-82

- Macduff discovers Duncan's body. 2.3.69-75

- Macbeth confesses to killing the two guards, claiming he was acting in defense of Duncan. 2.3.121-134

- Malcolm flees to England, and Donalbain, to Ireland. They fear they will be charged with the murder. 2.3.161-171

- Macbeth is declared the heir to Duncan's throne and he prepares to take the title. 2.4.36-41

- Macduff declares he will return home to Fife instead of attending Macbeth's coronation. Macduff fears that the future does not bode well. 2.4.46-50
**Macbeth: Outline of the Acts**

**Act III**

**The settings in Act III are:** the palace at Forres where Macbeth now lives; a gateway to the palace; a banquet room in Macbeth's palace; a heath; Macbeth's castle in Inverness.

**The main characters in Act III are:** Banquo; Fleance; Macbeth; three hired murderers; Lady Macbeth; Hecate and the other three witches; Lennox.

**At the end of Act III** Macbeth has been installed as the new king of Scotland, but his life has not really improved. He is plagued by guilt and feels a strong need to eliminate his enemies. Several people are suspicious and distrustful of the new king, Macbeth.

**The main events in Act III are:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Act. Scene. Line Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Banquo suspects Macbeth murdered Duncan. Banquo tells Macbeth he is going horse riding with Fleance.</td>
<td>3.1.1-10, 3.1.20-40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth no longer trusts Banquo and he hires two murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance as they are riding.</td>
<td>3.1.53-158</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth express discomfort regarding their new situation. They do not feel Macbeth is safely installed in his new position as king. Nevertheless, they resolve to put on joyous, welcoming faces at the banquet they will hold that night.</td>
<td>3.2.6-9, 3.2.15-28, 3.2.29-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two murderers wait for Banquo and Fleance. They are joined by a third. When Banquo and Fleance arrive, the murderers kill Banquo. Fleance escapes.</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As the Macbeths welcome guests into the banquet hall, the two hired murderers arrive to report back to Macbeth. Macbeth is pleased Banquo is no longer a threat, but he panics when he hears that Fleance escaped.</td>
<td>3.4.10-38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At the banquet, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo. The other guests do not see the ghost and are disturbed by Macbeth's ravings. In Macbeth's crazed state, he hints at the murders for which he is responsible. Later, with Lady Macbeth, Macbeth expresses distrust of Macduff who did not appear at the banquet, hinting he will remove (murder) Macduff.</td>
<td>3.4.49-87, 3.4.91-99, 3.4.158-171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On a heath, Hecate, the queen of the witches, meets with the three witches that previously met with Macbeth. They plan to destroy Macbeth by making him feel over-confident.</td>
<td>3.5.28-33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lennox and another lord discuss the state of Scotland. Lennox believes that Macbeth is responsible for the murders. The lord informs that Malcolm is safe in England and that Macduff has gone to beseech the English king to help him in taking down Macbeth.</td>
<td>3.6.1-24, 3.6.25-30, 3.6.30-40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Macbeth: Outline of the Acts**

**Act IV**

The settings in Act 4 are: a dark cave; Macduff’s castle in Fife; King Edward’s castle in England.

The main characters in Act 4 are: the three witches and Hecate; Macbeth; Lennox; Ross; Lady Macduff and her family; Macduff; Malcolm.

At the end of Act 4 Macbeth has become a tyrant-king and there are plans to bring Malcolm back from England to overthrow Macbeth.

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**The main events in Act 4 are:**

- Macbeth meets the witches in a dark cave and demands to know his future.  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.1.50-61

- The witches’ prophecies are more cryptic (i.e., confusing) than those made previously. Apparitions (or ghosts) appear and tell Macbeth the following:  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.1.74-102

- 1) Macbeth should beware Macduff 2) Macbeth should be bold because no one born of a woman will harm him 3) Macbeth shall not be harmed until a forest called Birnam Wood begins to move toward him. Because these prophecies seem impossible to realize, Macbeth's confidence is strengthened.

- While Macduff is in England, a murderer visits Macduff’s castle in Fife and kills his wife and children.  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.2.89-96

- Macduff meets Malcolm in England. Macduff argues that they should band together and invade Scotland in order to overthrow Macbeth.  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.3.3-9

- Malcolm tests Macduff’s loyalty and honor. Malcolm lies, telling Macduff that he, Malcolm, would be a corrupt king. Macduff is disgusted. By his disgust, he shows his integrity and Malcolm knows he can trust Macduff.  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.3.49-132

- Malcolm tells Macduff that an army of 10,000 soldiers is prepared to invade Scotland.  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.3.148-152

- Ross arrives in England and he tells of the increasing corruption and tyranny of Macbeth’s rule.  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.3.185-194

- Macduff pleads with Ross to tell him about the state of his family. Ross is reluctant, but he finally tells Macduff that his family has been murdered.  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.3.197-239

- First Macduff is overcome by sorrow and then he becomes only more determined to return to Scotland and kill Macbeth.  
  act. scene. line numbers: 4.3.240-265

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Macbeth: Outline of the Acts

Act V

The settings in Act 5 are: Dunsinane Castle (the Macbeths have moved here); the countryside near Birnam Wood and Dunsinane Castle; a battlefield near Dunsinane Castle.

The main characters in Act 5 are: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth; a doctor; Scottish nobles; Malcolm; Macduff; soldiers.

At the end of Act 5 Macbeth has been slain and Malcolm is declared king.

The main events in Act 5 are:

- Lady Macbeth has become seriously mentally disturbed. A doctor and servant observe her sleepwalking. She continues to refer to blood on her hands that she cannot wash away. 5.1.26-64
- Scottish nobles gather near Dunsinane to prepare for battle. They are determined to free Scotland of Macbeth. They plan to march toward Birnam Wood where they will meet up with Malcolm and the English forces. 5.2.1-7 5.2.13-25
- Macbeth is informed of the approaching soldiers. He is at once confident of his victory because of the prophecies and depressed, thinking that he has lived past his time. 5.3.1-10 5.3.22-32
- The soliders gather at Birnam Wood. Malcolm tells them to carry tree boughs to disguise the numbers in their army. By carrying these boughs, the army appears to be a forest itself. 5.4.6-9
- Lady Macbeth dies, most likely by suicide. Macbeth becomes extremely depressed, expressing his feeling that life is empty and pointless. 5.5.17-30
- A servant informs Macbeth that it appears Birnam Wood is moving toward the castle. Macbeth becomes inflamed and prepares for battle. 5.5.35-57
- The army is in a field before Macbeth's castle. Macduff will lead the army into battle. 5.6
- On the battlefield, Macbeth is confident because he has been told he cannot be killed by anyone born of a woman. When Macduff faces Macbeth, he tells Macbeth he was born by caesarian section. This frightens Macbeth, because it means that technically Macduff was not born of a woman. 5.7.1-4 5.8.17-20
- Macduff slays Macbeth. 5.8.32-39
- Macduff enters victoriously, carrying Macbeth's head in his hands. 5.9.22-24
- Malcolm is declared king, and he promises a new era of order and peace. 5.9.25-47
Macbeth
Annotated scene outlines
Act I, Scene 1

Setting: An isolated and desolate place in medieval Scotland.
Main characters: Three witches.
Overview: Three witches meet amidst wild weather. They plan to meet with Macbeth later upon a barren hillside. They introduce an important paradox in the play: “fair is foul, and foul is fair.”

The main events in Scene 1 are:

 hız Three witches meet in an isolated and desolate field. (1.1)
  • Context: In Shakespeare’s time, there was widespread belief in witches. The types of powers that people believed witches could wield varied quite a bit. Some people thought witches were not much more than strange, outcast women that could, for example, make a child sick or cause harm to cattle. Some people believed that witches had more demonic powers. The power of prophecy was considered particularly dangerous and prophecy was forbidden by the state. King James, the monarch when Macbeth was written, did believe in the existence of these more dangerous witches. The prophetic powers of the Macbeth witches would have identified these strange women as fearful beings who were not quite human.

 hız The witches discuss when they shall meet next. (1.1.1-5)
  The first witch suggests they meet in stormy weather, the second suggests when the “hurlyburly’s done” and the “battle is lost and won,” and the third witch states this will happen before “the set of sun.”
  • Setting and symbolism: It is appropriate for these devilish beings to meet in thunder and lightning. Such foul and tempestuous weather can be seen as a symbol for the darkness of the witches’ actions and plans. Interestingly, most of the scenes in this play are set at night, inside (where it was fairly dark in Macbeth’s time), or some other dark or desolate landscape. There is only one scene that is set during a pleasant, sunny day (Duncan’s arrival to Macbeth’s castle in 1.6).
  • Vocabulary: The word “hurlyburly” refers to a state of chaos and upheaval. At the opening of the play, Scotland is indeed in chaos: there is a civil war brewing, and leaders formerly thought to be loyal to the crown are proving to be traitors.
  • Paradox: The second witch’s claim that they will meet when “the battle is lost and won” is one of the many cryptic (confusing), paradoxical statements that the witches make. Prophecies were usually made in such cryptic language, allowing for multiple interpretations. There are many ways we could interpret this one. One possibility is that Macbeth will soon win a battle and rise in power; however, while he will continue to rise in power for some time, this moment with the witches is also the beginning of his downfall. He has “won,” yet ultimately he also has “lost.”

 hız The witches agree they will meet on a heath to meet with Macbeth. (1.1.6-8)
  • Context: A heath is a treeless, isolated and barren field that provides the feeling of desolation. It is an appropriate locale for three unearthly beings with dark designs to meet.

 hız The witches are called away by their demon familiars, Graymalkin and Paddock. (1.1.9-10)
  • Vocabulary: Demon familiars were animals, such as cats, birds, or toads, who were demonic like the witches and who help them in their misdeeds. It was believed that the animals inhabited the evil spirits of witches. The fact that these witches have familiars suggests, again, that they are of the more dangerous sort of witches, the kind with demonic powers.

 hız As the witches leave, they chant: “fair is foul and foul is fair.” (1.1.11)
  • Paradox: This phrase seems nonsensical—what is good is bad, and what is bad is good. This type of cryptic language is typical of the witches and could be interpreted by a Shakespearean audience as a sign of their devilish nature. However, as good paradoxes usually can, this one can also be interpreted on several different levels in the context of the play. In particular, this statement seems important to Macbeth’s future. What will seem “fair” to him will turn out to be his downfall. And likewise, what will seem “foul” to him may not have been so bad after all.
Act I, Scene 2  Macbeth the Warrior

**Setting:** King Duncan’s camp at Forres, a distance from the ongoing battles in the civil war.

**Main characters:** King Duncan, a wounded soldier, Ross, the Thane of Cawdor (he is never on stage, but he is important to the events of the scene).

**Overview:** King Duncan honors Macbeth as a valiant warrior in the civil war waging in Scotland. Duncan hears of Macbeth’s valiant efforts in one battle against a traitor in a place near Forres. Then Duncan hears of another battle where a different valiant warrior also fought off a traitor. This second battle took place in Fife, far from Forres, yet Duncan assumes that the brave warrior in the second battle was also Macbeth. To reward Macbeth, Duncan declares that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor.

The main events in Scene 2 are:

- **A soldier wounded in battle approaches Duncan’s camp to report on events.** (1.2. 1-3)
  
  It is somewhat unusual that Duncan, the king, is not participating in battle. Kings at this time typically involved themselves in the thick of battle. By refraining from battle, Duncan is characterized as a softer, gentler king than most. He certainly is a good man; however, he is not necessarily a strong man in wit or body. To the audience, this characterization may have even cast him as slightly effeminate.

- **The soldier tells Duncan of Macbeth’s bravery and honor. Near Forres, Macbeth battled a traitor and Norwegian foes, but he withstood the attack and defeated these threats to Duncan and to Scotland.** (1.2. 9-48)
  
  - **Metaphor:** The soldier describes the dire state of the battle by comparing the two sides to “two spent swimmers, that do cling together/ and choke their art.” If two swimmers are far from shore and are too tired (“spent”) to swim back, clinging together makes the situation worse. They will each pull the other down and “choke” their “art” (the art being their ability to swim or their life).
  
  - **Metaphor and simile:** The soldier describes the traitor Macdonwald first by using a metaphor comparing his ability to attract supporters to swarming insects. The soldier says that Macdonwald attracted “multiplying villanies of nature.” That is, he attracted countless people around him who were the most depraved examples of human nature. These villains “swarmed” around him like insects. Macdonwald had become a rebel. The soldier then compares Macdonwald to a “rebel’s whore”: a whore is hired to do exactly what her client desires. Macdonwald acted as if he had submitted himself completely to the rebels’ side, and thus he became their whore.
  
  - **Context:** After winning the battle against the rebel, Macbeth displays the rebel’s head for all to see. This was a common practice for all sorts of villains: thieves, murderers, traitors and others were often punished by beheading and having their head displayed in public. This practice was designed to deter others from committing the same crimes.

- **Ross approaches Duncan and appears anxious. Ross came from Fife, another battle site that is many miles from Forres.** (1.2. 50-56)

- **Ross reports that the Thane of Cawdor became a traitor, turning to the side of the Norwegians.** (1.2. 58-61)
  
  - **Vocabulary:** The term Thane was given to Scottish nobles who controlled a region. It is similar to the term Lord, which was used in England. The Thane of Cawdor thus lived in and was responsible for Cawdor and its region.

- **The battle against the Norwegians and the traitor looked dismal for Duncan’s side until a brave warrior stepped in and after a fierce fight, won the battle for Duncan.** (1.2. 62-67)
  
  - **Allusion:** Ross refers to the valiant warrior who kills the traitorous Thane of Cawdor as “Bellona’s bridegroom.” Bellona was a Roman goddess of war. Thus, by referring to the warrior as the bridegroom of the war goddess, the warrior takes on traits associated with Bellona: bravery, strength, superior skills in battle.

- **Duncan mistakes the unnamed hero of the second battle for Macbeth. He declares that the current Thane of Cawdor will be executed and Macbeth will take on his title.** (1.2. 73-77)

  Duncan’s mistake has drastic consequences for Macbeth. Becoming the Thane of Cawdor will be his first step along the path that leads him to kingship and then demise. Duncan’s mistake is rather curious. Duncan had just learned from the anonymous soldier that Macbeth had fought valiantly in the battle near Forres. Ross came from Fife, where the second traitor, the Thane of Cawdor, had fought the warrior only referred to as “Bellona’s bridegroom,” never as Macbeth. Fife is a great distance from Forres—too great for Macbeth to have traveled in time to wage both battles. We do not know what caused this mistake, but it is important because of its consequences.
**Act 1, Scene 3**

**Macbeth and the Witches’ Prophecies**

*Setting:* A heath amidst thunderous weather.

*Main characters:* The three witches, Macbeth, Banquo, Ross and Angus.

*Overview:* On a heath, the three witches foretell Macbeth’s and Banquo’s future and Macbeth is prompted to consider murdering King Duncan. The witches hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and King. The first title he already owns. The second he has been given by Duncan but he does not know yet. And soon he will make plans to obtain the third. The witches’ prophecies for Banquo are less clear. Banquo has reservations about the witches and their prophecies, but Macbeth accepts them, for the prophecies feed his ambition and his hunger for power.

The main events in Scene 3 are:

- **The witches meet on a heath and share stories about the havoc they have recently wreaked.** (1.3. 1-30)
  - The stories the witches tell further characterize them as malevolent, inhuman beings. In fact, the actions they recount are typical of those many people believed witches commonly engaged in in order to harm humans.
  - **Context:** The second witch has been killing swine. Killing livestock was thought to be a common practice of witches.
  - **Context:** The first witch has been pestering a woman whose sailor-husband is off to sea. The woman tells the witch to leave (“Aroint thee, witch!”) The witch insults her by calling her a “rump-fed runnion”—a dirty, decrepit creature fed on garbage. The witch goes on to explain that she will follow the husband in a sieve (a device like a strainer or colander) and harm the sailor. This type of behavior was also stereotypical of witches in the common mind. The second witch offers to “give [her] wind” to help her and to cause storms for the sailor. Witches were thought to have the power to control wind and to misdirect sailors.
  - **Vocabulary:** “weird sisters”: This is how the witches refer to themselves. The word “weird” had quite a different meaning in Shakespeare’s time. It derived from the much older word “wyrd” and it meant fate. The witches are describing themselves as those who can control fate, foretell the future and create the future or fate for a person.

