Exam course 3: Shakespeare's Macbeth

Resume

William Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth is set in Scotland in the 11th century and centers on one man's fatal attempt at power. As we meet Macbeth in the beginning of the play, he is a well-respected nobleman and soldier and favored by King Duncan. He has just won a battle against a rebel army for his king. Macbeth also seems to have a close and loving relationship with his wife, Lady Macbeth.

However, things change when Macbeth and his fellow nobleman Banquo come across three witches who predict that Macbeth will gain two new titles on top of him already being thane of Glamis: He will become thane of Cawdor and then king. Banquo, in turn, will not become king, but he will be the father of many kings. This prophecy kick-starts Macbeth's ambition, and when he is soon after made thane of Cawdor, he decides to act.

Macbeth informs his wife about the prophecy. Lady Macbeth is worried that her husband is too weak to seize power, so she asks evil spirits to fill her with cruelty so she may help him. When her husband soon after seems to be losing his courage, she asks him to act like a man. Lady Macbeth develops a plan: When King Duncan stays the night at their castle, Macbeth will murder him. Lady Macbeth will get the King's servants drunk and make it look like they committed the murder.

When heading for Duncan's bedchamber, Macbeth thinks he sees a bloody dagger floating in the air. After the murder, he is appalled by what he has done. He realizes, however, that there is no turning back now. Macbeth is crowned as king, and his belief in the prophecy is greater than ever. He worries that the prophecy will work just as well for Banquo. Macbeth therefore has Banquo murdered to prevent him becoming the father of future kings instead of Macbeth. However, Banquo's son, Fleance, escapes, and Macbeth's paranoia increases.

That same night the Macbeths hold a feast - a banquet - for their loyal noblemen. Suddenly Macbeth thinks he sees Banquo's bloody ghost and becomes hysterical. Lady Macbeth tries to make him pull himself together by mocking his lack of manliness, but Macbeth ends up embarrassing himself and his wife.

Meanwhile, Duncan's exiled sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, are doing their best to inform everyone that Macbeth must be Duncan's killer. Even nature itself seems to support the idea that Macbeth did not win the crown honestly: Scotland is troubled by strange weather and unnatural events such as horses eating each other.

Macbeth is troubled and goes to see the three witches again to learn the details of his fate. Three apparitions, or ghosts, appear. They give three predictions about the future:

1. Macbeth should watch out for Macduff, another nobleman.
2. No man born of woman can harm Macbeth.
3. Macbeth will not be defeated until Birnam Wood moves.

Macbeth interprets all of this as a sign that he is safe because surely all men are born of women and forests cannot move.

However, Macbeth's confidence is shaken when eight ghost-like kings appear, followed by the ghost of Banquo carrying a mirror to signify that he will father an endless line of royal heirs. One of Macbeth's noblemen arrives to inform him that Macduff has fled to England to join Malcolm. Once more, Macbeth decides to take matters into his own hands: Macduff's family should be murdered to punish Macduff for deserting him.

When Macduff learns of the killings, he swears revenge. Ironically, he thereby fulfills the first part of the prophecy saying that Macbeth ought to be wary of Macduff.

Malcolm, who has gained the support of the English king, now moves towards Macbeth's castle with an army, joined by Macduff. The invasion is soon joined by deserting Scottish nobles who are appalled by Macbeth's cruelty. Malcolm's army cuts off branches in Birnam Wood to conceal their numbers as they advance. They thereby fulfill the third part of the prophecy saying that Macbeth will not be defeated until Birnam Wood moves.

Lady Macbeth has been sleepwalking for a while as she has become increasingly troubled by the things she and her husband have done. Now Macbeth receives the news that she is dead by suicide. His reaction to her death is rather ambiguous. Macbeth is then told that Birnam Wood is moving towards the castle. Despite being disillusioned, he decides to fight.

