Macbeth

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, King James of Scotland became King of England. James almost immediately gave his patronage to Shakespeare's company, making them the King's Men. In many ways, *Macbeth* can be seen as a show of gratitude from Shakespeare to his new King and benefactor. For instance, King James actually traced his ancestry back to the real-life Banquo. Shakespeare's transformation of the Banquo in Holinshed's *Chronicles* who helped murder Duncan to the noble man in Macbeth who refused to help kill Duncan is therefore a kind of compliment given to King James' ancestor.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shakespeare's source for Macbeth was Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, though in writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare changed numerous details for dramatic and thematic reasons, and even for political reasons (see Related Historical Events). For instance, in Holinshed's version, Duncan was a weak and ineffectual King, and Banquo actually helped Macbeth commit the murder. Shakespeare's changes to the story emphasize Macbeth's fall from nobility to man ruled by ambition and destroyed by guilt.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Tragedy of Macbeth*
- **When Written:** 1606
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500 - 1660)
- **Genre:** Tragic drama
- **Setting:** Scotland and, briefly, England during the eleventh century
- **Climax:** Some argue that the murder of Banquo is the play's climax, based on the logic that it is at this point that Macbeth reaches the height of his power and things begin to fall apart from there. However, it is probably more accurate to say that the climax of the play is Macbeth's fight with Macduff, as it is at this moment that the threads of the play come together, the secret behind the prophecy becomes evident, and Macbeth's doom is sealed.

EXTRA CREDIT

Shakespeare or Not? There are some who believe Shakespeare wasn't educated enough to write the plays attributed to him. The most common anti-Shakespeare theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man because aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Yet the evidence supporting Shakespeare's authorship far outweighs any evidence against. So until further notice, Shakespeare is still the most influential writer in the English language.

PLOT SUMMARY

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

Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband about the prophecy and Duncan's imminent arrival. She decides her husband is too kind to follow his ambitions, and vows to push him to murder Duncan and take the crown that very night. Macbeth at first resists his wife's plan, but his ambition and her constant questioning of his courage and manhood win him over. That night they murder Duncan and frame the men guarding Duncan's room. The next morning, Macduff, another Scottish thane, discovers Duncan dead and raises the alarm. Macbeth

and Lady Macbeth pretend to be shocked and outraged. Macbeth murders the guardsmen of Duncan's room to keep them silent, but says he did it out of a furious rage that they killed the king. Duncan's sons think they may be the next target, and flee. Macbeth is made king, and because they ran, Duncan's sons become the prime suspects in their father's murder.

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

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

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

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

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

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

Banquo – A Scottish nobleman, general, and friend of Macbeth. He is also the father of Fleance. The weird sisters prophesy that while Banquo will never be King of Scotland, his descendants will one day sit on the throne. Banquo is as ambitious as Macbeth, but unlike Macbeth he resists putting his selfish ambition above his honor or the good of Scotland. Because he both knows the prophecy and is honorable, Banquo is both a threat to Macbeth and a living example of the noble path that Macbeth chose not to take. After Macbeth has Banquo murdered he is haunted by Banquo's ghost, which symbolizes Macbeth's terrible guilt at what he has become.

Macduff – A Scottish nobleman, and the Thane of Fife. His wife is Lady Macduff, and the two have babies and a young son. Macduff offers a contrast to Macbeth: a Scottish lord who, far from being ambitious, puts the welfare of Scotland even ahead of the welfare of his own family. Macduff suspects Macbeth from the beginning, and becomes one of the leaders of the rebellion. After Macbeth has Macduff's family murdered, Macduff's desire for vengeance becomes more personal and powerful.

King Duncan – The King of Scotland, and the father of Malcolm and Donalbain. Macbeth murders him to get the crown. Duncan is the model of a good, virtuous king who puts the welfare of the country above his own and seeks, like a gardener, to nurture and grow the kingdom that is his responsibility. Duncan is the living embodiment of the political and social order that Macbeth destroys.

Malcolm – The older of King Duncan's two sons, and Duncan's designated heir to the throne of Scotland. Early in the play,

Malcolm is a weak and inexperienced leader, and he actually flees Scotland in fear after his father is murdered. But Malcolm matures, and with the help of Macduff and an English army, Malcolm eventually overthrows Macbeth and retakes the throne, restoring the order that was destroyed when Duncan was murdered.

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

MINOR CHARACTERS

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

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

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

Lennox – A Scottish nobleman.

Ross – A Scottish nobleman.

Angus – A Scottish nobleman.