- **Macbeth and Banquo enter. Macbeth comments on the strange nature of the day, and Banquo is disconcerted by the strange appearance of the three women (the witches) that they encounter.** (1.3. 39-48)
  - **Paradox:** Macbeth comments on the nature of the day by echoing one of the witches’ paradoxes when he says “So foul and fair a day I have not seen.” He does not explain what he means, but we can consider that he views the day as fair because he has just been victorious in battle and/or the weather seems pleasant (although we have no evidence of that). He may consider the day foul because of a strange feeling he has, or perhaps because he is disturbed by violence of the recent battles. It is also possible that the weather is foul (because we have no evidence, the weather may be interpreted either way). The statement has no clear interpretation. However, one important thing this repeated phrase does is associate Macbeth with the witches and their nature even though he has yet to interact with them. As readers, we are meant to recall who said this strange phrase last (the witches) and make some sort of connection with who says it now. As we will see, Macbeth is indeed very drawn to the witches and their dangerous prophecies.
  - **Character:** Through Banquo, we learn about the witches’ appearance. They are withered, wearing wild attire, and they seem inhuman. Yet, they also appear to be women, although Banquo cannot be certain because they have beards. This appearance enhances the sense that these witches are unearthly, strange, and therefore, ominous.

- **The witches greet Macbeth by hailing him and referring to him by three titles, only the first of which he is currently aware.** (1.3. 49-53)
  - The three titles by which the witches address Macbeth are the first prophecy in the play about his future.
    - *First title:* Thane of Glamis. Macbeth already is the Thane of Glamis, so this prophecy is simply stating his current position. He well might expect to be hailed as such.
    - *Second title:* Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth has not yet become the Thane of Cawdor; in fact, he does not yet know of Duncan’s decision to give him this title. So, this prophecy is about the future and comes as a shocking and confusing surprise to Macbeth.
    - *Third title:* King. Duncan appears to be alive and well, so this prophecy is the most perplexing, as well as being the most appealing.
Banquo observes that Macbeth is alarmed, even fearful, of the witches’ prophecies.  (1.3. 53-55)
For a man of clear ambition, it seems strange that Macbeth’s first reaction to the prediction of his future kingship would be fear. He soon reveals what he is fearful about—the need he feels to murder Duncan to hasten the prophecy’s realization. This sign of alarm suggests that he thought of murder as soon as he heard the prophecy.
- **Pun:** Banquo asks Macbeth why he “start[s]” and seems to “fear/ Things that do sound so fair.” His language plays on the near rhyme of “fear” and “fair.” This pun emphasizes the close relationship that good and bad, fair and foul, or the fearful and the fair have in this play.

The witches give Banquo a cryptic prophecy about his future.  (1.3. 60-71)
Banquo also receives three predictions, but these all are paradoxical.
* First prophecy: He will be lesser and greater than Macbeth. One interpretation of this might be that although Banquo never achieves the glory that Macbeth does (he remains lesser), Banquo retains his integrity (he is thus greater).
* Second prophecy: He will not be as happy as Macbeth, yet also much happier. One interpretation of this is that Banquo is unhappier because he doesn’t receive the glory of Macbeth, and he also will be terribly betrayed by Macbeth. Yet, Banquo has sources of happiness that Macbeth does not: a son, integrity, contentment with his position.
* Third prophecy: His descendants will become kings, but he will never be king himself. The first part of the prophecy is not realized in the play, as Banquo’s son, Fleance, soon comes to a very bad end. However, the second part does seem true.

Macbeth and Banquo discuss the strange information they have received from the witches.  (1.3. 73-92)
Macbeth and Banquo are perplexed by how the witches vanished into thin air. Banquo compares the witches to bubbles, which can also vanish in an instant. Banquo wonders if the witches were real or if he and Macbeth have gone insane and lost their reason.

Ross and Angus enter after the witches leave to inform Macbeth the king has bestowed on him the title of Thane of Cawdor.  (1.3. 93-112)
Ross explains that the king was overwhelmed with Macbeth’s bravery in battle, especially as the king received news that Macbeth had been valiant and victorious in two different locations. For these actions, the king will bestow the title of Thane of Cawdor upon Macbeth.

Macbeth asks how this honor can be bestowed upon him since the current Thane of Cawdor still lives. Angus explains the Thane of Cawdor is about to be executed for treason.  (1.3. 114-123)
- **Metaphor:** Macbeth expresses his confusion over how he could receive this title when the present Thane of Cawdor lives by comparing Duncan’s bestowal of the title on Macbeth to being “dress[ed]...[,]n borrow’d robes.” The robes represent the honorable position that the Thane of Cawdor holds. Because Macbeth believes the current Thane of Cawdor to be alive and well, he perceives these robes/title as “borrowed,” as something not rightfully his.

To himself, Macbeth muses that his future will only get better.  (1.3. 124-125)
- **Vocabulary:** When Macbeth says that the “greatest is behind,” he means the best is yet to come. In Shakespeare’s time this phrase referred to the future, unlike in modern English, in which it usually refers to the past. Macbeth ponders his two current titles (Glamis and Cawdor), and sees a bright future ahead of him. The witches’ first two prophecies are now fulfilled, so it seems reasonable to expect the third to follow.

Banquo also acknowledges that Macbeth’s future looks bright and may lead to the throne, but he cautions that the witches do not have Macbeth’s best intentions in mind and that witches often use a twisted version of the truth in order to lead humans to their demise.  (1.3. 129-136)
- **Vocabulary:** “trusted home”: this phrase refers to the conclusion or end that Macbeth has come to believe will occur. It is a metaphor, comparing the conclusion of a sequence of events to a home. The term home is associated with the idea of being at the end of a journey. Banquo acknowledges that the “home” that Macbeth wants—kingship (the “crown”)—may indeed be the conclusion of his journey.
- **Vocabulary:** “instruments of darkness”: this phrase refers to the demonic forces in the world that want to harm humans. More specifically, it refers to the witches, who may well be instruments of darkness. Banquo explains that these demonic forces sometimes tell people things that are true and provide them with rewards (“honest trifles”), yet they do so only to gain the humans’ trust, after which they will betray the humans completely.
To himself, Macbeth acknowledges the two-sided nature of the prophecies, yet his ambition is sparked. A horrifying yet tempting image appears to him of what he should do to realize the third prophecy (to become king). (1.3. 137-152)

Macbeth considers that what the witches have told him can be either good or bad. Here, he expresses his confusion over how to interpret the prophecies. He considers both the good and bad aspects of the situation. The good part is that they promised success, and so far, this is exactly what seems to be happening. The bad part is that with his latest success has come an image or idea in his head that is so horrid that it seems to make his hair stand on end and makes his heart beat faster. He considers murder (we know he is imagining murdering Duncan even though he has not named his possible victim). He is so unnerved by this thought that he is overwhelmed with doubt and he cannot tell what is real and what is not.

- **Vocabulary**: "smothered in surmise": *surmise*, here, means speculations, imaginings or guesses. Macbeth cannot think clearly because he is so overcome with uncertainty and horrid, vivid imaginings.

- **Paradox**: “nothing is but what is not”: this phrase means that the only things that seem real to Macbeth are things that he also knows (or suspects) are *not real*. His promise of kingship seems real, but is not yet realized. The witches’ promises seem real, but he does not know if he should trust them. The image of murdering Duncan seems real, yet he has not gone through with it and is horrified at the thought of doing so. This paradox is related to the one the witches’ previously chanted: “fair is foul and foul is fair.” One of the themes of the play is the relationship between appearance and reality or the nature of reality. These paradoxes develop this theme.

- Macbeth resolves to let chance decide whether or not he will be crowned and forego his murderous plans. (1.3. 154-161)

- The group decides to proceed to meet with King Duncan. (1.3. 163-171)

Macbeth apologizes to the group for being absent-minded, as he was caught up in his own thoughts. While the group does not react to Macbeth’s distractedness now, soon they will have opportunity to see Macbeth behave even more strangely.
**Act 1, Scene 4** Duncan’s Announcement Spurs Macbeth’s Desires

**Setting:** King Duncan’s castle at Forres.

**Main characters:** Duncan, Malcolm, Macbeth.

**Overview:** At Forres, in King Duncan’s castle, the king, his sons, Macbeth and Banquo meet. Macbeth learns of an obstacle placed in his path to kingship. He considers his murderous plans once again.

The main events in Scene 4 are:

- **Malcolm reports to Duncan that the former Thane of Cawdor has been executed and the Thane seems well-acquainted with death.** (1.4.1-12)
  - **Simile:** Malcolm compares the Thane’s demeanor at the execution to one “that had been studied in death.” He means that it seemed as if the Thane had studied how to perform his own death as if he had been an actor. His death did not seem important to him—it was like a “trifle.”

- **Duncan responds that it is impossible to tell a person’s character from his outward appearance, as he had always trusted the Thane.** (1.4.13-16)
  - **Character:** The phrase “there’s no art/ to find the mind’s construction in the face” means that there is no way (“no art”) to decipher a person’s character from their face or outward appearance. While this may often be true, Duncan’s belief sheds light on his somewhat naïve and trustworthy character. He cannot detect a lie or someone’s bad intentions. This trait is important in this scene in which Macbeth expresses his loyalty to the king aloud and thinks about murder privately.

- **Macbeth enters. Duncan expresses his gratitude for Macbeth’s bravery. Macbeth responds by saying such actions are simply his duty as the king’s subject.** (1.4.17-38)
  - **Character:** Macbeth expresses his loyalty and sense of duty to the king. We know this to be dishonest, yet Duncan does not seem to detect any insincerity in Macbeth’s words.

- **Duncan announces that his son Malcolm will be the heir to the throne.** (1.4.39-49)
  - **Context:** In Macbeth’s time, sons did not automatically inherit the throne if their father was king. The king appointed the heir. Sometimes the heir was a loyal follower rather than one of the king’s sons. Macbeth could have had some hope that the king would appoint him as the Prince of Cumberland—i.e., the heir to the Scottish crown. Duncan’s announcement thus would have been a shock and disappointment to Macbeth.

- **To himself, Macbeth expresses his fury at Duncan’s announcement. He hopes that his hidden ambition to murder Duncan can remain secret, both so he can accomplish it and so that the darkness of his desire and his heart will not be revealed.** (1.4.55-60)
  - **Symbol:** The stars to which Macbeth refers can be interpreted as a symbol of light, goodness, and honesty. Macbeth wishes this light to be put out so that his dark desires will not be visible. Light and goodness were generally considered stronger forces than evil and darkness. So, if the light is put out, then evil is freer to work. Of course, there is a literal sense to Macbeth’s words too. He wishes to murder Duncan and he has a much better chance of doing so without getting caught if the night is dark and there is little light for other people to see him.
Act 1, Scene 5

Lady Macbeth’s Manly Spirit

Setting: A room in the Macbeths’ castle at Inverness.

Main characters: Lady Macbeth, Macbeth.

Overview: Lady Macbeth awaits her husband in their castle at Inverness. After reading a letter from Macbeth that tells of the witches’ prophecies, she determines that Macbeth will carry on with the plan to become king. Macbeth arrives and tells her of Duncan’s upcoming visit. This news only further solidifies Lady Macbeth’s hopes and plans.

The main events in Scene 5 are:

❖ Lady Macbeth reads a letter from Macbeth that tells of the witches’ prophecies. (1.5. 1-13)
   In his letter, Macbeth expresses his thrill and delight at what the witches predict for his future and his desire to share his excitement with his wife.

❖ Lady Macbeth fears that Macbeth is too kind and lacks the ambition to do what is necessary to fulfill the prophecy (i.e., murder Duncan). (1.5. 14-24)
   • Metaphor: Lady Macbeth compares “human kindness”—or gentleness, integrity, decency—to “milk.” The image evoked is a feminine one, as women carry milk to nurture their children, and traits such kindness and gentleness and tenderness were considered feminine traits. She characterizes her husband as having an overly feminine nature and she fears this will prevent him from acting forcefully and violently when required.
   • Metaphor: Lady Macbeth compares the will to act forcefully and violently in order to get what one wants to an “illness.” She means that someone who is capable of fulfilling one’s ambitions must be willing to sacrifice his/her morals and integrity, and this lack of integrity is something like a sickness. She knows Macbeth has the desire (ambition) to be king, but suspects his integrity (his lack of moral “illness”) will prevent him from performing what must be done to get the title.

❖ Lady Macbeth wishes she could give Macbeth her brave spirit. (1.5. 24-29)
   • Character: Lady Macbeth characterizes herself in masculine terms. She sees herself as having “valor” (bravery or boldness). This trait was considered appropriate for men but definitely not for women. Although both Macbeth’s and Lady Macbeth’s softness and bravery wax and wane considerably at different points of the play. Both of them are also disgendered to a significant degree, that is, having inappropriate traits for your gender. This was considered dangerous in Shakespeare’s time. Men were expected to act like men, and women, like women.

❖ A messenger informs Lady Macbeth that Macbeth and Duncan will soon arrive at the castle. (1.5. 30-38)

❖ Lady Macbeth decides that Duncan will be murdered tonight. (1.5. 40-43)
   • Symbol: The raven is a common symbol of death. When a raven cawed, it was often seen as an omen of impending death. Lady Macbeth says that the raven is hoarse—the bird has been announcing Duncan’s death for so long that it has nearly lost its voice.

❖ Lady Macbeth wishes that her feminine nature might leave her so that she would have the will and power to go through with the murder. (1.5. 44-57)
   • Character: Lady Macbeth calls upon the spirits to take away any feminine traits she may have so that she may go ahead with the plan. She asks to be “unsex[ed]”—to remove her femininity. She asks to be filled with cruelty, to have her blood thickened (this means she will not have soft feelings), and to prevent any sort of remorse. She uses a metaphor when she wishes that her “milk” (women are associated with milk and nurture, although she does not literally have a child to nurse now) be replaced with “gall” (shamelessness).

❖ Macbeth enters and Lady Macbeth tells him her plans. Macbeth says they will discuss the matter further. (1.5. 58-81)
Act 1, Scene 6  Duncan Arrives at the Macbeths’ Castle

Setting: Outside the Macbeths’ castle on a pleasant day.
Main characters: Duncan, Banquo, Lady Macbeth.
Overview: Outside the Macbeths’ castle, Lady Macbeth, Banquo and the servants of the house meet Duncan and his entourage. The weather is bright and sunny; this is the only scene in the play that is set in bright daylight. Macbeth, somewhat curiously, is not in attendance.

The main events in Scene 6 are:

❖ Duncan arrives at the Macbeths’ castle for a visit. He comments on the pleasant weather. (1.6.1-3)
  - **Irony:** Duncan comments on the nice weather and pleasant location (“seat” refers to location). He notes how this agreeable situation pleases the senses. It is ironic that the weather today—of all days—is pleasant, for it is the day that Duncan, the agreeable and honest king, will be murdered. It is also ironic that Duncan is the person that first comments upon the nice weather and place, for he will soon encounter people and a situation that is distinctly unpleasant.

❖ Banquo also comments on the pleasant weather. (1.6.4-11)

❖ Duncan thanks Lady Macbeth for having him to her home. (1.6.12-16)
  - **Irony:** On a literal, surface level, Duncan’s thanks are simply appropriate etiquette. However, his comments here, like those about the weather, are ironic, for he is thanking the woman who is instrumental in planning his murder.