On the battlefield, Macbeth meets Macduff who reveals that he, Macduff, was born via C-section. He is therefore not "of woman born". Realizing that the second part of the prophecy has also come true, Macbeth loses all hope of survival but is determined to die like a soldier. He is killed by Macduff, and his head is brought to Malcolm who is saluted as the new and rightful king of Scotland. Order is thus restored.

Act 1 summary

Scene 1: A desert place.

Shakespeare's Macbeth begins during a storm somewhere in Scotland. Three witches and the magical animals that serve them, such as a toad and a cat, meet up and mysteriously talk of a battle going on. They agree to gather again once the battle is over, in order to meet with Macbeth.

Scene 2: A camp near Forres.

In a military camp, King Duncan, sons Malcolm and Donalbain, and a nobleman named Lennox meet with a sergeant who has been injured in the battle mentioned in Scene 1. Later Ross, another nobleman, arrives. The sergeant tells them about the battle. Victory was secured in particular through the bravery of Macbeth, who is the King's relative and loyal thane (a Scottish nobleman).

In the battle, the King's army fought against an army of Irish rebels led by Macdonwald, who has now been killed by Macbeth. The Norwegian king, Sweno, joined forces with the rebels but he, too, was defeated. One of Duncan's noblemen, the thane of Cawdor, sided with the rebels but has been captured. King Duncan is thrilled with the victory and orders that the thane of Cawdor be executed and his title given to Macbeth.

Scene 3: A heath near Forres.

The three witches meet again and talk of people they plan to revenge themselves on. Macbeth and his fellow nobleman Banquo then appear, and the witches foretell that Macbeth will gain two titles, on top of already being thane of Glamis: First he will become thane of Cawdor, then he will become king. The witches also prophesy that Banquo will be the father of future kings although he will never be a king himself. The supernatural creatures vanish into thin air, and two noblemen, Ross and Angus, arrive to inform Macbeth that he is now thane of Cawdor. This kick-starts Macbeth's ambition.

Scene 4: Forres. The palace.

King Duncan, surrounded by noblemen, receives Macbeth and warmly thanks him for winning the battle for him. He then proclaims his son Malcolm to be his heir. This piece of news worries

Macbeth since he will have to kill not only Duncan but also Malcolm to fulfill the prophecy and become king.

Scene 5: Inverness. Macbeth's castle.

Lady Macbeth is reading a letter from her husband, which informs her of the mysterious prophecy. Her ambition is immediately roused, but she worries that her husband is too weak to seize power. The king is on his way to Macbeth's castle, Inverness. In order to gain the strength to kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth asks the evil spirits to take away her feminine traits such as pity and fill her with cruelty instead. When Macbeth arrives, she asks him to leave the whole business to her.

Scene 6: Before Macbeth's castle.

Duncan and his noblemen arrive at Inverness. The king obviously has no idea that this is where he will soon meet his end. Ironically, he thinks that the castle of the Macbeths looks very pleasant and is good for his nerves. He is greeted by Lady Macbeth who assures him that she and her husband are his loyal subjects.

Scene 7: Macbeth's castle.

Macbeth is reflecting upon the consequences of killing Duncan. He tells his wife that he does not want to go through with it. Lady Macbeth responds by mocking his lack of manliness. She also says that although she knows what being a mother is like, she would go as far as killing her own baby if she had been the one swearing to kill the king like Macbeth. She then outlines her plan of getting Duncan's servants drunk and blaming them for the murder. Macbeth agrees.

Act 2 summary

Scene 1: Court of Macbeth's castle.

It is night at the castle of Inverness, and Banquo and his son Fleance meet their old friend Macbeth. Macbeth denies thinking about the witches' prophecy but asks Banquo to meet up one day and discuss it. Banquo says to Macbeth he will do anything for him, as long as it does not conflict with his loyalty to King Duncan.

As Macbeth is alone, he suddenly thinks he sees a bloody dagger (a knife) floating in the air. Feeling like it is leading him to Duncan, he heads for the King's bedchamber, armed with real daggers.