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

Murderers – Men hired by Macbeth to kill Banquo and Fleance.

Porter – The guardian of the gate at Macbeth's castle..

Hecate – The goddess of witchcraft.

Gentlewoman – Lady Macbeth's attendant.

Siward – A warlike English lord.

Young Siward – Siward's son.

King Edward – The King of England. He is so saintly his touch can cure the sick.

Captain – A captain in the Scottish Army.

Seyton – Macbeth's servant.

Old Man – An elderly fellow who sees some strange things happen the night Macbeth murders Duncan.

English Doctor – An English doctor.

Scottish Doctor – The doctor Macbeth assigns to cure Lady Macbeth of her madness.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

AMBITION

Macbeth is a play about ambition run amok. The weird sisters' prophecies spur both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to try to fulfill their ambitions, but the witches never *make* Macbeth or his wife do anything. Macbeth and his wife act on their own to fulfill their deepest desires. Macbeth, a good general and, by all accounts before the action of the play, a good man, allows his ambition to overwhelm him and becomes a murdering, paranoid maniac. Lady Macbeth, once she begins to put into actions the once-hidden thoughts of her mind, is crushed by guilt.

Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to be great and powerful, and sacrifice their morals to achieve that goal. By contrasting these two characters with others in the play, such as Banquo, Duncan, and Macduff, who also want to be great leaders but refuse to allow ambition to come before honor, Macbeth shows how naked ambition, freed from any sort of moral or social conscience, ultimately takes over every other characteristic of a person. Unchecked ambition, *Macbeth* suggests, can never be fulfilled, and therefore quickly grows into a monster that will destroy anyone who gives into it.

FATE

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

Unlike Banquo, Macbeth acts: he kills Duncan. Macbeth tries to master fate, to make fate conform to exactly what he wants. But, of course, fate doesn't work that way. By trying to master fate once, Macbeth puts himself in the position of having to master fate always. At every instant, he has to struggle against

those parts of the witches' prophecies that don't favor him. Ultimately, Macbeth becomes so obsessed with his fate that he becomes delusional: he becomes unable to see the half-truths behind the witches' prophecies. By trying to master fate, he brings himself to ruin.

VIOLENCE

To call *Macbeth* a violent play is an understatement. It begins in battle, contains the murder of men, women, and children, and ends not just with a climactic siege but the suicide of Lady Macbeth and the beheading of its main character, Macbeth. In the process of all this bloodshed, *Macbeth* makes an important point about the nature of violence: every violent act, even those done for selfless reasons, seems to lead inevitably to the next. The violence through which Macbeth takes the throne, as Macbeth himself realizes, opens the way for others to try to take the throne for themselves through violence. So Macbeth must commit more violence, and more violence, until violence is all he has left. As Macbeth himself says after seeing Banquo's ghost, "blood will to blood." Violence leads to violence, a vicious cycle.

NATURE AND THE UNNATURAL

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

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

MANHOOD

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

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

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

VISIONS AND HALLUCINATIONS

A number of times in *Macbeth*, Macbeth sees or hears strange things: the floating dagger, the voice that says he's murdering sleep, and Banquo's ghost. As Macbeth himself wonders about the dagger, are these sights and sounds supernatural visions or figments of his guilty imagination? The play contains no definitive answer, which is itself a kind of answer: they're both. Macbeth is a man at war with himself, his innate honor battling his ambition. Just as nature goes haywire when the normal natural order is ruptured, Macbeth's own mind does the same when it is forced to fight against itself.

BLOOD

Blood is always closely linked to violence, but over the course of *Macbeth* blood comes to symbolize something else: guilt. Death and killing happen in an instant, but blood remains, and stains. At the times when both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth feel most guilty, they despair that they will never be able to wash the blood—their guilt—from their hands.

SLEEP

When he murders Duncan, Macbeth thinks he hears a voice say "Macbeth does murder sleep" (2.2.34). Sleep symbolizes innocence, purity, and peace of mind, and in killing Duncan Macbeth actually *does* murder sleep: Lady Macbeth begins to sleepwalk, and Macbeth is haunted by his nightmares.

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *Macbeth* published in 2003.

Act 1, scene 1 Quotes

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Related Characters: Weird Sisters (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.1.12-13

Explanation and Analysis

In the play's opening scene, three witches gather in a storm and discuss their upcoming meeting with Macbeth. Together they chant these lines about the moral uncertainty and decay in Scotland.