❖ Lady Macbeth welcomes Duncan, saying that it is her honor to have him visit. (1.6.17-23)
  - **Vocabulary:** Lady Macbeth says that everything she owns, including her life, is in “compt.” Compt means something is in trust. Or, in other words, what she owns is not really hers because she is a subject of the king. He owns everything, including her life, and has simply allowed her and entrusted her with it. Again, she is clearly being insincere, as everything she does or says seems to indicate a profound sense of ownership over her own life, especially her future.

❖ Duncan asks after Macbeth. Lady Macbeth offers to bring Duncan to Macbeth, his host. (1.6.24-37)
  - **Irony:** Duncan expresses his deep love and appreciation of Macbeth. It is ironic to express such emotion about the person responsible for your murder.
  - **Character:** There is irony in Duncan’s words; however, he has never expressed any suspicions about the Macbeths’ ulterior motives for having him. He is being sincere, as he always is.
Act 1, Scene 7

Macbeth Wavers and Lady Macbeth is Strong

Setting: In Macbeth’s castle, outside the main banquet hall, during the banquet to welcome Duncan.

Main characters: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth.

Overview: The Macbeths hold a banquet for King Duncan during which Macbeth leaves and walks about by himself. Macbeth is troubled, thinking about his plans to murder Duncan, and as he roams, he wrestles with his conscience. Lady Macbeth finds him and chastises him for allowing his determination to waver. They discuss their plans, and in the end Macbeth assures her that he is resolved once again to murder Duncan.

The main events in Scene 7 are:

1. Macbeth wishes he could just get the murder over with and without any bad consequences. (1.7.1-4)
   - Vocabulary: When Macbeth wishes that the assassination “[c]ould trammel up the consequence,” he means that he would like it if, when he committed the act, the act somehow would also prevent all future consequences. “Surcease” in this context means the completion of the event or the death of Duncan. So, he further wishes that upon completing the act, he would find success.
   - Character: The fact that Macbeth is worrying about consequences and wishing they could just disappear suggests that he is concerned about the planned event—whether it will be successful—and that his worry is causing him to think somewhat irrationally. It is not really reasonable to wish for instant success in any venture, especially in one that involves murdering the king.

2. Macbeth wishes that he could avoid punishment for the crime in this life and only have to wait for the inevitable consequences in the afterlife. (1.7.5-7)
   - Metaphor: Macbeth compares time and eternity to a sea, and the present moment to a sandbank on that sea. He wishes that he could skip the consequences—that the event itself would be the “be all and end all” here. And, in terms of consequences and judgement, he would like to “jump [to] the life to come.” He seems to assume that judgement in the afterlife is inevitable, and he would rather just wait for that punishment.

3. Macbeth acknowledges that there is always punishment for bad deeds, even in this life. (1.7.7-12)
   - Vocabulary: Macbeth reflects upon what happens to those who “teach/ Bloody instructions”—that is, those that influence others or teach them how to do evil deeds. His philosophy is essentially “what goes around, comes around.” He expresses this when he says what has been taught (i.e., evil) will “return to plague the inventor.” The “inventor” is the one who devised the evil deed and influenced others to do the same. The judgement for teaching evil such as he is thinking of always falls in this life (“we still have judgement here”). So, it is impossible, he contemplates, to avoid earthly consequences for evil deeds.

4. Macbeth thinks that he should not murder Duncan, for Duncan is in his home as a trusted guest, and also Duncan is a truly good person. (1.7.12-25)
   - Vocabulary: Macbeth considers reasons for not murdering Duncan. There are two fundamental reasons—Duncan is here in “double trust.” “Double” refers to two, and “trust” refers to the reasons Duncan trusts Macbeth or to the reasons why Duncan does not deserve to be murdered. First, Macbeth is a fellow Scot (Duncan’s “kinsman”), and Macbeth is also Duncan’s “subject” (as king, Duncan is more powerful and demands loyalty from his inferior, dependent followers or subjects). Second, Duncan is a gentle (“meek”) man who is virtuous in everything he does. Duncan does not deserve to die because he is a truly good man. By extension, because Duncan is so virtuous, if he were to be murdered, once in the afterlife, he would receive only pity, and terrible judgement would befall the murderer.
   - Simile: Macbeth compares Duncan’s virtues to angels. These angelic virtues will “plead” with strong, glorious voices (“trumpet tongued”) to those in heaven that the murder was an evil deed worthy of punishment.

5. Macbeth reveals that he has no reason to murder Duncan except for his overwhelming ambition. (1.7.25-28)
   - Metaphor: Macbeth uses a metaphor of horseback riding to explain his current situation. His “intent” is his intention or plan. He says he has no “spur/ To prick the sides” of that intent except “Vaulting ambition.” A spur is sharp point on a rider’s boot to kick the horse and motivate him to move. “Vaulting,” here, is another word to describe a horse
that jumps or leaps high. Macbeth’s ambition is so overwhelming that it is like a leaping horse. His desire to be king is the only thing that motivates him or “pricks his intent.” Yet this ambition is so great that it “overleaps itself”—it jumps too high or too far and causes him (and the metaphorical horse) to collapse. In other words, Macbeth is both consumed and paralyzed by his ambition.

Lady Macbeth enters and asks Macbeth why he is not in the banquet hall with his guests. Macbeth replies by telling her that they will not proceed with the plans to murder Duncan. *(1.7. 29-37)*

Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that because Duncan has honored him and Macbeth has risen in stature because of his recent actions (he has “bought/ Golden opinions from all sorts of people”), they will not proceed with the murder. He does not want to risk (“cast aside”) his recent gains.

Lady Macbeth calls Macbeth a coward. *(1.7. 38-48)*

- **Metaphor:** Lady Macbeth is disgusted with Macbeth’s lack of hope. She personifies the hope and compares it to a drunk. His hope appears “green and pale” (i.e., sickly and weak), just as someone does when they have a hangover.
- **Character and Context:** Lady Macbeth perceives her husband as a coward who is unwilling to act upon his desires. The willingness and capacity to act was considered a manly virtue in Shakespeare’s time, whereas passivity or unwillingness to act was considered womanly and weak.

Macbeth insists that all he does is manly. Lady Macbeth insists that he is not acting manly. *(1.7. 49-59)*

Lady Macbeth shows her boldness: she says she would rather kill her child than forsake the plan. *(1.7. 59-64)*

Other than this reference to nursing, there is no other to Lady Macbeth having a child. The Macbeths certainly do not have a child now. We might infer from this that the baby to which Lady Macbeth refers died in infancy or childhood. What is more important about her comments is how cold she seems. She would rather dash the brains out of her own child than give up on the plan to murder Duncan. This lack of maternal instinct and preference to rise in stature over protecting her child’s life would have appeared strikingly unnatural, unfeminine and dangerous to Shakespeare’s audience.

Macbeth reconsiders, but asks what will happen if they fail. Lady Macbeth says as long as they remain courageous, they will not fail. *(1.7. 65-68)*

- **Metaphor:** Lady Macbeth uses a musical metaphor to tell Macbeth how they can be successful. The phrase “screw your courage to the sticking place” compares Macbeth’s courage to the tuning of a stringed instrument. The tuner tightening the strings can be referred to as “screwing.” Once the string is taut (at the correct tightness), that position is called the “sticking place.” So, Lady Macbeth is saying to “tighten” or strengthen his courage until it is “taut” or strong, and the plan will not fail. On a stringed instrument, if the string is too slack, it cannot produce music in the correct key. Likewise, if Macbeth’s courage is too slack, the plan will fail. If a string is at its sticking place, music can be produced. If Macbeth has sufficient courage, the plan can go forward.

Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth the details of the plan. *(1.7. 68-79)*

Lady Macbeth says that it is certain Duncan will fall asleep soundly because of his long journey. Once Duncan is asleep, Lady Macbeth will give alcohol to the two guards (“chamberlains”) watching over Duncan’s door. Once the chamberlains are drunk, they too will fall into a deep sleep (a “swinish sleep”), and Macbeth can proceed safely with his plans.

Macbeth is shocked at Lady Macbeth’s boldness and suggests she is like a man. *(1.7. 80-82)*

- **Vocabulary:** Macbeth is so shocked by his wife’s dauntless daring, he sees her as masculine woman (a scary and dangerous gender for a woman in those times). He comments on her “undaunted mettle.” “Mettle” refers to one’s spirit and it can also refer specifically to a bold and courageous spirit. He says because of this unwomanly spirit, she should never bear daughters. Her masculine spirit is only appropriate to pass on to sons. Macbeth is not necessarily criticizing his wife at this moment, but rather expressing his own shock and perhaps fear.

Macbeth expresses his concerns. Lady Macbeth convinces him that they are capable, and Macbeth is settled on continuing with the plan to murder Duncan. *(1.7. 82-92)*

Macbeth asks if others will blame the two chamberlains at Duncan’s door when the murder is discovered. Lady Macbeth says that is exactly what will happen. Macbeth then seems more comfortable with the plan and says that he is settled on going through with it.
Act 2, Scene 1

Macbeth's Dagger

Setting: A dark night in the courtyard (an open place for meeting and gathering horses) inside the walls of Macbeth's castle at Inverness.

Main characters: Banquo, Fleance, Macbeth.

Overview: Macbeth meets with Banquo and Fleance and plans to discuss the witches' prophecies further with Banquo. Then as the time draws near for Macbeth to murder Duncan, he sees a dagger floating in front of him, as if it is leading him to Duncan's chamber. Macbeth continues to have worries even as he prepares to kill the king.

The main events in Scene 1 are:

1. Banquo and Fleance discuss the night, and Banquo says that he cannot sleep. (2.1.1-10)
   Banquo is tired but cannot sleep because of bothersome thoughts (cursed thoughts). He asks the angels (merciful powers) to keep these thoughts from him so that he might rest.
   • Setting and Symbolism: It is past midnight, the moon is down and the night is starless. That is, it is a very dark night. A dark night such as this can symbolize suspicious actions or evil deeds. We can also say such a setting foreshadows something bad that will soon happen.
   • Personification: When Banquo describes the starless night, he personifies “heaven”—heaven referring to the sky. The word “husbandry” in this context means economy or efficiency. The sky is practicing economy or efficiency by keeping its lights (stars) out.

2. Macbeth enters, and he and Banquo discuss the night’s banquet. (2.1.11-21)
   Banquo comments that the king is sleeping peacefully after having been in an unusually good mood. He bestowed presents on Macbeth's household, including a diamond for Lady Macbeth. Macbeth replies that he was not as good a host as he would have liked—he was given such short notice of Duncan’s arrival, and the household had little time to prepare.
   • Vocabulary: When Banquo says the the king sent “great largess,” the word largesse means gifts given as symbols of gratitude. The largesse was given to Macbeth’s “offices”—offices, here, means the household staff. When Banquo describes the gift of the diamond as “shut up/ In measureless content,” he means that the king concluded (“shut up”) his gift giving with a symbol of happiness that cannot be measured.
   • Vocabulary: When Macbeth replies that his “will was servant to defect,” he personifies his will or desire and says that it was not able to be fulfilled because it was subservient to “defect” or weakness. If you are a servant of weakness, then you cannot perform your best.
   • Character: It is characteristic of Duncan to be content and generous. It is also a sign of his inability to read people that he was unusually content this night, when he hosts were busy planning his murder. Macbeth is clearly trying to persuade Banquo that he truly appreciated Duncan’s company and generosity by claiming he felt bad for not being a better host. In just a few moments Macbeth will prove to be the worst sort of host—the sort of host who murders his guest of honor.

3. Banquo says he dreamed of the witches. Macbeth replies that they should discuss that subject further. Banquo agrees but insists he will not discuss anything dishonorable. Banquo and Fleance leave. (2.1.22-37)
   Macbeth claims he does not think of the witches—we should not trust such a claim. He goes on to say that if he and Banquo discuss the prophecies, and if Banquo supports him when the right time comes, there will be gain (“reward”) for Banquo. Banquo agrees but on the terms that he will only seek reward (“augment” his honor) if it means he can remain guilt free (keep his “bosom franchised and allegiance clear”).

4. When Macbeth is alone he hallucinates a dagger floating before him, leading him to murder Duncan. His thoughts reveal that although he is determined to go through with the plan, he is unsettled. (2.1.40-71)
   This passage is one of the more famous passages in the play. It also calls into question Macbeth’s sanity. Was he hallucinating because he had lost his sanity, or was the vision more of an imagination caused by an overstressed brain?
   • Action: Macbeth sees a dagger floating before him with the handle pointing toward him. He longs to clutch the dagger. The vision of the dagger is a symbol of Macbeth’s desire to kill Duncan and also of the murder that is about to occur.
Macbeth notes that he does not yet hold the dagger, but he can see it. He calls the dagger a “fatal vision”—“fatal” meaning ominous. He seems to sense that the vision is, in some sense, foreshadowing something sinister for his future. This recognition that the murder would be an act of malevolence and that Macbeth, while tempted, is still concerned about the morality of it, suggests that Macbeth retains a conscience. He then asks the dagger—or himself—if the dagger is “sensible/ To feeling as to sight.” He also asks whether his mind is simply creating the vision because his brain is “heat-oppressed” (literally oppressed by fever, but the fever Macbeth refers to seems to be more of a state of extreme stress). Macbeth is wondering if the dagger is physically real—whether he would be able to hold it—just like it seems to be visibly real. This fact—that Macbeth is wondering whether the dagger is real or is an hallucination—might suggest that Macbeth is not losing his sanity, at least not completely. The insane usually do not question the reality of their visions.

Macbeth draws his own real dagger and concludes the vision, whether real or not, is leading him to where he wants to go and what he wants to do. It is no coincidence that the instrument he needs to kill Duncan is the same as the visionary one now leading him.

There are many images of blood in this play. Macbeth sees drops (“gouts”) of blood on the handle (“hilt”) of the visionary dagger. This image clearly fits in with how Macbeth foresees his near future—he is imagining going to Duncan’s chamber and stabbing him with his dagger.

Macbeth refers to his present course of action—murdering Duncan—as a “bloody business.” This phrase is literally true: there certainly will be a lot of blood involved. Additionally, the reference to blood can be seen as a symbol of the murder, death, and misdeeds that Macbeth has involved himself in.

Macbeth refers to the land and the dark night as “dead.” Of course nature is not dead, but the fact he imagines it so reinforces the images associated with death in this speech. When he refers to a “curtain [ed] sleep[er],” we may interpret this as a metaphor for himself. The curtain is literally a reference to a veil surrounding a bed. However, it may also be a metaphor for something that hides clear thought and reason from the sleeper (after all, sleepers do not think rationally). He says that this sleeper (possibly himself) is “abused” (deceived) by wicked dreams. Macbeth feels as if he is living a bad dream in which he is tempted toward wickedness.

Macbeth’s description of the night evokes dark and violent images. This creates an atmosphere of danger and fear. He creates this image and feeling through a series of allusions. Macbeth alludes to Hecate, the queen of the witches. He says that nighttime is when witchcraft has most power and offerings are given to Hecate, celebrating her power. He personifies murder, referring to “withered Murder,” as if this personified evil deed were an old, tired, or sick. Perhaps we can interpret this as a reference to Macbeth’s state of mind, feeling tired out by his thoughts of murder. Macbeth then uses a metaphor from nature. He says the personified Murder has given his signal to action (“alarumed”) by his watchman (“sentinel”), the wolf. Wolves are commonly (and often inappropriately) perceived as vicious beings. The wolf’s howl is the signal for Murder. Murder then comes to action and behaves like Tarquin. Tarquin was a Roman tyrant who raped an innocent women named Lucrece. Throughout all of this, Macbeth is motivating himself and at the same time recognizing what he is about to do is violent and a violation of another’s life—that is, he recognizes what he is about to do is wrong.

As Macbeth prepares to go to Duncan’s chamber, he asks the stones to not listen to him walk. Metaphorically, this image refers to his desire to remain silent and to keep his responsibility for the act a secret, so he can escape blame from other people and also from heavenly beings.