Scene 2: The same.

Macbeth and his wife, Lady Macbeth, meet up in the night. He tells her that he has now stabbed Duncan to death. Macbeth is unsettled by the fact that his hands are stained with blood. He also thinks he heard someone saying a prayer in the night. However, he found himself unable to say "Amen", just as he thinks that no amount of water can wash away his sin.

Macbeth is so appalled that he has forgotten to leave the bloody daggers next to Duncan's sleeping servants. Lady Macbeth scolds him and goes to Duncan's chamber with the daggers and returns with hands as bloodied as Macbeth's.

Scene 3: The same.

A porter, who guards the entrance to Inverness and humorously compares it to Hell, opens the gates to two of Duncan's noblemen, Lennox and Macduff. It has been a strange night with unnatural weather. Soon, Duncan is discovered to be dead, and people rush in. It is revealed that Macbeth has killed Duncan's drugged servants, presumably as revenge for killing their king. When the others question Macbeth about this, Lady Macbeth faints.

The King's sons fear to be murdered too and agree to flee; Malcolm to England and Donalbain to Ireland.

Scene 4: Outside Macbeth's castle.

Morning has come, but strangely there is no daylight. The nobleman Ross and an old man discuss some unnatural events which have happened during the night. For example, Duncan's horses have broken free, and some even claim they have eaten one another.

Macduff arrives, and the men discuss how Macbeth has already gone to Scone to be crowned as king, now that Duncan's sons have suspiciously fled. Macduff worries that Macbeth will be a brutal ruler. He intends to return to his home in Fife instead of witnessing the crowning.

Act 3 summary

Scene 1: Forres. The palace.

Macbeth invites Banquo to a feast he is holding that night, although he is secretly plotting to have Banquo killed before that. Duncan's sons are in exile, claiming that Macbeth is a traitor who has usurped the throne. Macbeth tells Banquo that this is a lie and that the sons killed their own father. Banquo agrees to join the feast but is secretly worried that his old friend did not obtain the throne honestly.

Macbeth, in turn, is worried that the witches' prophecy about Banquo will come true, just like his own. This would mean that Macbeth has in fact murdered Duncan for Banquo's heirs, not his own. Thus, Macbeth invites two murderers to his castle and talks them into killing Banquo and Fleance.

Scene 2: The palace.

Before the feast, Macbeth speaks with his wife, Lady Macbeth. He is deeply troubled by what he has done and increasingly paranoid about the future. She does her best to calm him down. However, Macbeth seems to take charge as he does not tell his wife about his plan to have Banquo and Fleance murdered.

Scene 3: A park near the palace.

It is night, and the two murderers are joined by a third murderer. The three attack Banquo and Fleance but only manage to kill Banquo.

Scene 4: The same. Hall in the palace.

The Macbeths hold a feast for their loyal noblemen. One of the murderers arrives with blood on his face to inform Macbeth that Fleance has escaped. The escape of Banquo's son - a potential royal heir - makes Macbeth paranoid. When he returns to the table, he finds his seat taken by Banquo's bloody ghost. Macbeth upsets everyone as he becomes almost hysterical at the sight. Although Lady Macbeth does her best to cover up for him and tries to make him pull himself together by mocking his lack of manliness, it ends awkwardly with the guests having to leave.

Scene 5: A Heath.

Note: This entire scene is believed to have been written and added by Thomas Middleton and not by Shakespeare! Partly due to the meter and style, and partly due to this scene being dramatically irrelevant.

Here, we see the three witches meet with Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. She scolds them for making the prophecy to Macbeth without involving her first. Hecate wants her part in bringing down Macbeth who they think has been too ambitious.

Scene 6: Forres. The palace.

Lennox and another lord discuss the latest events, and Lennox refers to Macbeth as a traitor and tyrant. Malcolm is now in England under the protection of the English king, Edward the Confessor. Lennox hopes that Siward, the Earl of Northumberland, will gather his English forces and go against Macbeth. That would save Scotland from its current state of unnatural suffering.