That "fair is foul" means that what seems genuine is in fact evil, while "foul is fair" inversely means that what appears negative is actually positive. Thus the witches point out the fickle quality of appearances—a recurring theme throughout the tragedy—contending that foul and fair things can easily be mistaken for each other. This line is an example of the rhetorical device *chiasmus*: when elements of a text are arranged in the form ABBA. Here, "A" is "fair" and "B" is "foul." Chiasmus can have many different meanings depending on the circumstance, but here it gives a rhythmic quality to the text and points out a paradox between two terms.

The image of "fog and filthy air" similarly foreshadows how the senses will be muddled in the text, preventing characters from accurately perceiving what would be fair or foul. More generally, this image showcases how symbols and ethics will become mixed up in the tragedy. As supernatural creatures, the witches themselves seem decrepit and "foul" at times—but their prophecies are also accurate, which would make them "fair." Thus these lines do not only make a distinction between false appearance and honest reality, but rather question the very ability to determine the moral goodness of any such reality.

Act 1, scene 3 Quotes

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.

Related Characters: Banquo (speaker), Macbeth, Weird Sisters

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.3.135-138

Explanation and Analysis

Macbeth and Banquo have just learned that Macbeth has become Thane of Cawdor, which confirms the first part of the witches' prophecy. In response, Banquo notes that the stories told by the witches may be attempts to manipulate Macbeth.

These lines pose an important question about the role of supernatural forces in this tragedy: Are the witches dictating these mens' destinies or do men maintain the ability to avoid or affect the prophecies being presented? When Banquo says they "win us to our harm," he contends that the witches are actively exploiting him and Macbeth, yet he also notes that they "tell us truths"—which would seem to imply that nothing they recount is false. The resolution comes in a similarly paradoxical phrase: "Honest trifles" that "betray." What Banquo means is that aspects of the witches' prophecies are genuine, but that those components are ultimately insignificant. He believes that these "instruments of darkness" will use the prophecies to gain control over him and Macbeth and then later manipulate them.

Banquo thus argues that he and Macbeth should resist believing the witches too much, even though they have thus far been correct in their prophecies. This belief posits a worldview in which humans *can* act freely from the influence of supernatural forces—choosing to believe them or not. Macbeth, on the other hand, represents the position that direct adherence to their prophecies will allow him to thwart his fate. Shakespeare thus uses these two characters mixed responses to present two different ways of viewing the supernatural forces in his work: as either maneuvering or merely recounting fate.

Act 1, scene 4 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.4.57-58

Explanation and Analysis

After hearing that Duncan will visit his castle, Macbeth finds himself fantasizing about seizing power for himself. He wishes to obscure these evil thoughts from outside observers.

In these early moments in the play, Macbeth is still uncertain about how or whether to proceed with the murderous impulses that have arisen in him after hearing the witches prophecy. Though he ambitiously hopes to control the throne of Scotland, he also carefully watches these desires and seeks to hide them from others. Saying, "Stars, hide your fires" shows that Macbeth wishes to remain invisible and in complete darkness, such that his "black and deep desires" could not be observed. Metaphors of light and dark pervade this play, and here their meaning remains unclear: Darkness stands for Macbeth's moral unscrupulousness, but "light" is not quite the inverse of ethical goodness. Rather, "light" is represented as an active agent that can "see" into those desires; it stands for a supernatural or even holy force that scrutinizes man's actions.

Macbeth, then, seems to believe in the existence of a God-like figure who judges him for his thoughts, and from whom he wishes to hide. His concern is less that other human beings will spy his desires and more that it will be observed by supernatural forces—a point that confirms his allegiance to the witches' paranormal tendencies. Within this short image then, we have the underpinnings of Macbeth's striking guilt complex and the implication of a corresponding spiritual system, though the exact nature of that spirituality remains unclear.

Act 1, scene 5 Quotes

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; make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall.

Related Characters: Lady Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 1.5.47-55

Explanation and Analysis

After learning that King Duncan will remain at the castle for the evening, Lady Macbeth plots his demise. She asks for fortitude in renouncing any human compassion in order to best carry out the deed.

Much like Banquo, Lady Macbeth believes that supernatural forces have a corruptive effect on human nature. She believes they "tend on mortal thoughts" and will fill her with "direst cruelty." Yet whereas Banquo made this point in order to avoid those effects, Lady Macbeth fully embraces the depravity. Indeed, she uses a series of commands in order to demand being overtaken by them. The implication is that Lady Macbeth wishes to act entirely cruelly, but her natural human disposition will prevent her from doing so.