Macbeth then prepares himself to go. He observes that talking about something is not the same as doing it, and he must act now (“Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives”). He hears a bell, and considers that his final signal. He also compares the bell a death-knoll—the ringing of the bell to signal someone’s death. He hopes that Duncan does not hear the bell, for it—metaphorically—announces Duncan’s impending death, and Macbeth would wish that Duncan not know his fate. This also suggests some pity for Duncan and a recognition that his act is not moral. A psychopath, for example, would not feel worry or guilt about an impending murder.
**Act 2, Scene 2**

**Setting:** A dark night in the courtyard (an open place for meeting and gathering horses) inside the walls of Macbeth's castle at Inverness.

**Main characters:** Lady Macbeth, Macbeth.

**Overview:** Lady Macbeth awaits Macbeth's return from murdering Duncan, all the while reflecting on her own part in the plot. When Macbeth returns, he tells his wife about the event and also expresses extreme worry and guilt. Lady Macbeth takes things into her own hands to finish what needs to be done.

**The main events in Scene 2 are:**

- **Lady Macbeth reflects to herself upon her actions: getting Duncan's servants drunk.** (2.2. 1-11)
  
  Lady Macbeth says that she too drank alcohol. Her purpose was to "make her bold" and not to make her drunk, as was her purpose in giving the grooms (servants) drink. She is confident that the "surfeited grooms" are well-drunk ("surfeit" means to have an excess of something, so she is confident that the grooms have had an excess of drink). The grooms sleeping on the job makes a mockery of their duty ("charge" means duty). Given their present state, their future is grim: they could be charged with the murder because she has left the daggers with them and thus be sentenced to death, or they could be charged with forsaking their duty and thus possibly live but still be given a death-like existence.

- **Symbol:** Lady Macbeth hears an owl shrieking and calls it the "fatal bellman." Owls were considered an omen or symbol of death. The bellman she refers to is the man who rings a bell announcing someone's death. So, Lady Macbeth is personifying the owl as this sort of bellman, announcing Duncan's death. The owl shrieking provides an ominous atmosphere to the scene.

- **When she hears a noise, Lady Macbeth worries that the servants may have awoken.** (2.2. 12-17)
  
  When Lady Macbeth hears a noise (it is actually Macbeth returning), she thinks that the grooms may have awoken and discovered they were set up. She notes that she laid daggers beside them—in order to make them look guilty. She would have killed them to be safe, but she could not because one of the men looked like her father and this momentarily took away her boldness.

- **Macbeth returns and the two talk about their experiences: the murder of Duncan and taking care of the servants.** (1.2. 18-44)

  - **Action:** Macbeth recounts how he heard Malcolm and Donalbain, who slept close to Duncan, make noises as he was about his business. One laughed in his sleep and the other cried "Murder!" They awoke but they soon settled themselves back to sleep. Clearly, if one of them had discovered Macbeth, the plan would have been foiled.

  - **Vocabulary and irony:** Macbeth feels as if Malcolm and Donalbain had caught him, as if "they had seen [him] with ... hangman's hands." A hangman was responsible for executing people with an axe. Literally, there is some logic to Macbeth's comparison of himself to a hangman: he just executed Duncan with a dagger. There is also irony in his comparison: when Macbeth reaches his demise, he will be brutally executed.

  - **Character:** Malcolm and Donalbain say "Amen" before they return to sleep (a proper Christian gesture). When Macbeth hears this, he wants to say "Amen" also (presumably also as a Christian gesture signifying his piety); however, he cannot. The words get stuck in his throat. This seems to be a sign of his sinfulness and his awareness of that sinfulness. Christians were certainly not supposed to commit murder, nor were they supposed to attempt to take destiny into their own hands. Macbeth has done both, and for that he has sinned and he knows it. One of the interesting things about Macbeth's character is that he is willing to commit horrendous acts of brutality to get what he wants, but all the while he is plagued with doubt and guilt. (The character Richard in another Shakespeare play, Richard III, also commits multiple murders, but feels no remorse or guilt whatsoever.)

- **Macbeth is overwrought. He tells how he heard a voice cry that he would never sleep again.** (2.2. 46-56)
  
  Sleep is a time of rest and peace—usually. And it is often thought a guilty conscience prevents sleep. The voices Macbeth hears (in his mind, although they seem audible) might be interpreted as the voice of his conscience telling him he will be punished for his crime: if not by others who may or may not discover him, then by his own mind and body.
Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth to wash the blood off his hands. She says that she will also return the bloody daggers to the servants’ room. Macbeth refuses to return to the place of the murder. (2.2. 57-73)

- **Simile:** After Macbeth says that he cannot return to the scene of the crime, Lady Macbeth chides him for being afraid of Duncan’s body and sleeping men. She says that the dead and the sleeping are like pictures—just like pictures of people have no life or the potential to harm one, so do the sleeping and dead. Neither the grooms, Malcolm and Donalbain, nor Duncan have any power to harm. It is as if they are all lifeless and gone. She will return the daggers and lay them beside the grooms, smearing blood on their bodies to make them look more guilty.

After Lady Macbeth has left to return the daggers, Macbeth hears knocking and is frightened. He is also deeply disturbed at the sight of his bloody hands. (2.2. 74-80)

- **Allusion:** When Macbeth looks at his hands, he is horrified at what he sees. He sees hands bright red with blood. This image could well be literal—Macbeth may not have washed his hands yet—and it is also symbolic, the red blood representing Macbeth’s evil deed and also his guilt. To explain how much blood is on his hands—how guilty he is—he refers to the ocean and says that the blood on his hands could the entire sea “incarnadine” (to make brilliant red). He alludes to Neptune, the Roman god of the sea. Even Neptune’s sea cannot clean his hands or his guilt.

Lady Macbeth returns. Her hands are now bloody as well, but she feels ashamed that she was not as involved in the murder as Macbeth. She says that they both need to clean themselves and get to bed in order to avoid suspicion. (2.2. 81-93)

Unlike Macbeth, Lady Macbeth still feels in control of herself and the situation. Her only regret is that she has not participated in a murder. She is more innocent—she “wears a heart so white.” White symbolizes purity and innocence. We may see some irony in Lady Macbeth referring to herself as innocent—we know she is far from pure. She tells Macbeth what to do next: he and she both need to clean their hands, change into their nightclothes, and stop worrying.
Act 2, Scene 3

Setting: Early morning in the courtyard (an open place for meeting and gathering horses) inside the walls of Macbeth’s castle at Inverness.

Main characters: A porter (the watchman at the outside gates who lets people in), Lennox, Macduff, Macbeth, Banquo.

Overview: Early in the morning Duncan’s body is discovered. The chamberlains are blamed for the murder. The nobles decide to prepare themselves to make this situation right. Lady Macbeth and Macbeth successfully pretend innocence. Malcolm and Donalbain leave Scotland.

The main events in Scene 3 are:

- The porter, who is drunk, is awakened by knocking at the gate. He pretends to be the guardian of the gates of hell. (2.3.1-21)
  - Allusion: The porter of hell’s gate was a figure that was typical in medieval plays. This character was usually a comical figure, as is this fellow in Macbeth. Shakespeare’s audience would have recognized what sort of character this porter was pretending to be and found him comical not only because of his drunken actions, but also because of the reference to the traditional porter of hell’s gate. When people see a character that is a type, people are likely to react a certain way because they are familiar with this type of character. Beezlebub was an angel of Satan—in other words a demonic, hellish figure.
  - Vocabulary: The porter playfully calls the knocker an “equivocator.” An equivocator was a person who lies and deceives his listeners. The term was especially used in religious contexts: a man who had been accused of heresy might deny such in order to escape punishment and because he does not believe in the charges against him. In a certain sense Macbeth equivocates: he rationalizes sinful actions to himself and denies them to others.

- Macduff and Lennox enter the gates. Macduff and the Porter have a “philosophical” conversation about the effects of alcohol. Macduff asks if Macbeth is awake. (2.3.22-42)
  When Macduff notices the porter is drunk, the porter—humorously—explains the effects of alcohol. It paints one’s nose (makes the nose red), it causes one to sleep and to urinate. He also says that it is both good and bad for “lechery”—or sinful sexual acts—because it “raises one’s desire” for such acts but prevents one from performing.

- Macbeth enters. Macduff asks if the king is awake because the king had asked Macduff to call on him early. Macbeth shows Macduff the door leading to Duncan. (2.3.49-53)
  - Character: Being polite, when Macduff inquires about the king, Macbeth offers to show him the way. Macduff apologizes for the trouble—his comment probably also refers to the trouble of keeping the king at his castle. Macbeth replies that it has been a pleasure, and that those acts that are difficult are the best for one’s health (“The labor we delight in physics pain”). Although Macbeth would be expected to respond in such a manner, we can see some irony in his words. The “labor” that Macbeth took on was not simply housing the king, but killing him. Macbeth killed him to rise in status (in a sense cure the pain of having unfulfilled ambition), but given Macbeth’s guilty conscience, Macbeth’s words are clearly deceptive—or an equivocation.

- Macbeth and Lennox discuss how the tempestuous night. (2.3.56-68)
  - Pathetic fallacy: Pathetic fallacy is a literary term meaning the weather or environment reflects an aspect of the mood or atmosphere. Lennox describes many strange occurrences of the last night. The night was “unruly”—meaning bad weather with ominous occurrences. Chimneys were blown down, strange death-like screams that uttered terrible prophecies of tumultuous times and confusion. The “obscure bird” refers to the owl that made noise the entire night. There may have even been an earthquake. All of these events are omens of something terrible happening in world of humans. We know that what happened was the murder of the king. So, the whole environment seems to reflect the horrible event that Macbeth brought about.
Macduff re-enters and exclaims that the king is dead. Everyone panics.  (2.3. 69-88)
Macduff describes the murder scene in highly emotional and descriptive language. It was a horror so terrible that words cannot convey it. He personifies confusion, saying “Confusion” has made a “masterpiece”—meaning this event is the epitome of chaos and confusion. The murder was violation of all that was sacred.

- **Allusion:** Macduff tells people that if they go to the chamber, they will see a “new Gorgon.” In Greek mythology gorgons were three horrible sisters with snakes for hair (Medusa is the most famous gorgon) who generally were frightening and repulsive and who had the power to turn any observer into stone. Macduff means that anyone who goes to Duncan’s chamber and sees his murdered body will be so shocked it will be as if they looked upon a gorgon and were turned to stone.

Lady Macbeth enters and upon hearing the news acts as a lady would be expected to.  (2.3. 89-102, 135-136)
Lady Macbeth asks innocently what has happened. When she hears, she pretends to be shocked. Later in the scene (lines 135-136) she seems to have become faint with the news, for Banquo asks for someone to “look to her” and she is helped out. This performance is evidence of Lady Macbeth’s ability to act in a manner that furthers her own interests, even if such is a complete falsification. It is to her benefit to act like a frail woman here in order to cover up her own involvement in the murder.

Malcolm and Donalbain learn of the murder of their father. The men further discuss the state of Duncan. The chamberlains are blamed for the murder.  (2.3. 109-158)
Lennox notes the state of the chamberlains—their dead faces look distracted, and they have bloody daggers on their persons. This is enough to lay blame on the two men at this point. Macbeth claims that he killed the chamberlains in a rage after finding out about Duncan’s murder. For the time, this helps to prevent fingers being pointed at Macbeth. The men resolve to avenge Duncan’s murder. Banquo says he will “fight [against]...treasonous malice,” viewing the murder as treason, a crime against the state. Macbeth tells the men to ready themselves as men should—being manly here meant being brave, fearless, and determined.

Malcolm and Donalbain decide to leave.  (2.3. 137-145, 159-171)
Malcolm and Donalbain believe they may be blamed for the murder, despite the chamberlains being blamed at the current moment, for the brothers could be seen to have motive. Malcolm was named heir to the throne, so if Duncan is removed, then that opens up the way for Malcolm's ascension. In order to escape any blame or other problems arising from the situation, Malcolm decides to leave for England and Donalbain, to Ireland.
Act 2, Scene 4

Discussion after the Murder

Setting: Outside Macbeth’s castle.

Main characters: An old man, Ross, Macduff.

Overview: The morning after the murder, an old man, Ross and Macduff discuss events. The weather and nature continue to be highly unnatural. Malcolm and Donalbain are suspects in the murder. Macbeth will now become king. Macduff will not attend the ceremony.

The main events in Scene 4 are:

- An old man and Ross discuss the previous night (when Duncan was killed) and today’s weather. In addition to those that Macbeth and Lennox spoke of in Scene 3, more unnatural events have occurred. (2.4. 1-24)
  
  Vocabulary: The word “sore” in the old man’s first speech means dreadful or ominous. The man then says that the sore happenings (the dreadful happenings) of last night were so terrible that they make any other experience he’s had trivial or unimportant (“[h]ath trifled former knowings”). “Knowing” means experience and “trifled” means made insignificant.

  Metaphor: Ross observes that the day is dark. The sun is not out despite the hour. This is also an ominous sign. He compares the sun to a “traveling lamp” and personifies the dark night, saying it has “strangled” the traveling lamp. That is, the dark night has overcome the sun and nighttime persists.

  Image: The old man recounts seeing an unnatural event in nature. An owl who normally would hunt mice killed a falcon. While both these birds are hunters, the owl does not normally prey on large birds such as falcons. Likewise, normally a falcon could not be brought down by an owl, as both are very strong predatory birds.

  Image: Ross recounts how he saw Duncan’s horses, who were fine specimens of their species (well-trained and beautiful), turn wild. The old man says that the horses ate each other.

  Pathetic Fallacy: All of these happenings are ominous and unnatural—not what would happen in a world that was working properly. They reflect the unnaturalness of the Duncan’s murder and the chaos that now pervades Scotland.

- Macduff enters and the three speak of Duncan’s murder. The blame currently points to the chamberlains, but Malcolm and Donalbain are under suspicion. (2.4. 25-35)

  Vocabulary: When Macduff says that the chamberlains (“Those that Macbeth hath slain”) are blamed for the murder, Ross asks “What good could they pretend?” In modern English, Ross’s question simply means—what could those two men possibly gain by the murder? Macduff responds by saying it is believed the men were “suborned”—suborned here means hired by someone else. The fact that the king’s two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, have fled the scene places suspicion on them as the orchestrators.

- The three discuss Macbeth’s impending ascension to the throne. The crowning will be in Fife. Macduff will not be attending. (2.4. 36-53)

  Ross observes that in this situation—with the sons of the king gone and suspects in a murder—Macbeth will become king. The crowning will take place at Scone. Macduff adds that he will not attend the ceremony but will return home to Fife. Macduff’s absence at this event that gives so much honor to Macbeth suggests that Macduff does not support this action. In fact, we can interpret Macduff’s absence as foreshadowing of a very serious conflict between Macduff and Macbeth that will arise later in the play.
Act 3, Scene 1  Macbeth Takes Banquo’s Fate into His Hands

Setting: A room in the palace at Forres. Macbeth moved into Duncan’s castle after his coronation.
Main characters: Banquo, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Lennox, Ross, and other nobles.
Overview: Macbeth makes his first appearance as king. He announces a special feast for this evening. Then he arranges for two hired murderers to kill Banquo.

The main events in Scene 1 are:

- **Banquo reflects upon Macbeth’s rise to power. He suspects foul play was involved.**  (3.1-10)
  - **Action:** Banquo notes that Macbeth now has all that the witches (the weird women) had promised him: he is Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and finally, king. Banquo suspects (feels) that Macbeth did not achieve his status by honest means, but rather through misdeeds—“play[ing] fouly for’t.” Banquo remembers that the witches had prophesied that his children would be kings. He hopes that if Macbeth’s prophecies came true, the “oracles” (prophecies) of the witches may come true for him as well.