Act 4 summary

Scene 1: A cavern. In the middle, a boiling cauldron.

The three witches are dancing around a bubbling cauldron while filling it with scary ingredients such as bits of bat, snake, and shark. Macbeth arrives, desperate for clarity, and demands that they reveal the details of his future. Three apparitions, or ghosts, then appear: an armed head; a bloody child; and a crowned child holding a branch.

The apparitions say that Macbeth should be on his guard concerning Macduff; that no man born by a woman can harm Macbeth; and that he will not be defeated until Birnam Wood moves towards Dunsinane Hill where Macbeth's castle lies.

However, when Macbeth asks about Banquo becoming the father of kings, his relief turns to despair: Eight ghost-like kings appear, with Banquo's ghost carrying a mirror at the end, signifying his never-ending line of royal heirs.

One of Macbeth's noblemen, Lennox, arrives to inform him that Macduff has fled to England. This confirms that Macbeth cannot trust Macduff. Macbeth then decides to have Macduff's family killed to punish Macduff for deserting him.

Scene 2: Macduff's castle.

Lady Macduff is speaking to her young son and Ross, a nobleman, about Macduff having fled to England. She feels let down. Ross leaves, and Lady Macduff discusses the nature of treason with her clever son. A messenger arrives to warn her that they are in danger. She stays, however, as she is innocent. Soon after, she and her children are cruelly murdered by Macbeth's men.

Scene 3: England. Before the King's palace.

Macduff and Malcolm have a lengthy discussion about what makes a good king. Both mistrust each other at first. Macduff is trying to persuade Malcolm to trust him while indirectly asking if Malcolm would be a better king than Macbeth. In turn, Malcolm tries to test Macduff's loyalties by falsely telling him that he will be a cruel and selfish ruler. A doctor arrives, and they briefly talk of kings being able to cure people with their divine powers.

Ross arrives to inform Macduff that Macbeth has had Macduff's family and household murdered. Macduff becomes upset and swears to take revenge together with Malcolm, thereby fulfilling the first part of the witches' prophecy which warned Macbeth of Macduff.

Act 5 summary

Scene 1: Dunsinane. Ante-room in the castle.

A doctor and a gentlewoman (a lady's maid) discuss Lady Macbeth: She has started sleepwalking. As they speak, she sleepwalks into the room, and they watch her talking to herself in an agitated way. Lady Macbeth more or less reveals that she and her husband were behind the murders of the late King Duncan and Banquo. She desperately tries to clean her hands which she thinks are stained with Duncan's blood.

Scene 2: The country near Dunsinane.

Scottish noblemen - Menteith, Caithness, Angus, and Lennox - and some soldiers talk about how the English army is heading for Macbeth's castle. Rumour has it that Macbeth has gone

mad and that the people serving him have lost their loyalty towards him. The group heads on to join the English army led by Malcolm, Duncan's son.

Scene 3: Dunsinane. A room in the castle.

Bad news keeps arriving for Macbeth as he is having his armor put on by Seyton, one of his officers: Macbeth's thanes abandon him; his remaining people are white with fear; and the doctor comes to inform him of Lady Macbeth's troubled mental state. Macbeth merely replies that the doctor should cure her - just as he wishes the doctor could cure his suffering country.

Scene 4: Country near Birnam Wood.

Malcolm, Siward, his son Young Siward, Macduff, Menteith, Caithness, Angus, Lennox, and their army arrive at Birnam Wood near Macbeth's castle. Malcolm orders everyone to cut off branches from the trees to hide their real numbers as they approach the castle. Without knowing it, they are hereby making the third part of the witches' prophecy come true: Birnam Wood is moving towards Macbeth's castle

Scene 5: Dunsinane. Within the castle.