To make this point, Lady Macbeth focuses on images relating to female fertility and more generally to bodily functions. That she implores "unsex me here" indicates that she sees her gender as preventing her from carrying out her vile purpose; while "take my milk for gall" similarly involves a desire to give up something feminine nurturing (mother's milk) for something destructive and acidic (gall). Repeated references to the body further show her to be renouncing not only womanhood but humanity altogether—as if she desires to be a supernatural entity like the witches who could then act without moral scruples. In wishing to give up her humanity, this passage thus paradoxically affirms Lady Macbeth's sense that there is in fact an inherent goodness to human nature and specifically human biology. At the same time, it shows that humans see in the supernatural a corruptive route away from goodness—which they may flee (as Banquo does) or full-heartedly embrace.

Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it.

Related Characters: Lady Macbeth (speaker), Macbeth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.5.76-77

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Macbeth entreats her husband to kill Duncan that night. She recommends he act secretively and strike out violently.

These lines return the text to the theme of appearance versus reality. While Macbeth still remains uncertain about

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English 1

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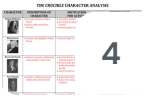

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Crucible character analysis chart answers

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Major Themes of The Crucible and Year of Wonders

English- Unit 4

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whether he wishes to deceive and kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth is fully committed to the cruel idea. She thus sees duplicity as the best route to achieving her evil ends. She contrasts a passive image of "innocent flower" with the active corruption of "the serpent," much like the witches mixed up "fair" and "foul" in the tragedy's opening scene. For her, however, this distinction does not express a general predicament, but rather becomes a specific strategy to gain political power.

Referencing a serpent is also an allusion to the Biblical scene in the Garden of Eden, in which a snake tempts Eve and leads to humanity's expulsion from paradise. This Christian reference is especially evocative considering Lady Macbeth's engagement with supernatural paganism: just as she has summoned the aid of fiends, Lady Macbeth symbolically asks her husband to strike out against Christian ideals—to play the role of a Biblical villain.

Act 1, scene 7 Quotes

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.7.25-28

Explanation and Analysis

Macbeth ponders whether he should follow through on his plan to kill Duncan. He observes that he is being motivated by aspirations for power rather than responding to a specific injustice.

Shakespeare here makes a subtle point about two different reasons why one would be impelled act. The first is to have a "spur" or clear impetus for doing something, while the second is a more general "vaulting ambition." By describing the spur as something that can "prick the sides," Macbeth stresses how it is a narrow and specific stimulus; as a result it has a direct causal effect on his "intent." Ambition, on the other hand, tends to "o'erleap[] itself," meaning that it encourages one to act beyond his or her reasonable means. It overshoots a goal and as a result can have negative consequences.

What is intriguing about this passage is that Macbeth seems keenly aware of his motivations and limitations. Though he may be acting out of "vaulting ambition," he is not immediately convinced by that desire. He can critically assess what stimulates him to act, and its likely consequences. Yet, at the same, time he *will* ultimately ignore this skepticism and indeed "o'erleap" himself. Shakespeare thus gives a complex presentation of human psychology, in which people may introspectively note the flaws of their motivations, while still falling prey to those very flaws.

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more, is none.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.7.51-52

Explanation and Analysis

Having decided moments earlier against murdering Duncan, Macbeth finds his manhood challenged by his wife. In response, he argues that composure and allegiance are more characteristic of masculinity than rash violence.

His claim is made through somewhat indirect language. Using the term "dare" presents manhood as adventurous, even though Macbeth defines it through inaction rather than action. For he will only perform actions that "become a man"—a pun on "become" as meaning both to make one seem agreeable and to turn into. If one does "more," Macbeth reasons, he would not be a man, for he would have overstepped the boundaries of behaviors that define men and that make them attractive or worthy. In this way, Macbeth describes manhood as a limit on his actions instead of a justification for *more* action like Lady Macbeth.

This passage returns to the theme of gender identities. Recall that Lady Macbeth renounced her womanhood earlier in Act 1, Scene 5 in order to disavow empathy and heartlessly pursue her goal of power. Yet in the lines after Macbeth's quote here, she asks Macbeth to do just the opposite with his gender: to maintain and embrace it. This contrast shows that *she* sees manhood as equivalent to brute and rash action, whereas before that cruelty seemed to stem only from the supernatural or inhuman realm. Macbeth, however, unseats her opinion by defining manhood in terms of composure and calm intent. Shakespeare thus places the question of gender identity at the heart of this tragedy, presenting it as an ideological tool

used by the characters to encourage each other to act more or less aggressively.