- **Macbeth enters as king with his retinue. Banquo tells Macbeth he is going horseback riding. Macbeth announces a feast for that evening and asks Banquo not to be absent.**  (3.1. 11-47)
  - **Macbeth treats Banquo with respect, calling him his “chief guest.” Macbeth requests the presence of Banquo at the feast being held tonight. Lady Macbeth adds that if Macbeth were absent, there would be a “gap,” or something lacking at the feast. Banquo treats Macbeth as a king, and tells him he follows his commands, as is the duty of a subject. Banquo is going riding this afternoon. Macbeth expresses disappointment, for he wanted Banquo’s advice and counsel this afternoon, but he agreeably says tomorrow will be fine. Macbeth mentions that Malcolm and Donalbain (“our bloody cousins”) have gone to England and Ireland and have not confessed their crimes, but rather are telling strange stories about what happened (“strange invention”).
  - **Character:** Note Macbeth’s welcoming demeanor with Banquo. This is pretense, for as will soon be apparent, Macbeth has plans to remove Banquo from his life permanently.

- **After everyone leaves, Macbeth reflects upon his fears regarding Banquo.**  (3.1. 52-77)
  - **Character:** Macbeth reveals that he feels insecure in his new position. When he says “To be thus,” he means to be in his current position—king. He says this position is “nothing” (not meaningful) if he is not safe in his position. This suggests he feels threatened.
  - **Character:** Macbeth also reveals that he deeply fears Banquo—his fears “[s]tick deep.” Banquo has a royal nature—he is someone who has kingly qualities. He is brave (he will dare much), and he is wise in what he chooses to involve himself in.
  - **Allusion:** To express his feeling that Banquo is a better man than Macbeth, and thus to be feared, Macbeth alludes to Mark Antony and Caesar. In Ancient Rome, Mark Antony was a general under Caesar and also a close relative. Macbeth implies Mark Antony felt inferior to Caesar, just as he feels inferior to Banquo. It is interesting that Macbeth compares himself to someone who worked for the ruler and Banquo to the ruler.
  - **Metaphor:** To further express his insecurity in his position, Macbeth laments the fact that his line will not continue on the throne—for there is no line. A “fruitless crown” and a “barren sceptre” are comparing symbols of his kingship (crown, sceptre) with trees and women that cannot reproduce.

- **Macbeth invites two hired murderers to talk with him. He explains Banquo is his enemy as well as theirs. Macbeth arranges for the assassins to murder Banquo.**  (3.1. 78-158)
  - **Vocabulary:** Macbeth persuades the murderers that Banquo has been the cause of their ill fortune. Macbeth says that it was Banquo who “held [the murderers]/ So under fortune.” This phrase means Banquo kept the murderers down on their luck or Banquo prevented them from succeeding. Macbeth claims the men previously thought it was him when he says “which you had thought had been/ Our innocent self.” Traditionally kings refer to themselves in the plural—they do not say “I” but “we,” and they do not say “my” but “our.” Macbeth then goes on to say they “passed in probation.” This means that Macbeth and the two men have gone over the proof of what Macbeth just claimed. He says the men were deceived (“borne in hand”) and hindered in their plans (“crossed”). He says that even an idiot could recognize that the cause of these misfortunes was Banquo.
• **Action:** Clearly as a rhetorical move—that is to manipulate the conversation—Macbeth asks the men if they are such good men that they would pray for Banquo and have patience with his actions. (Note: we do not have any evidence of such actions, only Macbeth’s word). The men claim that they are such men, that they will forebear these misdeeds. One motive for such a strange response is that they are afraid of Macbeth and simply want to agree with whatever he says. Macbeth responds with sarcasm, suggesting their response was inappropriate. Macbeth says that he supposes the two men are men. He makes an analogy by saying all different breeds of dogs, including mongrels, are called dogs. The implication is that these men are of a lower breed of human, although still of the species. Macbeth says that Banquo is “sickly in this life,” meaning that while Banquo lives, he is a sickness, but he would be perfected in his death. Now the murderers respond by saying they agree and they are angry (“incensed”) and tired of being pulled down by fortune (“tugged with fortune”). They all agree Banquo is their enemy.

• **Metaphor:** Macbeth uses a fencing metaphor to express his disgust with Banquo. He says Banquo’s being “thrusts” just like a fencer thrusts his sword into the very heart of Macbeth’s life (“near’st of life”).

• **Vocabulary:** After the murderers agree to carry out Macbeth’s plan to murder Banquo, Macbeth tells them how. Macbeth will tell them where to wait (“plant” themselves) tonight. The place must be far from the palace (“something from the palace”) because Macbeth cannot be blamed (he “require[s] a clearness”). They must not make any mistakes (“rubs”). Further, Banquo’s son Fleance should also be killed. We can note that Macbeth has good reason to want Fleance dead, for the witches had prophesied that Banquo’s children would be kings.
Act 3, Scene 2

Setting: A room in the Macbeths’ palace. A few hours before the banquet.

Main characters: Lady Macbeth, Macbeth.

Overview: Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth express distress and worry about their current situation. Both worry that what they have achieved is not worth the price. Lady Macbeth does not voice her concerns to Macbeth, although he is open with her. What he does keep secret are his plans for Banquo. He hints that he has planned something but does not reveal his murderous plans to his wife.

The main events in Scene 2 are:

- While Lady Macbeth is alone, waiting for Macbeth to come to her, she suggests that the position they have achieved is nothing if they are not safe and secure in that position. (3.2. 1-9)
  - Vocabulary: Lady Macbeth exclaims that nothing has been gained when she says “Nought’s had”: “nought” means nothing. She also says that everything has been lost when she says “all’s spent”: “spent” here means used up or exhausted.
  - Character: She explains why she feels so hopeless. She says that when desire (or ambitions or goals) are attained “without content”—that is, when achievement does not bring happiness and safety—then it is better to be in the position of the enemies they are working to destroy. She says that their “destruction” has only brought “doubtful joy.” Note that her sentiments are similar to those expressed by Macbeth, especially those in 3.1.52-53 where Macbeth says it is useless to be in his present position if he is not secure in that position. Note also that Lady Macbeth’s sentiments revealed here privately give a very different impression from the public Lady Macbeth who is bold and fearless.

- Macbeth enters looking distressed. Lady Macbeth now changes her demeanor and tells Macbeth not to worry. (3.2. 10-14)
  - As soon as Macbeth enters, Lady Macbeth becomes her usual self, chiding him for being overly worried. She says that things that have no remedy should have no regard—things that cannot be fixed shouldn’t be worried about.

- Macbeth vents his worries and frustrations to Lady Macbeth. (3.2. 15-28)
  - Macbeth expresses similar thoughts to Lady Macbeth’s own private thoughts—that they are not safe. He notes the bad dreams they have been plagued with. He also says that it would be better to be dead and at peace than in this “torture of the mind.” He envies Duncan, for he is not guilty of treason or malice, and rests in peace.
  - Metaphor: Macbeth compares their attempt to become secure in their position to killing a snake. He says the snake (their opponents) has only been “scotch’d.” “Scotch’d” means cut with a knife or slashed. The snake has not been killed. They have not removed their enemies and thus they are not safe. He says at the moment the snake (their enemies) is curled up (“close[d]”), but she retains her venomous (dangerous) tooth which surely can still harm them.

- Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth to calm down and especially to be calm at the banquet tonight. Macbeth assures her that he will behave appropriately. (3.2. 29-39)
  - Vocabulary: Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth to “sleek o’er [his] rugged looks.” This means to cover up his worried demeanor and look relaxed and content.
  - Metaphor: For his part, Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth to pay attention to Banquo and “lave [their] honors in ... flattering streams.” This is a complicated image, but essentially Macbeth is comparing their situation to washing in a stream. Their “honors” are their recently achieved status and position. “Lave” means to wash. He imagines a stream as a place where flattery flows. So he is saying they must keep their new position clean and healthy by washing it in the flattering stream. In simpler terms, he means they must flatter their guests, even enemies like Banquo, in order to keep those guests happy and from turning on them.

- Macbeth and Lady Macbeth discuss the problem of Banquo—that he still lives and is a threat. (3.2. 40-42)
  - Image: Macbeth says that his mind is “full of scorpions.” This vivid image portrays a man who feels like his own mind is poisoning him, and a man who is full of fear and confusion—scorpions aren’t full of fear and confusion themselves, but a mind full of scorpions must be a horrendous thing.
Macbeth tells his wife that there is a plan in the works to take care of Banquo. He will not tell her the details but tells her to wait until the deed is done. (3.2. 43-61)

- **Vocabulary:** When Macbeth tells his wife that he worries about Banquo and Fleance, she consoles him by saying they cannot live forever—they will not be problems forever. Her words are “in them nature’s copy not eterne.” “Nature’s copy” refers to a person’s lease on life or the length of time they are allowed to live determined by nature. “Eterne” simply means eternal. So their lease on life is not eternal, Lady Macbeth points out.

- **Vocabulary:** Macbeth responds that before the night falls a dreadful deed will be done that shall comfort them. He uses several figurative phrases to refer to the night. “Ere the bat hath flown/ His cloistered flight” means before the bats start to fly (bats fly at night) around buildings (in this case “cloistered” means in or around buildings). He also says this event will happen before the beetle is called by Hecate (witches work mostly at night).

- **Vocabulary:** Macbeth suddenly seems to have some hope. He tells Lady Macbeth (“chuck” is a term of endearment) that it is better if she does not know. He then summons the night. “Seeling” refers to closing one’s eyes. Apart from the literal meaning—that people close their eyes at night when they sleep—he means that at night it is more difficult to see or discover what evil happens—the day’s eyes are closed. The “great bond” he refers to may be his bond with Banquo or Banquo’s bond with life. He wishes that bond be torn to pieces.
Act 3, Scene 3

The Murder of Banquo

Setting: A park with a gate leading to Macbeth’s palace.

Main characters: Three murderers, Banquo, Fleance.

Overview: A third murderer joins the two Macbeth hired. They wait for Banquo and Fleance and then attack them. They kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes.

The main events in Scene 3 are:

- The first two murderers ask the third who sent him, as Macbeth had indicated there would just be two. The third answers that Macbeth sent him. (3.3. 1-10)
  The first murderer seems shocked or suspicious that someone else would join them. The second murderer says that they should trust the third murderer since he knows what their purpose is. What he means is that the only person who could have informed the third murderer of the men’s actions is Macbeth himself, and therefore, the third man is in the same league as the first two. The men wait for dark to fall and Banquo to arrive.

- Character and action: It is peculiar that Macbeth would send a third man when he had already hired the first two. The play offers no answers as to why, but the question offers some intriguing possibilities. It is possible that Macbeth simply did not fully trust the first two hired men to complete the task and so he sent a third to help them and keep an eye on them. This is the most obvious possibility. Another interpretation is that the third man is actually Macbeth himself in disguise, wanting to be part of this event. There is no direct evidence for this, so we cannot say the man definitely is Macbeth, but it fits with Macbeth’s personality. It is a possibility to entertain.

- The murderers hear horses. They conclude Banquo and Fleance must be approaching. They prepare themselves. (3.3. 11-23)

- The murderers kill Banquo. Fleance escapes. The men decide to report back to Macbeth. (3.3. 24-33)
  The second murderer observes that in letting Fleance escape, they “lost/ Best half of [their] affair.” He means the murderers let the most important target of Macbeth’s plan go free. While the men here may not know why, we can easily surmise the reason Fleance’s death was of primary importance. The witches had prophesied that Banquo’s children would be kings. Thus Fleance is a greater threat to Macbeth than Banquo.
Act 3, Scene 4

Setting: A banquet room in the Macbeths’ castle.

Main characters: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Ross, Lennox, other nobles, the first murderer.

Overview: The Macbeths hold a banquet for the nobles. Just as Macbeth is about to be seated, Banquo’s ghost appears to Macbeth. He begins to rave in a manner that makes him seem mad, but he also hints at some of his misdeeds. Lady Macbeth finally tells the guests to leave. Alone, Macbeth tells her there is no going back to their former selves, and they have much yet to do.

The main events in Scene 4 are:

A. As the banquet starts, the Macbeths’ welcome their guests. Macbeth says that he will sit in the middle of group. (3.4. 1-13)

• Setting: This banquet begins appropriately, with all appropriate etiquette followed. The guests are seated according to their “degree” or rank. Lady Macbeth is sitting on a chair reserved for royalty, but she will formally welcome everyone soon. Macbeth, like a dignified host, is mixing and mingling with everyone. He says that he will sit in middle of the table, presumably so he can be at the center of things.

B. The first murderer approaches the door. When Macbeth approaches, the murderer informs him about the night’s events—that Banquo was killed, but Fleance escaped. (3.4. 13-38)

• Simile and metaphor: When Macbeth learns that Fleance escaped, he becomes rattled, saying his “fit” is coming again. By “fit” he means his overwhelming fear. He uses several similes and metaphors to describe his previous calm state and his new nervous state. He says that previously he had been “whole as the marble”; “whole” in this sense means well-built, strong, in good condition. He says he was “founded as the rock”; “founded” here means stable or immovable. He says he was as “broad and general as the casing air”; “broad and general” here means unconfined or free, so he says he was as free as the air. Then he explains his present state, which in summary, is feeling confined. He says he is “cabin’d,” meaning he feels as if he is shut up in small cabin. “Cribb’d” means confined. He is “bound” or tied to his fears and doubts.

• Metaphor: Macbeth compares Banquo to a serpent and Fleance to a worm. Banquo, the “grown serpent” is dead. But Fleance, the “worm,” still lives and in time will develop “venom.” Macbeth means that in time Fleance will become a serious threat to him.

C. Lady Macbeth goes to Macbeth to lead him back. She says he has not been a good host. (3.4. 39-47)

D. Macbeth does not sit at the empty seat when he reaches the table. He exclaims that he wishes Banquo were present. At that moment the ghost of Banquo, visible only to Macbeth, appears in the empty seat. Macbeth cannot understand why Lennox asks him to sit down, for to Macbeth it appears all seats are taken. (3.4. 48-87)

Note that the ghost is only visible to Macbeth. To the others it seems that there is an empty seat and Macbeth is acting very strangely. The play does not answer this question, but the question remains as to whether the ghost is really a ghost or if the vision is simply a figment of Macbeth’s overheated mind.

• Action and character: At first Macbeth thinks the ghost is a practical joke played by one of the guests. He asks which of them have done this. Then he goes on, hinting at his role in Banquo’s death. He exclaims that no-one can say that he did “this” (Banquo’s murder, of which everyone else is ignorant). He says no-one can “shake” their “gory locks at him.” “Gory” means bloody and here suggests guilty. He is suggesting someone else is guilty and is setting him up. The truth is that no-one knows what he is talking about, and so his proclamation of innocence seems to take on the opposite suggestion—that he was involved with some bloody crime. We do not know if the ghost is real or not, but it is real to Macbeth and he reverted to a paranoid state that is quite different from his royal demeanor at the beginning of the banquet.

• Action: Lady Macbeth tells the other guests that Macbeth periodically has such fits and the best thing to do is to completely ignore him. Meanwhile she urges him to pull himself together. She does so by insulting his masculinity. He is not acting like a man, and he needs to get it together.
The ghost exits. Lady Macbeth urges Macbeth to compose himself. Macbeth is very disturbed. (3.4. 88-109)

- **Action:** Macbeth speaks somewhat philosophically on what he has seen. He notes that before laws and civilization put an end to violence (“Ere human statute purged the gentle weal”—“weal” means commonwealth), there was much bloodshed. In fact, there still are terrible murders performed. He says that in the past when a man was stabbed (“when his brains are out” means *when he has been stabbed mortally in the head*), he died. But that is the case no longer. Now, when a man dies, even with twenty wounds on the head, he rises again (he is referring to the murder of Banquo and his resurrection as a ghost).

- **Action:** When Lady Macbeth reminds Macbeth he has guests awaiting him, Macbeth returns to the company and asks they not wonder about his ravings, for he has a “strange infirmity” that really is not serious. Macbeth raises a toast to Banquo.

