

# GCSE Literature: Macbeth: All You Need to Know

## Characters

**Macbeth** A captain in Duncan's army, later the Thane (Lord) of Glamis and Cawdor. When Three Witches predict that he will one day be king of Scotland, he takes his fate into his own hands, allowing his ambition and that of his wife to overcome his better judgement. His bloody reign culminates in a battle against Malcolm and the English forces.

**Lady Macbeth** The devilish wife of Macbeth, whose ambition helps to drive her husband toward the desperate act of murder. Subsequently, her husband's cruelty and her own guilt recoil on her, sending her into a madness from which she never recovers.

**Banquo** A fellow-captain and companion of Macbeth, who also receives a prophecy from the Witches: that his children will one day succeed to the throne of Scotland. This information is sufficient to spell his death at the hands of the resentful Macbeth, who is later haunted by Banquo's ghost.

**Duncan** King of Scotland. His victories against rebellious kinsmen and the Norwegians have made him a popular and honored king. His decision to pass the kingdom to his son Malcolm provokes his untimely death at the hands of Macbeth.

**Fleance** Banquo's son, who, by escaping Macbeth's plot on his life, will go on to be father to a line of kings.

**Donalbain and Malcolm** Duncan's two sons. Fearful of implication in their father's murder, they flee Scotland, Donalbain to Ireland and Malcolm to England, where he raises a large army with the intention of toppling the tyrant Macbeth.

**Macduff** A thane (nobleman) of Scotland who discovers the murdered King Duncan. Suspecting Macbeth and eventually turning against him, Macduff later flees to England to join Malcolm. When Macbeth arranges the murder of his wife and children, Macduff swears personal revenge.

**Lennox, Ross, Menteth, Angus, Caithness** Thanes of Scotland, all of whom eventually turn against the tyrannical Macbeth.

**The Porter, the Old Man, the Doctors** Three commentators on events, all of whom have a certain degree of wisdom and foresight. The Porter hints at the Hell-like nature of Macbeth's castle; the Old Man associates the murder of King Duncan with the instability of the natural world; the Doctors recognize disease and disorder even though they cannot cure it.

**The Witches** Three agents of Fate who reveal the truth (or part of it) to Macbeth and Banquo and who later appear to confirm the downfall and tragic destiny of the tyrannical Macbeth.

## Plot

Set in medieval Scotland and partly based on a true historical account, *Macbeth* charts the bloody rise to power and tragic downfall of the warrior Macbeth. Already a successful soldier in the army of King Duncan, Macbeth is informed by Three Witches that he is to become king. As part of the same prophecy, the Witches predict that future Scottish kings will be descended not from Macbeth but from his fellow army captain, Banquo. Although initially prepared to wait for Fate to take its course, Macbeth is stung by ambition and confusion when King Duncan nominates his son Malcolm as his heir.

Returning to his castle, Macbeth allows himself to be persuaded and directed by his ambitious wife, who realizes that regicide — the murder of the king — is the quickest way to achieve the destiny that her husband has been promised. A perfect opportunity presents itself when King Duncan pays a royal visit to Macbeth's castle. At first Macbeth is loth to commit a crime that he knows will invite judgment, if not on earth then in heaven. Once more, however, his wife prevails upon him. Following an evening of revelry, Lady Macbeth drugs the guards of the king's bedchamber; then, at a given signal, Macbeth, although filled with misgivings, ascends to the king's room and murders him while he sleeps. Haunted by what he has done, Macbeth is once more reprimanded by his wife, whose inner strength seems only to have been increased by the treacherous killing. Suddenly, both are alarmed by a loud knocking at the castle door.

When the drunken porter of Macbeth's castle finally responds to the noise, he opens the door to Macduff, a loyal follower of the king, who has been asked to awake Duncan in preparation for the return journey. Macbeth indicates the location of the king's room, and Macduff discovers the body. When the murder is revealed, Macbeth swiftly kills the prime witnesses, the sleepy guards of the king's bedchamber, and Lady Macbeth faints. The assembled lords of Scotland, including Macbeth, swear to avenge the murder. With suspicion heavy in the air, the king's two sons flee the country: Donalbain to Ireland and Malcolm to raise an army in England.

Macbeth is duly proclaimed the new king of Scotland, but recalling the Witches' second prophecy, he arranges the murder of his fellow soldier Banquo and his son Fleance, both of whom represent a threat to his kingship according to the Witches' prophecy. The hired murderers kill Banquo but mistakenly allow Fleance to escape. At a celebratory banquet that night, Macbeth is thrown into a state of horror when the ghost of the murdered Banquo appears at the dining table. Again, his wife tries to strengthen Macbeth, but the strain is clearly beginning to show.