Macbeth is preparing for battle when horrible female cries are heard. It turns out that Lady Macbeth is dead. To this, Macbeth somewhat ambiguously replies that she should have died hereafter.

Macbeth then receives the unbelievable piece of news that Birnam Wood is moving towards the castle. Disillusioned by his prospects and life in general, he decides to at least die like a man.

Scene 6: Dunsinane. Before the castle.

The army arrives at Macbeth's castle, and the soldiers throw down their branches and launch into battle.

Scene 7: Another part of the field.

Macbeth is on the battlefield and easily kills Young Siward when the young soldier challenges him. Meanwhile, Macduff is looking for Macbeth in order to take revenge for the loss of his

family. Malcolm and Siward enter the castle as it has now been surrendered to them without resistance.

Scene 8: Another part of the field.

Macbeth encounters Macduff on the battlefield, but refuses to fight him because the murder of Macduff's family is already hard on his conscience. However, Macduff taunts him into fighting and reveals to him that he (Macduff) was born via C-section, which means that he was not born of a woman in the normal sense. Thus, the second part of the witches' prophecy seems to be coming true, and Macbeth's confidence is shaken.

Macduff says that Macbeth will be shown to everyone as a treacherous coward and monster. This makes Macbeth pluck up the courage to fight back as a final attempt to beat his fate. However, Macbeth is killed by Macduff.

Scene 9: Another part of the field.

Malcolm, Siward, Ross, and the other noblemen fighting against Macbeth gather. Siward is told of his son's valiant death in battle, and Macduff arrives with Macbeth's head. Malcolm is hailed as king by everybody, and he refers to rumors of Lady Macbeth having committed suicide. He then promises to reward all his loyal followers and heads for Scone to be crowned as king, so order in Scotland may be restored.

The genre of Macbeth: drama

William Shakespeare's Macbeth is a drama, or play. This is relevant to your analysis in several ways. Firstly, a play has no narrator. This means that we do not have access to the characters' thoughts and feelings. Instead, we must analyze the characters and their motives based on what they say (their dialogue) and what they do (their actions). For example, when Macbeth starts seeing a floating dagger, it tells us something about his mental state.

Secondly, you should remember that when a play is staged, its interpretation relies on the decisions of the director and actors (and not just the text itself). So if you are working with stage versions of Macbeth, this is important. This study guide, however, only focuses on the play as a text. This is typically the way we work in English class: text-based.

More specifically, Macbeth is also a tragedy. Tragedies follow a central character who goes through struggles caused by fate and a tragic flaw within the character himself that he cannot overcome, making him a tragic hero. These elements can be found in Macbeth, as in other Shakespearean tragedies such as Hamlet.

The genre of tragedy was first invented in Athens in Ancient Greece. When watching a play about human suffering, the audience both empathizes with the hero and feels a sense of relief that they are not in his shoes. This sense of relief is known as "catharsis" and is essential to the genre of tragedy. So, if you ever felt sorry for Macbeth and his tragic end, you may have just gone through a bit of catharsis.

Theatre in Shakespeare's day

Theatre was very different in the Elizabethan era. Today, we often associate theatre with something serious and intellectual. In the 1500s and 1600s, however, people from all social classes would go to an open-air playhouse in London to be entertained. The audience generally talked and ate while they watched, and throwing food at the actors was not unheard of. The play would be punctuated by songs and dances, even in the case of a tragedy. Staging was minimal, with no elaborate props or special effects.

Another key element of both Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre was that women were not allowed on stage. All female roles were played by young boys whose voices had not broken. The reason was that acting was considered immoral and particularly unfit for women, who were expected to appear virginal and innocent.

So, when reading Macbeth, you might want to imagine a teenage boy playing Lady Macbeth! This becomes particularly interesting in Act 1, Scene 5 when Lady Macbeth delivers her famous "unsex me" soliloquy, where she asks that her female characteristics be removed and replaced with male characteristics. Shakespeare seems to play with the idea of gender, drawing the audience's attention to the irony of the role being played by a boy.