The ghost reappears to Macbeth and Macbeth raves at himself and the ghost, appearing mad. (3.4. 110-129)

- **Action:** As soon as Macbeth toasts Banquo, the ghost reappears. Macbeth seems out of his mind now as he rages directly at the ghost. Of course, no-one else can see to whom he is yelling. He tells the ghost to leave (“quit my sight”). He rages about how the ghost/Banquo is dead, his bones being marrowless and his blood being cold. He tells the ghost to take any other form than that of Banquo—a bear or rhinoceros for example—and Macbeth will not be afraid. He tells the ghost to challenge him to a duel in a deserted place, and then he will not tremble. If he does, he can be called a baby girl for his weakness. He tells the ghost to leave (“Hence!”).

After the ghost exits, Macbeth sits down but continues to act strangely. Lady Macbeth says that he is not well, and the guests leave. (3.4. 130-150)

Lady Macbeth chides Macbeth for having “broken the mirth” (ruined the good mood) of the banquet. Part of her motive seems to get things back to normal at the dinner, and by simply calling Macbeth’s action something that ruined the mood, she makes his actions seem less strange than they were. She doesn’t draw attention to his mad ravings. However, Macbeth is still not feeling right, and he starts to rave about how he finds it strange that Lady Macbeth is not moved at all by the sight of Banquo (he seems to assume that she saw it). This—and the whole experience—makes him feel like a stranger to himself (“make me strange/ Even to the disposition I owe”). Ross asks Macbeth what sights he saw. If Macbeth answered this, he would likely betray his involvement in at least Banquo’s murder. Lady Macbeth tells the guests to not talk to Macbeth for it makes him worse. She then says that they should go. The banquet is over.

Alone with his wife, Macbeth worries about the current situation and makes plans. (3.4. 151-175)

- **Action:** The first thing Macbeth concerns himself with when talking with Lady Macbeth is the consequences of murdering Banquo. He uses the word “blood” to mean *death, murder and/or revenge* in his exclamation “It [i.e., Banquo’s murder] will have blood; they say blood will have blood.” He then lists a few strange things that have been known to happen: moving stones, speaking trees, prophecies (augures) and connections between events told by magpies (“magot-pies”) and jackdaws (“choughs”), murderers being revealed by crows (“rooks brought forth/ The secret’st man of blood”). His words suggest that he is now fearful of his misdeeds being revealed by all sorts of sources; he does not feel confident that his actions can be kept to himself and his wife.

- **Action:** Macbeth then wonders about Macduff and his absence at the banquet. He says he will find out, for he has spies in all of the nobles’ houses (“There’s not one of them but in his house/ I keep a servant fee’d”—he pays a servant to tell him what goes on the house). He then says that he will visit the witches once again because he must know what their prophecies are.

- **Image and metaphor:** To describe how guilty he is, he uses a metaphor, comparing murder to a river of blood. He says “I am in blood/ Stepp’d in so far,” meaning he has waded so far into the river of murder, or in other words, he has committed so much murder. He then says “should I wade no more/ Returning were as tedious as go o’er,” meaning if he were to stop now and try to reclaim his past life that would be as difficult and tedious as continuing. He concludes the scene by saying he and Lady Macbeth are “young in deed,” meaning they have much more to do.
**Act 3, Scene 5**  

**Setting:** A heath amidst thunderous weather.

**Main characters:** Hecate (the queen of the witches), the three witches.

**Overview:** Hecate, the queen of the witches, meets with the other three witches. She is displeased with how they have been working their evil magic. She tells them that tomorrow all of them will meet with Macbeth in order to draw him further along his path of destruction.

**The main events in Scene 5 are:**

- **When the first witch asks Hecate why she is angry, Hecate answers that she is upset that the three witches did not involve her in their manipulation of Macbeth.** (3.5. 1-9 )
  - **Vocabulary:** Hecate begins her response to the witches by insulting them. She calls the witches “beldams,” which means hags. She calls them “saucy” and “over-bold.” “Saucy” means presumptuous and disrespectful. They are saucy and over-bold because they “trad[ed] and traffic[ked]....riddles and affairs of death” with Macbeth, but they did not ask her, the expert in such black magic, to get involved. In other words, they played with Macbeth and forgot to include their leader in the game.

- **Hecate adds that she is angry that Macbeth, although he has been tempted to evil, does not act for evil’s sake, but simply to further his ambition.** (3.5. 10-13 )
  - **Character:** Hecate characterizes Macbeth as a “wayward son” who is “spiteful and wrathful” and cares only about his own gains. We might note that while Macbeth does have a conscience and his feelings of guilt keep him from being considered by the reader as 100% bad, Hecate’s description is fairly accurate. Moreover, it is probably more accurate at this point than the perspective any of the nobles have of him (although this will soon change). As a witch, Hecate is devoted to evil, not for her own gains, but because evil is what she considers the most worthy. She is also upset with Macbeth because he “[l]oves for his own ends”—that whatever mischief he makes, it is to benefit him. She would like him to be devoted to evil deeds, not to better himself, but for their own sake.

- **Hecate tells the witches to be at a certain place tomorrow with all of their powers and charms, for there Hecate and the witches will meet with Macbeth.** (3.5. 14-19 )
  - **Allusion:** Hecate tells the witches to meet her tomorrow at “the pit of Acheron.” In Greek mythology, Acheron is one of rivers of Hades. Hades was the underworld or hell. Hecate does not literally mean they should go to Acheron in Hades, but rather she is thinking of a dismal, hell-like place that is like Acheron.

- **Hecate announces her departure. She needs to collect various magical spells that will work on Macbeth, causing him to become over-confident and thus leading him to his destruction.** (3.5. 20-37 )
  - **Context:** Hecate announces she must leave, for she is flying to a “corner of the moon” to capture a drop of vapor. It was often believed in Shakespeare’s time that with strong enough spells, a substance could be captured from the moon that had strong magical powers. She plans to use the vapor to conjure up sprites (spirits or ghosts) that will help spur Macbeth on further in his ambition, causing him to commit greater evil. He shall be so confident that he will not care about death, fate, and scorn (others’ bad opinions of him).
Setting: A room in Macbeth’s palace at Forres.

Main characters: Lennox, an unnamed noble (his title is “Lord”).

Overview: Two nobles, Lennox and an unnamed lord, discuss recent events. Lennox characterizes Macbeth as a tyrant and suggests that it is, in fact, Macbeth who is guilty for the recent murders. The two discuss Macduff, and reveal that a force is being prepared in England to assist Scotland in freeing itself of Macbeth. Macbeth is aware of Macduff’s belligerence and because of that and suspicions as to what Macduff is up to, Macbeth is preparing for war.

The main events in Scene 6 are:

- Lennox reviews the events of late, and the interpretations that seem most obvious. Lennox does not hold these obvious opinions. He suspects Macbeth. He asks as to Macduff’s whereabouts. (3.6. 1-24)
  - Action: Lennox opens the conversation with the lord saying that his “former speeches have hit [the lord’s] thoughts,” meaning the lord has similar thoughts as Lennox. Lennox adds that what has happened of late has been “strangely borne,” meaning the way the events have happened has been strange and suspicious.
  - Action: Lennox reviews the events of the recent past and comments on Macbeth’s reactions. Macbeth pitied Duncan—but only after Duncan was dead. He says it may be that Fleance killed Banquo, for Fleance was with Banquo and he fled, casting suspicion on him. And it seems with some sarcasm that Lennox says the Duncan’s sons were responsible for his murder. Lennox notes how Macbeth immediately became enraged and killed the two chamberlains. Lennox then speaks of Macbeth more directly, saying he has managed things cleverly. He has seemed innocent, but he is truly suspicious. Lennox calls Macbeth a tyrant: this is the first time such a word has been used in reference to Macbeth. This term defines Lennox’s opinion of Macbeth, and tells us that his former observations were simply that of the common mind, what Macbeth would like people to think, and probably said in a sarcastic tone.

- The lord replies that Macduff has gone to see Malcolm in England. He has been convincing the English court that Scotland is in need of help. The lord says that if England could free Scotland of Macbeth, their lives would be much better. (3.6. 25-38)
  - Character: Macduff has gone to “wake Northumberland and warlike Siward” and to pray to the king. Northumberland is a county of England, and so Macduff has gone to convince the people of this county along with their earl, Siward, that something is amiss in Scotland and they can help.

- The lord also adds that the king—Macbeth—is so angered at the news, that he is preparing for war. Macbeth sent a messenger to Macduff, but Macduff refused to provide an answer. (3.6. 38-45)

- Lennox advises that a messenger tell Macduff to keep his distance for the time being, but that it looks as if changes (the overthrow of Macbeth) could happen soon. (3.6. 46-53)
Act 4, Scene 1

Setting: Amidst thunder, in a dark cave with a cauldron.
Main characters: Three witches, Hecate, Macbeth, apparitions, Lennox.
Overview: Macbeth visits the witches once again. He demands to know his future. The prophecies are given not by the witches themselves, but by apparitions (ghost-like visions). Similar to his last visit with the witches, Macbeth receives three prophecies, although this time they are more cryptic. He then asks about Banquo and the answer is disturbing. He receives news from Lennox that Macduff has fled to the English king’s court. Macbeth swears to kill Macduff’s family.

The main events in Scene 1 are:

1. The witches meet and chant spells around their cauldron. (4.1.1-46)
   As the witches gather round the cauldron, they add various poisons and items from nature to make their potions and spells stronger. Amongst the items they add are toads, snakes and eyes of newts. These chants and spells might seem stereotypical to a modern reader, but in Shakespeare’s time they would have been signs of the witches’ evil power. Hecate enters and praises their good work.
   - Atmosphere: Because of the widespread belief in witches, this scene would not be comical—as it might be to a modern reader—but eerie and ominous.

2. Macbeth enters the cave and demands the witches tell him more about his future. They agree, but ask if he wants to hear it from them or from their “masters.” Macbeth tells them to call the “masters.” (4.1.47-73)
   Action: Macbeth says he “conjure[s]” the witches to answer him. “Conjure,” here means simply to implore someone or ask someone forcefully. Macbeth lists many of the witches’ abilities—possibly to compliment them. Amongst the powers he names are controlling the wind, “confound[ing]” sea navigation (causing sailors to go off course), and causing castles to collapse. The witches respond eagerly, saying Macbeth should ask and they will answer. When the witches refer to their “masters” they are referring to the spirits and apparitions that they decided to summon in Act 3, Scene 5. Macbeth is eager to hear from the “masters,” possibly because the word “master” suggests beings that are even more powerful than the witches.

3. The first apparition appears, telling Macbeth to fear Macduff. He won’t give more information. (4.1.74--81)
   After working with the cauldron and chanting some more spells, the witches produce an apparition. An apparition is like a ghost or a vision. This vision is of a head without a body but with armor (probably a helmet).
   - Symbol: This head does not clearly symbolize one thing, but there are at least two possibilities that lead to interesting interpretations. The head could symbolize Macduff’s armored head when he confronts Macbeth at the end of the play (this confrontation will be Macbeth’s final downfall). The head could also symbolize Macbeth’s own head, which will be severed by Macduff at the end of the play.
   - Action: The apparition of the head does not say much, but what he does is important. He warns Macbeth to beware Macduff. Macbeth acknowledges that this warning reflects his fear of Macduff. He wants to ask more, but this apparition is finished and disappears.

4. The second apparition tells Macbeth that he need not fear anyone who was born from a woman. (4.1.81-92)
   The witches promise a second apparition that is even more powerful. Then a bloody child appears. To the child’s warning, Macbeth retorts that he need not fear Macduff, for surely he was born of woman (we will find out soon this is not quite so). Nevertheless, Macbeth still decides Macduff should not live—just in case.
   - Symbol: Again, the bloody child does not clearly symbolize anything; however, as with any symbol, meaning is a matter of interpretation. You will soon learn that Macduff was not “born of a woman,” but rather he was born by caesarean section. The fact that Macduff was not born of a woman will be a crucial aspect of how the prophecies play out, how they work to make Macbeth overly confident. This bloody child can symbolize Macduff being “ripped” from his mother’s womb. This interpretation probably seems confusing if this is the first time you have read Macbeth; however, after you finish the play, reconsider how Macbeth was given cryptic hints about his downfall.
The third apparition tells Macbeth that he will not be in danger until Birnam Wood (a forest near his palace) begins to move toward him. (4.1. 93-109)

This apparition is a child with branch in his hand. He tells Macbeth to bold and confident, for he will not see his demise unless Birnam Wood begins to move toward his castle. Macbeth feels emboldened, for it seems impossible for a forest to move.

- **Symbol:** This image can symbolize Malcolm, a child compared to Macbeth, and the cutting of the tree boughs in Birnam Wood which will be a crucial aspect of this prophecy being fulfilled. Again, these interpretations have little context here in Act 4, but if you revisit them after you have finished the play, they will be more meaningful.

Macbeth demands to know about Banquo. The witches warn that this is not advisable, but he insists. Consequently, eight apparitions that look like kings appear, the last being one that looks like Banquo. Macbeth cannot understand the meaning and is greatly disturbed. (4.1. 109-142)

- **Symbol and context:** It was said that Banquo descended from a line of kings, the family called the Stuart Dynasty. This dynasty now had James 1 on the throne. Banquo would be (or would have been) the eighth king in this line.

- **Character:** Macbeth is distraught at the line of kings before him. He asks the witches why they showed him this vision. The witches do not answer him directly, but simply tell him that all this is “so” or true. They then perform a dance and vanish.

After the witches leave, Lennox enters. Macbeth asks him if he saw the witches; Lennox says “no.” Lennox tells Macbeth Macduff has left Scotland for the English king’s court. Macbeth swears to kill Macduff’s family. (4.1. 145-170)

- **Action:** After Lennox gives Macbeth the news about Macduff, Macbeth speaks to himself. He personifies time, saying Time delayed Macbeth’s plans—“anticipat’st” means forestalled or delayed. He says that plans or “purpose” is nothing unless acted upon—“unless the deed go with it.” He determines that from now on, his first impulses (“the very firstlings of [his] heart”) will be immediately turned into actions (“the firstlings of [his] hand”). The thought he has now, and decides to act upon immediately is to go to Macduff’s castle unannounced (or have others sent by him do so), and kill (“give to th’ edge of the sword”) Macduff’s wife, children and any other descendants. He determines that talking or “boasting” is finished; he will act upon this thought immediately.
**Act 4, Scene 2**

**Setting:** Macduff’s castle at Fife.

**Main characters:** Lady Macduff, her children, Ross, a messenger, murderers.

**Overview:** This scene demonstrates the escalation in Macbeth’s violence. In Macduff’s castle, his wife and Ross first discuss Macduff’s flight to England. Then Lady Macduff and her son have a revealing conversation about the nature of treason. A messenger comes to warn the family they are in danger, but it is too late. Murderers enter the castle and kill the family. We can assume that the murderers were hired by Macbeth.

**The main events in Scene 2 are:**

- **Ross has come to Macduff’s castle to talk about Macduff’s flight to England with Lady Macduff. She asks why he left and receives a vague answer. Lady Macduff vents her anger at her husband for leaving.** (4.2. 1-16)
  - **Action:** Ross asks Lady Macbeth to have patience regarding Macduff’s flight to England. She is angry and asks why she should be patient, as Macduff had no patience himself. She interprets the motive behind his flight as fear. The line “When our actions do not/ Our fears do make us traitors” reveal what her fears are regarding how Macduff’s flight will be perceived. Fleeing to England could be interpreted as an act of treason—making Macduff a traitor. Lady Macduff means that she acknowledges that Macduff’s actions are not truly traitorous, but the fact that he left—out of fear—makes him appear as a traitor. Ross defends Macduff, saying that Lady Macduff does not know whether Macduff was motivated out fear or, possibly, wisdom.
  - **Action and character:** Lady Macduff scoffs at the idea that it could be wisdom to leave his wife, children, home and responsibilities in Fife (his “title”). Her words reveal a deep cynicism about what motivates people. She claims that Macduff did not love them and lacks the ability to feel affection (“He wants the natural touch”). She explains her point of view by an analogy from nature: even a wren (a tiny bird) will fight an owl who is hunting her beloved chicks, despite the great odds she will not win. The wren has “natural affection” by sticking by her family in the direst circumstances. Macduff does not, for he has left his family alone. She claims that for Macduff, “All is fear and nothing is love.” Some people, like Ross, understand and support Macduff’s journey to England. Lady Macduff is filled with feelings of anger and abandonment.