The following day, Macbeth returns to the same Witches who initially foretold his destiny. This time, the Witches not only confirm that the sons of Banquo will rule in Scotland, but they also add a new prophecy: Macbeth will be invincible in battle until the time when the forest of Birnam moves towards his stronghold at Dunsinane and until he meets an enemy "not born of woman." Dismissing both of these predictions as nonsense, Macbeth prepares for invasion.

When he is told that Macduff has deserted him, Macbeth begins the final stage of his tragic descent. His first move is the destruction of Macduff's wife and children. In England, Macduff receives the news at the very moment that he swears his allegiance to the young Malcolm. Malcolm persuades him that the murder of his family should act as the spur to revenge.

Meanwhile, in Scotland, Lady Macbeth has been taken ill: She walks in her sleep and seems to recall, in fragmentary memories, the details of the murder. Now, in a series of alternating scenes, the action of the play moves rapidly between the advancing army of Malcolm and the defensive preparations of Macbeth. When Malcolm's army disguise themselves with sawn-off branches, Macbeth sees what appears to be a wood moving towards his stronghold at Dunsinane. And when he finally meets Macduff in single combat, his sworn enemy reveals that he came into the world by caesarean section; he was not, precisely speaking, "born of woman." On hearing this news, Macbeth rejects one final time the Witches' prophecy. With a loud cry, he launches himself at Macduff and is slain. In the final scene, Malcolm is crowned as the new king of Scotland, to the acclaim of all.

## Terminology Relevant to Macbeth

<b>Accession</b>	To become king or queen; to take the throne.	<b>Pathetic Fallacy</b>	The use of weather to reflect mood and atmosphere, or to foreshadow a dramatic event.
<b>Allusion</b>	Reference to a historical event, work of art, mythical/literary figure, religious text, etc.	<b>Patriarchal</b>	A word to describe a society that is controlled by men (patriarchal).
<b>Aside</b>	A comment made by an actor. It is heard by the audience but not by the other actors. The actor may walk out on a protruding platform and step to one side, wink at the audience (maybe), and make a sarcastic, witty, or simply explanatory comment. This can also create <b>Dramatic Irony</b> .	<b>Patronage</b>	The support (through money, promotion) offered by a patron.
<b>Catholic</b>	Christians who are led by the Pope and believe that the Bible (the word of God) and Roman Catholic Tradition (the word of the Church, e.g. Saints etc) teach about salvation and sin.	<b>Prophecy</b>	A prediction of what will happen in the future.
<b>Corruption</b>	A dishonest or criminal act done by a person in a position of power to benefit themselves.	<b>Protagonist</b>	The main character around who the action is focused.
<b>Divine Right</b>	the idea that kings are chosen by God and are not accountable to their subjects; rebellion against a king is also rebellion against G-d, and is therefore the worst of all possible crimes/sins.	<b>Protestant</b>	Christians who believe that the Bible alone teaches us all we need to know about sin and salvation.
<b>Dramatic Irony</b>	When the audience knows something that characters do not. This helps to build tension / humour etc.	<b>Regicide</b>	The act of murdering a king
<b>Equivocation</b>	A deliberately misleading statement. It is not technically a lie, but it is also not the whole truth.	<b>Soliloquy</b>	A dramatic monologue (monologue: speech by one actor alone on the stage) that gives the illusion of being a character's unspoken thoughts.
<b>Eponymous</b>	When the play is named after the protagonist.	<b>Subversion</b>	
<b>Fatal Flaw</b>	The secret weakness of character that brings about a <b>tragic</b> hero's downfall.	<b>Tragic hero</b>	A character who begins as a well-respected person, but has some flaw (such as pride, greed, ambition, etc.) that leads him to misery and an early death.
<b>Great Chain of Being</b>	The belief in Elizabethan England that the universe is organized in a hierarchy stretching from the lowest inanimate lifeforms all the way to the God. A disturbance in any part of this chain would cause ripples throughout it.	<b>Tyranny</b>	Cruel, unreasonable, or selfish use of power or control.
<b>Jacobean</b>	A person, object, text etc which existed during the reign of King James I.	<b>Usurp</b>	To take (a position of power or importance) illegally or by force.