Macbeth: If we should fail.
Lady Macbeth: We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail.

Related Characters: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 1.7.68-71

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Macbeth continues to convince Macbeth that they should kill Duncan. When he wonders whether they will actually succeed, she argues that with sufficient fortitude they will certainly triumph.

The first two lines in this passage are halting and uncertain. Macbeth begins a hypothetical clause—"If we should fail"—but does not successfully finish it; while Lady Macbeth offers the similarly half-formed question "We fail?" In contrast to these fragmented construction, she opts for an aggressive command—"screw your courage"—and acerbic claim: "we'll not fail." Bravery and adherence to one's goals, in her opinion, will ensure success.

Their exchange insinuates two diverging views on human destiny: Whereas Macbeth attributes success to the whims of fates and prophecies, Lady Macbeth believes that humans themselves can select their own destiny. Her command "screw your courage to the sticking-place" implies that sufficient bravery will ensure success regardless of any external influence. Between these two characters, then, Shakespeare defines a spectrum of human relationships to destiny and personal agency—in which some attribute success to personal prowess while others see it as being out of one's own hands.

Act 2, scene 1 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.1.44-53

Explanation and Analysis

After discussing the witches with Banquo, Macbeth is left alone to contemplate his impending murder. He then sees a dagger in the air and wonders to what extent it is real or hallucinated.

A primarily psychological analysis would see in these lines the first signs of Macbeth's insanity. His inability to distinguish between a physical and imaginary dagger does not prevent him from hoping to "clutch" either one. When he can't clutch it, he notes that it is impossible to "have" the vision and yet that he can still "see" it, and is confused why his sense of touch and vision seem to inexplicably not accord. Characteristically, Macbeth remains acutely aware of the conditions of his sanity, observing that his "heat-oppressed brain" may be responsible for creating the illusion. Yet after noting how his mind may be addled, he once more reiterates the "palpable" quality of the dagger, comparing it to his own physical sword.

Beyond introducing the idea that Macbeth may be acting out of madness, this passage develops the theme of appearance versus reality. Macbeth may be fixating on a false vision, but the vision actually reveals to him a truth—for it is a portent of the murder to come. In a sense, then, the "foul" vision is actually "fair" in that it is an accurate representation of reality. And when Macbeth does "draw" his own sword, he implies that even a hallucination may have a causal effect on his own actions. Shakespeare thus presents false visions not as figments of the imagination but as capable of inducing changes to reality itself.

Act 2, scene 2 Quotes

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

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 2.2.47-52

Explanation and Analysis

After murdering Duncan, Macbeth begins to feel remorse for what he has done. He fixates on a voice he claims to have overheard during the act, believing that it charges him with deep guilt.

We see here Macbeth's continued descent into the paranoid thinking characteristic of a murderer. His previous visual hallucinations are now accompanied by auditory ones, but instead of rationally ignoring them, he ruminates on how the illusion relates to his experience. Taking the line "Sleep no more!" Macbeth at first indicates a belief that it refers to Duncan whom he has murdered, that the words charge him with having killed a defenseless person while they were in "innocent sleep."

The text could easily have halted here, but the truly manic thinking comes in the ensuing images. Macbeth begins to focus obsessively on the abstract idea of sleep. He imagines it to be a weaver who "knits up" or makes coherent and composed "the ravell'd sleave of care"—in which a "ravell'd sleave" is a messy and disorganized garment. This metaphor presents sleep as a tranquil and organizing force that helps a person make coherent the chaos of life, that allows people to be coherent and calm. In the following lines, he casts sleep as the inverse or double to different types of daytime: the "death" after each "life"; the restful "bath" after one works; the "balm" to ease minds that may be overworked; a second sustenance after the meal of the day. These evocative images show how deeply Macbeth believes to have violated human life—for not only has he murdered Duncan but he has done so in an almost sacred space of sleeping rejuvenation. As Macbeth's obsessive thoughts on sleep proceed, an intimation exists too that "Sleep no more!" refers to the rampant guilt and madness that will descend now on Macbeth and his wife, in which because of their guilt, they will lose these healthful and necessary effects of sleep.

Act 3, scene 2 Quotes

Nought's had, all's spent
Where our desire is got without content.

Related Characters: Lady Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3.2.6-7

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Macbeth ponders why she continues to be dissatisfied with her existence. She acknowledges that she has had complete success in her endeavors but somehow remains vexed.