- **Ross defends Macduff, recalling his honor and wisdom. He bids her well and leaves.** (4.2. 17-33)
  - **Vocabulary:** When Ross urges Lady Macduff to “school” herself, he is telling her to control herself for her husband’s sake. Ross says Macduff is a good man; he is “noble, wise, judicious and best knows/ The fits o’ the season.” The last phrase about knowing the season means Macduff understands how things change (like the seasons change) and how to respond the the changes. Ross is literally referring to the changes in Scotland. He tells Lady Macduff not to believe rumors simply because she is afraid. If she does, it like she is on a “wild and violent sea” that has no stability.

- **Lady Macduff tells her son that he has no father. They have a conversation about what they will do without a father or husband. The son still believes he has a father.** (4.2. 34-52)
  - Lady Macduff asks her son what he will do without a father. The son responds with an analogy from nature. Just as the birds do—i.e., live with what they have got and make the best of it—he will survive. However, he denies that he is fatherless, telling his mother she is wrong. He asks her what she will do without a husband. Perhaps sarcastically, she answers she will find twenty new husbands at the market. The young boy, displaying unusual wit for someone his age, asks if she will buy them and then sell them again. Perhaps he is commenting on how easily it seems his mother is willing to give up on his father, Macduff.

- **Lady Macduff and her son discuss whether Macduff is a traitor, what it means to be a traitor and what should happen to them. They boy has a pessimistic view of the world for a child.** (4.2. 53-71)
  - Lady Macduff’s definition of a traitor is anyone who swears and lies, and she believes that all traitors—i.e., all who swear and lie—should be hanged. You should note that this is an extremely broad definition of traitor. She says traitors should be hanged by honest men. The son then makes an insightful, if pessimistic, observation. If his mother’s system of law were enacted, the traitors (swearers and liars) would be fools for getting hanged. For, there are so many of these types of traitors, they could easily outnumber and overcome the honest hangmen and thereby escape punishment.
A messenger arrives, saying the Macduffs are in danger and should leave their home at once. (4.2. 71-81)

- **Vocabulary:** The messenger is unknown to Lady Macduff, and hence it is reasonable that she be suspicious. He assures her he is on her side by acknowledging her honorable position. His phrase “your state of honor” means her **honorable position**, and his phrase “I am perfect” means he is well-acquainted with how honorable she is. He tells her he fears danger for her is near. In his phrase “I doubt,” “doubt” means fear, so he says he fears some danger.... The phrase “approach you nearly” simply means is nearby. When he says “Be not found here. Hence with your little ones!” he means Get your family and yourself away from this place!

Lady Macduff wonders why she should flee since she has done no wrong and then reflects that in truth there is no-one who is truly blameless. (4.2. 82-88)

Lady Macduff at first wonders why she should “fly” or leave her house because she has done no “harm.” Then she observes that in this world “harm” or misdeeds are often considered laudable or praiseworthy and doing good is often considered bad. Thus, according to this logic, the good Lady Macduff is considered by many in the world as dangerous or bad. Consider how this fits in with the theme “fair is foul and foul is fair” and the related theme of appearance vs reality.

Murderers enter the home and accuse Macduff of being a traitor. The son protests but to no avail. The murderers kill the son and the scene ends with the murderers chasing Lady Macduff. We can assume she also was murdered. (4.2. 89-97)

Although the murderers do not name the person who hired them, we can safely assume this person was Macbeth. We learned only in the last act that Macbeth planned just such an action. While this play has many violent scenes, this one is often considered the most disturbing, as the victims of Macbeth’s rage are completely innocent, a young boy and his mother.
Act 4, Scene 3  
Macduff’s Grief and Plans for Revenge

**Setting:** In England, in front of the king’s (King Edward) palace.

**Main characters:** Malcolm, Macduff, Ross.

**Overview:** Macduff arrives at the castle of the King of England. He meets with Malcolm. At first, Macduff attempts to persuade Malcolm that they should invade Scotland. Malcolm, however, tests Macduff’s loyalty by pretending that he is disloyal and would be a terrible king. Macduff becomes enraged, and this proves to Malcolm that Macduff is loyal to Scotland. After Macduff and Malcolm have reconciled, Ross enters and informs Macduff of the murder of his family. Macduff is overcome with grief, and he determines to remove Macbeth from the throne.

The main events in Scene 3 are:

- **Macduff arrives at the palace of the King of England, where Malcolm is staying.** The two talk about Macbeth’s tyranny and the horrible state that Scotland is in. Malcolm begins his test of Macduff’s integrity and loyalty. (4.3. 1-28)
  - Imagery: Macduff provides a grim picture of the state of Scotland. Widows howl—that is, women are made widows when their husbands are slain, and they howl for grief. Children are made orphans. Heaven does not hear the cries of sorrow; rather, the sorrowful cries are sent back to earth unanswered.
  - Character: Malcolm begins his test of Macduff’s loyalty to Scotland by pointing out that Macduff used to be a friend of Macbeth. Malcolm says that he will allow Macduff to betray Malcolm in order to try to win back the bond Macduff had with Macbeth. If Macduff had agreed to this, then Malcolm would know that Macduff cared more about himself than the terrible state of Scotland. Macduff insists that he is not treacherous—that is, he would not betray Malcolm and the country.

- **Malcolm continues to test Macduff by telling him that if he, Malcolm, became King of Scotland, he would be even more tyrannical and corrupt than Macbeth.** Macduff forsakes all hope, both for himself and his country. Malcolm then explains that he was testing Macduff’s integrity by lying about his own honor, and the fact that Macduff recoiled from Malcolm’s words proves he is loyal and someone to be trusted. (4.3. 29-154)
  - Personification: After Malcolm tells Macbeth again that he should betray his country and protect his own by allying with Macbeth, Macduff cries out in despair. He personifies the country of Scotland when he cries, “Bleed, bleed, poor country.” It seems he is envisioning the bloodshed to come, and proclaiming that bloodshed is necessary. Then he personifies tyranny as a victor over all that is good.
  - Character: Malcolm envisions removing the tyrant Macbeth. But he says that when he has killed him (he provides the image of treading on Macbeth’s head) that the country will actually have more vices than before. Vices are very bad habits and behaviors.
  - Simile: To express how vile Malcolm really is, he refers to Macbeth as “black Macbeth.” Malcolm says that when he rises to power, even though Macbeth seems “black” now, when Malcolm is king, Macbeth will seem “pure as snow.” He compares Macbeth to white snow, a symbol of purity. He is not saying Macbeth is good or pure, only that when compared to how bad he, Malcolm, could be, that Macbeth seems good. Macbeth will seem like a lamb—lams are symbols of peace and innocence.
  - Character: After explaining how lustful and avaricious he is, Malcolm goes on to list the good qualities of a king: justice, verity (truthfulness), temperance and many more. He says that he has none of these qualities. Macduff then despires for Scotland and declares that Malcolm will never be king, Macduff prepares to leave. Malcolm then changes his tone entirely, explaining that he had been lying to Macduff, trying to tempt him to evil. If Macduff had been enticed, then Malcolm would know that Macduff was not trustworthy. Because Macduff was not tempted but rather repulsed, Malcolm knows that Macduff is a good, trustworthy person. Malcolm then reassures Macduff that everything he said about himself was a lie, and that Malcolm is truly loyal to Scotland.

- **Macduff learns of the king’s ability to work miracles by healing the sick.** (4.3. 155-177)
  - Context: This king of England, King Edward, was believed to have healing powers. The disease that the doctor, Macduff and Malcolm refer to is call scrofula. It is a form of tuberculosis which at that time had no cure. Thus, this king who apparently could cure scrofula was believed to have magical or heavenly powers.
Ross arrives with current news about the terrible state of Scotland. Ross lies, telling Macduff his family is well. Malcolm announces that he and a noble named Siward and 1000 men are preparing to return to Scotland to overthrow Macbeth. (4.3. 178-220)

Ross tells Macduff the truth about his family. Macduff is overcome with grief. Then, he resolves to kill Macbeth. (4.3. 221-279)
Act 5, Scene 1

Setting: A room in the Macbeths’ castle at Dunsinane.

Main characters: A doctor, a servant of Lady Macbeth, Lady Macbeth.

Overview: One of Lady Macbeth’s servants asks a doctor to come and observe Lady Macbeth, for the servant has seen Lady Macbeth do strange things at night. As the two observe Lady Macbeth, they hear her imagine the murders again. Lady Macbeth seems extremely disturbed.

The main events in Scene 1 are:

❖ The doctor and Lady Macbeth’s servant discuss Lady Macbeth’s recent actions. (5.1.1-16)

One of Lady Macbeth’s servants, or gentlewomen, has called in the doctor because of concerns about Lady Macbeth’s strange behavior at night. The doctor has stayed up with the servant for two nights, but Lady Macbeth has done nothing odd during this time. The doctor suspects the servant is not telling the truth. The servant explains to the doctor what she has seen.

• Action / Character: Lady Macbeth has been sleepwalking and appearing very disturbed since Macbeth left to prepare for battle. At night she has been seen getting up from her bed, throwing her robe over her, and unlocking her chest. She then takes out a paper and materials for sending letters, folds the paper, writes upon it, reads what she wrote, and then seals the paper. After all this, she returns to bed.

• Character: The doctor remarks that sleepwalking is a “great perturbation of nature,” meaning it is a sign of serious disturbance. Because a character who is a doctor carries with him respectability, we can understand that what the doctor says is likely true and that Lady Macbeth is seriously troubled. The doctor asks the servant if Lady Macbeth has been saying anything while she walks. The servants remarks that she has heard Lady Macbeth speak, but she will not report what she heard, presumably because the content was so disturbing.

❖ Lady Macbeth enters, sleepwalking and talking strangely. The doctor and servant observe her. (5.1.17-63)

This is a famous scene in which Lady Macbeth enters, usually wearing a white nightgown, carrying a long, lit candle. Here, Lady Macbeth appears in stark contrast to her earlier fearless, clearheaded persona. Her appearance indicates she has been overcome by the distress and probably the guilt of her crimes. The doctor and servant observe that Lady Macbeth’s eyes are open, but they are not perceiving the outside world.

• Action: Lady Macbeth is seen wringing her hands. She then begins to speak, commanding a “spot” on her hands to disappear. Her speech seems nonsensical, but it is clearly about blood and death. We know that she is talking about the murders she help committed, and her actions here seem to suggest that she is feeling remorse.

• Action: Lady Macbeth mentions an “old man” that had a lot of blood, and the wife of the Thane of Fife who is not present any longer. She is referring to the murder of Duncan and Macdonwald’s family.

• Character: The doctor declares that he cannot treat Lady Macbeth. He suggests that her illness is more mental and spiritual than medical. He does add the encouraging note that he has known some sleepwalkers who have died a “holy” death, or one in which they would pass to heaven. Whether he believes this is possible for Lady Macbeth or not is unclear.

❖ After Lady Macbeth leaves, the doctor wonders about the meaning of Lady Macbeth’s strange behavior. (5.1.64-75)

• Imagery: The doctor uses many words and phrases that suggest something unnatural is happening here and in Scotland. Some of these words and phrases are “foul whisperings,” “unnatural deeds,” and “infected minds.” In Shakespeare’s time things thought unnatural were often interpreted as omens, or signs of something very bad to come in the future. Lady Macbeth appears to be part of this omen. Her problems here seem spiritual in nature.
**Act 5, Scene 2**

**Setting:** The countryside near Dunsinane castle.

**Main characters:** Soldiers and noblemen: Menteith, Caithness, Angus, Lennox.

**Overview:** Soldiers and noblemen are making their way to Birnam Wood, near Dunsinane castle. They plan to join the English soldiers who are coming to help remove Macbeth from the throne. The noblemen discuss their situation.

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**The main events in Scene 2 are:**

- **Menteith describes the current situation:** the men are on their way to meet the English forces who are extremely motivated to fight Macbeth. (5.2. 1-12)
  - Macduff and Malcolm are with the English forces, on their way to Birnam Wood. At Birnam Wood the Scottish and the English will join and proceed with removing Macbeth.

- **The nobles discuss Macbeth.** They note that Macbeth is preparing for battle. They also note that Macbeth seems a tormented man. (5.2. 13-29)
  - **Character:** Macbeth is referred to as a tyrant, a ruler who is cruel and oppressive. The nobles note that Macbeth is fortifying, or strengthening the defenses, of his castle. Yet, he seems mad, or crazy. The country is distempered, or sick. The country is so sick that Macbeth cannot control it—Caithness compares the ability to control to tightening a belt. Macbeth “cannot buckle...the belt of rule.” Angus goes on to say that Macbeth is now feeling the consequences of his evil deeds—the “murders [are] sticking on his hand.” Using a clothing metaphor, Angus presents an image of the useless king: the title of king and all of a king’s responsibilities are compared to a robe. This robe of responsibility hangs loosely on Macbeth. He does not “fit” the position.

- **The nobles renew their loyalty to Scotland and their determination to rid Scotland of Macbeth.** (5.2. 30-37)
  - **Metaphor:** Caithness declares the nobles’ determination when he says they will march on. He says they will find the “medicine” that will cure the “weal.” The medicine is Malcolm, who is waiting to take the throne from Macbeth. The “weal” is the land. Caithness then makes a reference to the medical procedure of bloodletting. This procedure involved causing a patient to bleed, in the belief that bleeding or bloodletting would cure them. Caithness says that the troops loyal to Scotland will let their own blood for Scotland. He is referring generally to the effort they will put forth, and also to the possible real bloodshed that they may experience in battle.
Act 5, Scene 3  

Setting: A room in Dunsinane castle.
Main characters: Macbeth, the doctor, servants.
Overview: Macbeth ponders his situation. He hears of the troops gathering outside his palace, yet he refuses to worry about them, thinking that the witches' prophecies cannot possibly come true. The doctor tells Macbeth of Lady Macbeth's state and Macbeth feels alone and desolate.

The main events in Scene 3 are:

1. Macbeth rejects all warnings about the upcoming battle because he believes the witches' prophecies are protecting him. (5.3. 1-21)  
   - Character: Macbeth resorts to the witches' cryptic prophecies, believing they hold more truth than the physical reality around him. In reference to the growing numbers outside, he states that they are no threat until Birnam Wood moves. Because it seems impossible that a forest would move, he means that the troops are simply no threat. When told of Malcolm's return, Macbeth resorts to the witches' prophecy that Macbeth could not be destroyed by a man born of woman. As Malcolm is just such a man who is born of woman, Macbeth does not perceive Malcolm as a threat. When a servant enters and tells Macbeth there are 10,000 men outside, Macbeth orders the servant to leave, calling him a coward ("lily-liver'd" and linen cheeks).

2. Macbeth calls his servant Seyton. Before Seyton arrives, Macbeth expresses how miserable he feels. When Seyton enters, Macbeth expresses his determination to fight. (5.3. 22-41)  
   - Character: In this short soliloquy, we see Macbeth's true, inner thoughts. He says that the coming attack—the "push"—will either ensure his position and make him happy ("cheer me") or it will destroy his position ("dis-seat" him). This is a crucial moment in his reign. Note that he is not leaning on the witches' prophecies here, but rather he seems genuinely concerned. He describes his life by a nature metaphor. He says he has lived long enough. His life has become like a yellow leaf, dried and withered. He says that when he considers his future, he does not see all the things that make a person happy: honor, love, obedience friends. Rather, he looks forward to curses and empty flattery ("mouth-honor").
   - Character: When Seyton enters and tells Macbeth that it is true that armies are preparing to fight him, Macbeth demands his armor and expresses a desire to fight fearlessly. Note the sudden change in mood from when he was speaking only to himself.