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## Context and Shakespeare's Intentions

### Historical:

Shakespeare's plot is only partly based on fact. Macbeth was a real eleventh century Scottish king who reigned in Scotland from 1040 till 1057. He succeeded Duncan, whom he had defeated in battle, but the real Duncan was a weak man, around Macbeth's own age, not the respected elderly figure we meet in the play. In reality, Macbeth was succeeded by his own stepson, not by Duncan's son, Malcolm, who came to the throne later. The Stuart kings claimed they descended from, but Banquo is a mythical figure who never really existed. Shakespeare found his version of the story of Macbeth in the Chronicles of Holinshed, a historian of his own time. Holinshed does include a Banquo in his version, but he is also a traitor who assists Macbeth in the murder. As a tribute to the Stuarts, and James in particular, Shakespeare presents Banquo as a wise, noble and regal figure who provokes jealousy in Macbeth as much for his own good qualities as for the promise the witches make to him of founding a dynasty.

### Social:

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, Shakespeare's acting company was called the 'Chamberlain's Men', and it is known that they performed for the court. After the accession of James they changed their name to the 'King's Men' as a tribute to him. The patronage of the King and court was obviously valuable to Shakespeare. In Macbeth, Shakespeare seeks to flatter and please the King in various ways. Macbeth, the character who usurps the place of a lawful King, is shown as losing everything as a result – he becomes hated and demonised by all his subjects, as does his wife, who supports him in his crime. Banquo, whom the Stuarts claimed as their ancestor, is presented in a completely positive light. When the witches show Macbeth the future, he sees a line of kings descended from Banquo that seems to 'stretch out to the crack of doom'. This flatters King James with the promise of a long-standing dynasty, although in fact James's father, Charles I, would be executed, and the Stuart line was to die out with Queen Anne in 1714.

Shakespeare also included other enthusiasms of the King in the play. James had written a book called Basilikon Doron, which looks at the theme of kingship. In the book, James identifies the ideal king as one who does his duty to God and to his country and who is also a man of spotless personal integrity. In the play, Shakespeare, too, explores this topic, with the character of Malcolm representing the template of the ideal king. James was also very interested in the supernatural, and had written a paper called Daemonologie on the subject. During his reign as King of Scotland, Women were regularly burnt as witches, and Shakespeare presents his witches unequivocally as powerful and evil emissaries of the devil. In his day, the majority of the general public, too, believed in witches and the power of the supernatural, and the witch scenes would have been taken very seriously.

Despite the fact that a single woman ruled England at the time of William Shakespeare, the Elizabethan society was patriarchal. In Elizabethan times women belonged to their fathers (or their brothers if their father died), and then to their husbands. Women could not own property of their own. This is one of the reasons Queen Elizabeth never married – she did not want to give up her power to a man. Women were allowed to marry from the age of 12 in Shakespeare's time, but often only women from wealthy families would marry so young.

Women were considered the weaker sex and in need always of being protected. When married, women were expected to bear children, for childbearing was considered an honor. Most women bore children every two years, but because so many children died, families were not large. As head of the household, the husband was allowed to discipline his wife, and often women were not allowed to inherit property.

### Political:

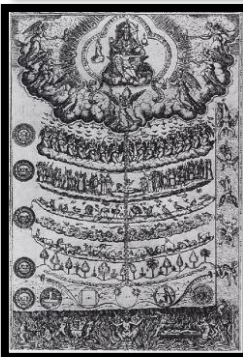
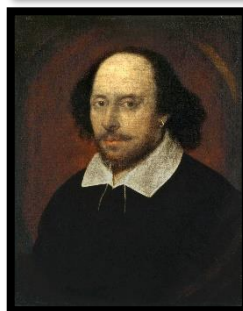
Shakespeare was writing for the theatre during the reigns of two monarchs, Queen Elizabeth I and King James I. The plays he wrote during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, such as A Midsummer Night's Dream, are often seen to embody the generally happy, confident and optimistic mood of the Elizabethans. However, those he wrote during James's reign, such as Macbeth and Hamlet, are darker and more cynical, reflecting the insecurities of the Jacobean period. Macbeth was written the year after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603 without an heir to the throne. The throne was offered to James Stuart, James VI of Scotland (a distant cousin of Elizabeth), who then became James I of Britain. James was the son of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots, who had been deposed and imprisoned when he was a baby, and later executed on Elizabeth's orders. However, his accession was by no means a popular choice with everyone. Since he was not a direct descendant of Elizabeth, there were other relatives who believed they also had a strong claim and James feared that discontented factions might gather around them. At first the Catholics had hoped James might support them, since his mother had been such a staunch Catholic, but when they realised this would not happen (as he had been raised as a protestant) conspiracies developed, one of which was the Gunpowder Plot. Guy Fawkes and his men tried to blow up James and his parliament in 1605. The conspirators were betrayed, and horribly tortured on the rack until they confessed. They were then executed in the most brutal fashion as a warning to other would-be traitors. Shakespeare's play Macbeth is to some extent a cautionary tale, warning any other potential regicides (king-killers) of the awful fate that will inevitably overtake them.