These lines reveal a sharp change in Lady Macbeth's disposition. Whereas before, she believed completely that ambition (and the murder of Duncan) would generate positive results, here she concludes just the opposite. "Nought's had, all's spent" must be taken metaphorically—because Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have in fact achieved their goal of becoming king and queen—to refer to their contentment and emotional stability. But now she states that the trade-off of political power in exchange for "content," which we can take to mean "guilt-free contentment," wasn't at all worth it.

Beyond revealing a growing dissatisfaction in Lady Macbeth, this passage makes a broader claim on the trappings of power and fame. Lady Macbeth points out that the status she had pursued does not in fact grant her happiness, but rather has brought her into greater misfortune. Thus Shakespeare uses her psychological anxiety as a way to illustrate the self-defeating natures of avarice and desire.

Act 3, scene 4 Quotes

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

Related Characters: Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3.4.168-170

Explanation and Analysis

After seeing Banquo's ghost, Macbeth decides to return to consult the witches on his fate. He points out to his wife that he has pursued his murderous destiny too far to stop doing so now.

When Macbeth says, "I am in blood" he presents himself as entirely immersed in murder: Instead of causing blood to simply flow from others, he also feels the effects of that violent action – the blood he has spilled surrounds him. He

then clarifies that this is the result of having "Stepp'd in so far" into the metaphorical bloody pool; while "wade no more" signifies that he cannot stay afloat but will drown in the liquid. Thus Macbeth uses the metaphor of a pool of blood to articulate his own guilt and culpability: He believes that what he has done has inescapably sealed his fate and that trying to shift destinies at this point is pointless.

His choice of the word "tedious," however, complicates the passage somewhat. Instead of saying that "returning" is impossible or undesirable, he claims it is boring or insipid. This distinction seems to indicate that Macbeth *could* indeed change his bloody behavior and that he fails to do so simply out of apathy or inertia. In this way, he presents a somewhat more ambivalent version of fate's determinism: Destiny may very well have dictated his actions, but he could potentially shift them if he were more courageous.

Act 4, scene 1 Quotes

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

Related Characters: Weird Sisters (speaker), Macbeth

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4.1.44-45

Explanation and Analysis

The witches prepare for Macbeth's arrival by mixing an unnatural brew in the cauldron. During their incantation, one makes this pronouncement on impending evil.

These lines firstly verify the supernatural powers of the witches. They are able to sense from physical stimuli—"the pricking"—in their bodies that something "wicked" will take place in the future. Although the audience might be skeptical of the actual mystical powers the witches possess, this image confirms that they have at least a limited capacity to make sense of the future.

At the same time, by describing the wicked phenomenon as a separate external force — the phrasing of "this way comes" is a passive construction — the witches also present themselves as observers of fate, rather than active agents that bring certain events to pass. So while other human characters may see the witches as manipulative spirits willing bad events into existence, their actual incantations show them to be mere bystanders and oracles for fate. The witches comment describes Macbeth as the wicked one, implying that while their prophecy may have been accurate, it was Macbeth's wickedness that caused him to pursue it as he did (or perhaps that his choice to pursue it as he did has made him wicked).

Act 5, scene 1 Quotes

Out, damned spot! out, I say!

Related Characters: Lady Macbeth (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 5.1.37

Explanation and Analysis

Lady Macbeth has taken to sleepwalking. One night, she wanders and rubs her hands while saying this line.

We see here the extent to which guilt has crippled Lady Macbeth and disrupted her ability to live a normal life. Saying this line while trying to wash her hands shows that while she earlier believed that she could simply wash her hands clear of Duncan's blood, that in fact she could not psychologically escape that blood at all. She obsessively repeats the action, believing that the "damned spot" that morally implicates her has refused to disappear. In this way, the play makes clear that the guilt that first caused Lady Macbeth to question her contentment has now caused her to enter a full-blown psychosis.

The text also returns to its ever-pressing concern of illusions and false appearances. Whereas Lady Macbeth was able to remove the physical blood from her hands after the murder, she remains unable to do away with its metaphorical counterpart. Much like Macbeth saw a hallucinatory knife before the murder, she visualizes non-existent blood after the deed has been completed. Although we might be likely to write these images off as false apparitions, one should also note the significance of their *psychological* reality. That is to say, although the "spot" is not palpable to anyone else, it is indeed a honest "fair" expression of Lady Macbeth's guilt. Shakespeare's work thus presents illusions as having their own kind of unique reality, a reality founded in the inner workings of the mind.