3. The doctor and Macbeth discuss Lady Macbeth’s sickness and Scotland’s sickness. (5.3. 42-71)  
   - Character / Action: Macbeth asks the doctor about Lady Macbeth's health. The doctor replies that she is not very sick, but she is tormented by hallucinations ("thick-coming fancies"). Macbeth tells the doctor to cure her. Macbeth asks the doctor if he cannot cure mental ailments as well ("a mind diseased," memory of a "rooted sorrow," "written troubles of the brain"). The doctor says that he cannot cure mental ailments. The patient must cure himself.
   - Character / Action: At the doctor's words, Macbeth exclaims that medical science is useless (it should be thrown to the dogs). He demands his armor. He says that if the doctor could cure his wife, he would respect him highly. Then, he compares the state of Scotland to a sickness, wondering which medicinal herb would cure the country. As Macbeth finishes putting on his armor, and he once again repeats the witches' prophecy that he need not fear until Birnam Wood moves toward Dunsinane.
Act 5, Scene 4

Malcolm’s Army Prepares for Battle

Setting: Countryside near Birnam Wood.
Main characters: Malcolm, a man named Old Siward and his son, Macduff, other nobles and soldiers.
Overview: Malcolm and the nobles rally the troops for battle. Malcolm tells the soldiers to break boughs of the trees in Birnam Wood so that they can hide behind the tree branches as they approach Macbeth’s castle.

The main events in Scene 4 are:

- Malcolm tells the soldiers to disguise themselves with tree branches from Birnam Wood. (5.4. 1-10)
  - Action: Malcolm tells his soldiers to cut down boughs so that they can disguise themselves. He does not know the witches’ prophecies. However, we do know what the witches said, and we can start to suspect that the prophecy may come true in a certain way.

- The group is informed that Macbeth is now alone in his castle because everyone that could has forsaken him. (5.4. 11-18)
  - Action: Siward says that Macbeth is isolated in his castle. Anyone who had freedom left. The only people other than himself and Lady Macbeth are those who were forced to stay.

- Macduff and Siward assert that it is a difficult situation they are in, but the only right, just way to proceed is in battle. (5.4. 19-27)
The Beginning of the End

Act 5, Scene 5

Setting: A room in the Macbeths’ castle at Dunsinane.
Main characters: Macbeth, Seyton, messenger.
Overview: Macbeth opens the scene by a show of confidence in his ability to beat the coming army. Then, he and Seyton hear a loud cry inside. Macbeth first reacts by claiming that while the shriek may signify fear, he does not feel any fear any longer. Seyton returns from investigating the source of the cry; he announces that Lady Macbeth is dead. At this point, Macbeth delivers a speech that conveys a profound emptiness. A messenger enters announcing that Birnam Wood has begun to move. Macbeth now realizes that the prophecy had been designed to mislead him.

The main events in Scene 5 are:

1. Macbeth proclaims that he can outlast any siege put on the castle. (5.5. 1-7)
   - A siege is a tactic whereby an army surrounds an enemy, cutting off supplies of water, food and other necessities until either the besieged force surrenders or dies.
   - **Imagery:** Macbeth expresses his confidence (or overconfidence) with vivid images. He calls for banners to be hung outside the castle; banners are a symbol of pride. He portrays the people in his castle as laughing at the possibility of a siege—this type of laughter is scornful and proud. He then pictures his enemy waiting so long for him and his supporters to surrender that they die of famine and “ague” (fever) themselves.

2. From somewhere else in the castle comes the sound of women crying out. Seyton goes to investigate and Macbeth ponders how he was once frightened but is no longer. (5.5. 8-16)
   - **Character:** Macbeth states that he has almost forgotten what it is like to be afraid. He says there was a time (“the time has been”) when his blood would have run cold (“my senses would have cool’d”) if he heard someone shriek at night. A horrific story would have roused him from bed and shaken him, for he would have believed the horror. He says he has experienced enough horrors—he has “supp’d full of horrors.” He says that horrific things (“direness”) cannot make him start any longer.

3. Seyton returns, announcing Lady Macbeth is dead. Macbeth suddenly is profoundly desolate. He envisions his life creeping slowly from day to day being utterly meaningless. (5.5. 17-30)
   - **Character:** The first thing Macbeth says in response to Seyton’s news is that Lady Macbeth should have died later. This statement could have several interpretations. It might mean that Macbeth wished Lady Macbeth to die later because he could die then too, and they would have been together. It might mean that if she had died later he would have been able to properly mourn her, whereas now he is compelled to deal with his enemies. After this statement Macbeth begins a speech that is both famous and despondent. He imagines his future days (his “tomorrows”) creeping slowly (“at a petty pace”) right until he meets the “last syllable of recorded time,” or his last moment, which seems very far in the future. His past has done nothing but lead him toward a “dusty” or meaningless death. Now he calls time or life short. He compares life to the shadow thrown by a candle, except a shadow that walks and acts as if he was a poor actor on stage. He compares life to a story told by an idiot that has a lot of pomp and excitement (“sound and fury”) but really means absolutely nothing.

4. A messenger arrives, announcing that Birnam Wood appears to be moving toward the castle. Furious, Macbeth begins to doubt himself and the prophecies given to him by the witches. (5.5. 31-57)
   - **Action:** The messenger says that as he watched, it appeared that Birnam Wood had begun to move. The witches had prophesied that Macbeth would be safe until Birnam Wood moved. We already know how the forest appears to move: the soldiers are walking through the wood and holding branches to disguise them. Although there is a practical reason for the illusion, this event is a bad sign for Macbeth.
   - **Character:** After threatening the messenger with death if the messenger were lying, Macbeth says that he is no longer as confident. When he says “I pull in resolution” he is portraying “resolution,” or confidence, as a horse that he now has to “pull in”—meaning tightening the reins. His confidence was once free, and now it seems that that was foolish. An “equivocation” is something similar to a lie, but also with differences. It is something that on one level has some truth, but it is that truthful level that the people listening to the equivocation don’t hear or understand. Macbeth is referring to the prophecy. He thought the prophecy to be impossible to fulfill and thus it seemed it promised him a good future; however, the prophecy is being fulfilled in a strange way, and thus his future is in jeopardy.
Act 5, Scene 6  Malcolm’s Army Approaches Macbeth’s Castle

Setting: A field near Macbeth’s castle.

Main characters: Malcolm, old Siward, Macduff and the army.

Overview: As the army nears Macbeth’s castle, Malcolm commands them to throw down the tree branches they were carrying. The leaders determine to fight fiercely.

The main events in Scene 6 are:

1. Malcolm commands the troops. (5.6. 1-6)
   Malcolm commands the army to throw down their “leafy screens” (their tree branches that they used as disguises). They will now appear as “those [they] are,” or as themselves. Malcolm announces that old Siward and his son will lead the first battle. Macduff and Malcolm will control what other business there is to take care of.

2. Siward hopes that they will find Macbeth, the “tyrant,” this night. He says it would be better to be beaten if they fight poorly. (5.6. 7-9)

3. Macduff hopes that they are victorious. (5.6. 10-11)
   - Personification: Macduff hopes their trumpets will “speak.” Trumpets and other instruments such as drums were often used on the battlefield to help soldiers stay motivated. Trumpets also are often used to announce victory. Macduff portrays the trumpets as instruments that can speak or tell stories. He says the trumpets are “clamorous harbingers of blood and death.” A harbinger is something that announces the arrival of someone or something. Macduff says that the trumpets will be announcing “blood and death.” We can understand that he means a fierce battle and one in which Macbeth’s blood is shed and ends with Macbeth’s death.
Act 5, Scene 7

Macbeth Clings to the Witches’ Prophecy

**Setting:** The battlefield.

**Main characters:** Macbeth, Young Siward, Macduff.

**Overview:** The battle has been waging for some time now. Macbeth is feeling cornered, yet he clings to the last prophecy the witches gave him that said Macbeth could not be killed by anyone born of a woman. Macbeth kills young Siward and feels more confident. Macbeth leaves. Macduff enters feeling virtuous and strong. Siward tells Macduff that Macbeth is isolated in his castle.

The main events in Scene 7 are:

- **Macbeth feels trapped but remember the witches’ prophecy.** (5.7. 1-4)
  - **Metaphor:** To describe his feeling of being cornered, Macbeth compares himself to a bear tied to a stake. In Shakespeare’s time bear baiting was a popular pastime. Bears were captured and tied to poles with short leads. Dogs were then let loose on the bear. As the bear was so confined, his ability to fight was lessened. The sport was extremely violent and deadly. Macbeth feels like a trapped bear, but like these bears, he also feels a strong need to fight.
  - **Character:** Macbeth then remembers that the witches told him he could not be killed by anyone who had been born of a woman. As Macbeth thinks that everyone is born of a woman, he feels he has nobody to fear.

- **Young Siward enters and tells Macbeth that he is a devilish tyrant. The two fight and Siward dies.** (5.7. 5-18)
  - **Character:** Siward insults Macbeth. Siward implies that Macbeth is evil and devilish by saying Macbeth’s very name is so hateful that even the devil could not say a name more hateful. Siward then calls Macbeth a hateful tyrant (“abhorred tyrant”). This characterization makes Macbeth seem like an extremely evil ruler who must be removed at all costs. Siward is willing to lose his life and he does. When Siward and Macbeth fight, Macbeth slays Siward.

- **After Macbeth leaves, Macduff enters and expresses his strong desire to avenge his family’s death and kill Macbeth. Old Siward enters and shows Macduff the way to Macbeth’s castle, where Macbeth is isolated.** (5.7. 19-36)
  - **Character:** Macduff says if he doesn’t kill Macbeth, the ghosts of his wife and family will continue to haunt him. Macduff says that he does not want to fight the poor soldiers who Macbeth hired to protect him, he only wants to fight Macbeth.
  - **Action:** Old Siward enters and says that Macduff should approach the castle. Some of the soldiers from Macbeth’s army have changed sides. The castle is “gently render’d.” That is, the castle has surrendered with little resistance.
**Act 5, Scene 8**

**Setting:** The battlefield.

**Main characters:** Macbeth, Macduff.

**Overview:** Macbeth and Macduff come face to face. Macbeth decides that although he is losing, continuing to fight is the best option. Macduff enters and the two men hurl insults at each other and then begin to fight. Macbeth mentions that he is not afraid because no man born of a woman can harm him. Macduff explains that in a certain sense he was not born of a woman. Macbeth loses courage and soon Macduff kills Macbeth.

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**The main events in Scene 8 are:**

1. **Macbeth determines to continue fighting.** Macduff enters and the two men express their anger at each other. (5.8. 1-10)
   - **Allusion:** Macbeth says that he should not play the “Roman fool” and “die/ On [his] own sword.” He is referring to the Roman belief that when someone got into a losing position in battle it was more honorable to commit suicide than to let the enemy do the killing. We know that Macbeth does not believe in this tradition because he calls these Romans who commit suicide “fools.”
   - **Action:** When Macduff enters, Macbeth says that it was Macduff that he had feared most. Nevertheless, Macbeth tells Macduff to stay back for he is “charged with [Macduff’s] blood.” That is, Macbeth is full of desire to fight and kill Macduff.
   - **Action:** Macduff says that he is finished talking (he “has no words”) and that his “voice is in [his] sword.” He means that he is interested in action—specifically fighting Macbeth—and not discussing any of their disagreements.

2. **After Macbeth and Macduff start to fight,** Macbeth tells Macduff that he is losing and might as well surrender. Macbeth tells Macduff the witches’ prophecy. Macduff tells Macbeth that he was not born of a woman. (5.8. 11-20)
   - **Simile:** Macbeth tells Macduff that their fight is futile and that Macduff is destined to lose by comparing Macduff’s ability to wound Macbeth (“make me bleed”) to Macduff’s ability to make an impression on the very air they breathe. The air is not impressionable, so this means that Macduff is also unable to wound Macbeth. The reason for Macduff’s supposed weakness is that he was born of a woman.
   - **Allusion:** Macduff tells Macbeth to listen to the “angel” who he has served faithfully. Macduff refers to demonic forces, specifically the witches. Macduff says that although the witches gave Macbeth this prophecy that gave him confidence, they could have also told him—but did not—that Macduff was ripped from his mother’s womb before birth. Today we would simply call this type of birth a Caesarian section. Because this type of birth was so unusual, it didn’t even seem like Macduff was technically born, and thus he becomes the only real threat to Macbeth.

3. **Macbeth says this news is the only thing that shakes his courage.** He now realizes that although the witches may have spoken the truth, they also misled him. (5.8. 21-26)
   - **Character:** Macbeth comes to the realization that he has been deceived by the witches. He curses them, for they have weakened (“cow’d”) his strongest attributes. He calls them “juggling fiends,” meaning they are deceitful devils. He acknowledges now that the witches deal in “double-sense”—that is saying something that is technically true, but at the same time it is deceiving. He determines that he will not fight Macduff.

4. **Macduff tells Macbeth to surrender so that he would be made a spectacle for all to see.** This spurs Macbeth on and Macbeth declares that he will not surrender. (5.8. 27-39)
   - **Action:** Macduff calls Macbeth a coward and tells him to surrender. Macduff says that if Macbeth surrendered, he would become a spectacle (“the show and the gaze of the time”). When Macduff says that Macbeth would be “painted upon a pole, and underwrit,” Macduff means that Macbeth would be beheaded and have his head displayed on a pole. This was a common punishment for serious crimes.
   - **Action:** Macduff’s words rile Macbeth and he declares that he will not give in and honor Malcolm (“kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet), nor will he allow himself to hear the public (“rabble”) curse and shout at him. Even though Macduff came through Birnam Wood and was born by Caesarian section, Macbeth will fight to the death.

5. **Macduff and Macbeth fight.** Macbeth is slain.


Act 5, Scene 9

**Setting:** Near Dunsinane castle.

**Main characters:** Malcolm, Old Siward, nobles, Macduff, other soldiers.

**Overview:** The throne and Dunsinane castle now belong to Malcolm. The nobles and Malcolm discuss the battle. Old Siward learns of his son’s death. Macduff brings in Macbeth’s head. Malcolm’s victory is declared and celebrated.

The main events in Scene 9 are:

- **Malcolm, Old Siward and other nobles discuss Young Siward’s death.** (5.9. 1-24)
  - **Action:** Siward notes that the battle was “cheaply bought,” or that it wasn’t difficult to win. When Malcolm wonders where Macduff and Young Siward are, Ross tells Siward that his son was killed in battle. Ross says that Siward paid a “soldier’s debt.” Ross also that Siward fought bravely (in his “unshrinking station”). Siward asks if his son had wounds “before,” meaning on the front of his body. Ross confirms this. Wounds on the front of the body indicated that a soldier died fighting, not running away. Siward glories in this, calling his son “God’s soldier.” It was a belief that dying when fighting bravely was an honor. Siward is happy his son had such an honorable death.

- **Macduff enters carrying Macbeth’s head and hailing Malcolm as king.** (5.9. 25-31)
  - **Action:** Macduff calls Macbeth the “usurper,” someone who had the throne illegitimately. Malcolm is the true king, and Macduff makes this clear by his exclamation, “Hail King.” He says that all those around Malcolm should also raise their voices in recognition of Malcolm’s reign. All present hail Malcolm.

- **Malcolm makes a speech, promising that peace and justice will return to Scotland.** (5.9. 32-47)
  - **Action:** Malcolm uses the word “we” instead of “I.” This was the correct way for kings to talk. He says that it will not be long before everyone who helped him will be paid or rewarded for their efforts (“make us even with you”). He announces that the thanes will become earls—earl was the title used in England for men with similar positions to thanes—and so Malcolm is also saying there will be significant changes in Scotland. Malcolm calls Macbeth a “butcher,” and he calls Lady Macbeth a “fiend-like queen.” He invites everyone to his coronation in Scone.