### Philosophical:

Religious thinkers in the Middle Ages had upheld the idea of 'The Great Chain of Being' (see image). This was the belief that God had designed an ordered system for both nature and humankind within which every creature and person had an allotted place. It was considered an offence against God for anyone to try to alter their station in life. Since royal rank was bestowed by God, it was a sin to aspire to it.

Although his mother, Mary Queen of Scots, was a beautiful and charming woman, James I was aware he was ugly and lacking in the charisma which inspired loyalty. But he was an intelligent and well-educated man, and promoted various beliefs which he felt would keep his position secure. One of these was the so-called 'divine right of kings'. This was the belief that the power of monarchs was given directly by God, and thus monarchs were answerable only to God. Any opposition to the King was an attack on God himself, and therefore sacrilege, the most terrible of sins.



## Themes

Kingship	Ambition	Corruption	Betrayal
Freewill	Disorder	Deception	Cruelty
Tyranny	Fate	Masculinity	Guilt

## Quotes

Act, Scene	Themes	Speaker	Quote	Act, Scene	Themes	Speaker	Quote
1.1	Witches	Witches	'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'	2.3	Donaldbain	Donaldbain	'There's daggers in men's smiles.'
1.3	Banquo	Banquo	'If you can look into the seeds of time, And say which grain will grow, and which will not, speak.'	3.1	Bandquo	Bandquo	'Thou hast it now-King, Cawdor, Glamis, all as the Weird Women promised, and I fear thou played'st most foully for 't.'
1.3	Banquo	Banquo	'And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, The instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest trifles, to betray's in deepest consequence.'	3.1	Macbeth	Macbeth	'Our fears in Banquo stick deep, and in his royalty of nature reigns that which would be feared.'
1.3	Macbeth	Macbeth	'If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me.'	3.1	Macbeth	Macbeth	'Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown and put a barren scepter in my grip, Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand, no son of mine succeeding.'
1.4	Macbeth	Macbeth	'Stars, hide your fires! Let not light see my black and deep desires.'	3.4	Macbeth	Macbeth	'I am in blood steep'd in so far, that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as to o'er.'
1.5	Lady M	Lady M	'Come, you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts! Unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty.'	4.1	Witches	Witches	'By the pricking of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes.'
1.5	Lady M	Lady M	'Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full o' the milk of human kindness;'	4.2	Lady M	Lady M	'When our actions do not, our fears do make us traitors.'
1.5	Lady M	Lady M	'Yet do I fear thy nature; it is too full o' the milk of human kindness;'	4.3	Malcolm	Malcolm	'Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell; though all things foul would wear the brows of grace, yet grace must still look so.'
1.7	Macbeth	Macbeth	'I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more, is none.'	4.3	Malcolm	Malcolm	'Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break.'
1.7	Lady M	Lady M	'I have given suck, and know How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: I would, while it was smiling in my face, Have pluck'd my nipple from its boneless gums, And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this.'	5.1	Lady M	Lady M	'Out, damned spot! Out, I say'
1.7	Lady M	Lady M	'Screw your courage to the sticking-place.'	5.1	Lady M	Lady M	'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.'
1.7	Macbeth	Macbeth	'I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, and falls on the other.'	5.2	Angus	Angus	'Those he commands only move in command, Nothing in love: now does he feel his title hand loose about him, like a giant's robes upon a dwarfish thief.'
2.1	Macbeth	Macbeth	'Is this a dagger which I see before me. The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee; I have thee not, and yet I see thee still. Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible to feeling as to sight?'	5.5	Macbeth	Macbeth	'I have supp'd full with horror; direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts cannot once start me.'
2.2	Malcolm	Malcolm	'To show an unfelt sorrow is an office which the false man does easy.'	5.5	Macbeth	Macbeth	'Out, out, brief candle! Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more: it is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.'
2.2	Macbeth	Macbeth	'Will all great Neptune's ocean was this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.'	5.8	Macbeth	Macbeth	'I bear a charmed life.'
3.2	Macbeth	Macbeth	'What's done is done.'				

Model Responses and Example Exam Questions can be found on the school website in the English KS4 section.