Characters in Macbeth

1. Macbeth, the protagonist

The protagonist of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the Scottish nobleman and warrior Macbeth. Throughout the play, he develops dramatically.

Macbeth's qualities are highlighted in the beginning of the play

We hear of Macbeth before we first meet him, and it is all praise. In Act 1, Scene 2, a sergeant who has fought alongside him refers to him as "brave Macbeth" (1.2.18). King Duncan refers to him as "valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!" (1.2.26). Right from the start, we understand that **Macbeth is a brave soldier, a nobleman, and the King's relative**.

When killing Macdonwald, the rebel leader, Macbeth "unseam'd him from the nave to the chops, / And fix'd his head upon [the] battlements." (1.2.24-25). This suggests that brutally killing people is no problem for Macbeth, at least when it happens in battle.
However, as we read on, we see **a more reflective side of Macbeth's character**. We finally meet him when he and Banquo encounter the witches. The very first words Macbeth speaks are: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." (1.3.39). This line tells us two things about him. First, these words echo the words of the three witches when we first met them: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." (1.1.12). This suggests that Macbeth may already be influenced by their evil powers.

Second, the line shows us a rather reflective side of Macbeth. Banquo is the one who reacts like a soldier to the witches' prophecy: He remains calm and practical. In contrast, Macbeth seems stunned into silence, and from Banquo we learn that Macbeth looks scared: "Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (1.3.53-54). Already now, Macbeth seems to be thinking ahead, considering the potential consequences of the prophecy. As well as being a soldier, he is also a thinker.

In Act 1, Scene 5, we see **the private side of Macbeth** as Lady Macbeth reads aloud a letter her husband has sent her where he lovingly refers to her as "my dearest partner of greatness" (1.5.11). Lady Macbeth broadens our understanding of Macbeth's character even further in her soliloquy, which she addresses at her husband as if he were there:

Yet do I fear thy nature,
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false. (1.5.16-21)

Lady Macbeth's description shows that **Macbeth is an ambitious man, but one who prefers to succeed honorably**. In Lady Macbeth's mind, this makes him weak, but she is more than ready to boost his bravery.

The murder of Duncan is a turning point for Macbeth

The witches' prophecy plants a seed in Macbeth's mind. After struggling with doubts about whether he should act upon the prophecy and accept the potential consequences, he finally agrees with his wife: They should murder King Duncan.

From then on, **Macbeth starts lying to others**. When he meets Banquo in the dark, he presents himself as "a friend" (2.1.13), despite possibly already thinking of Banquo as a rival. He also lies to Banquo about not having thought about the prophecy at all (2.1.26). At the same time, Macbeth hints that Banquo will be rewarded if he allies himself with Macbeth (2.1.31-32). This reveals that Macbeth is already plotting to kill Duncan.

When Macbeth murders Duncan, he gains ultimate power and becomes King of Scotland. However, this upward move politically **starts a downward spiral for him morally**. In the Elizabethan world picture, there was no greater sin than regicide - killing your king. A king was thought to be chosen by God, and anyone killing a king would be damned and go to Hell. Right after the murder Macbeth is horrified at what he has done and **riddled with guilt**: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" (2.2.75-76). Literally, his hands are stained with Duncan's blood, but metaphorically Macbeth also feels that his soul is stained with the sin of regicide. This is underlined by the fact that Macbeth felt unable to say "amen" when he heard someone saying a prayer in the dark (2.2.36-43).

Like many other politicians, Macbeth soon learns that the real challenge is not *gaining* power but *keeping* it. **His paranoia increases**, partly due to the rumors of his guilt which Duncan's sons are spreading, and partly due to his fear that Banquo's prophecy will come true too. Therefore, he has Banquo murdered. The bloody dagger, which Macbeth sees before Duncan's murder, and Banquo's ghost, which Macbeth sees at the banquet, may both be signs that Macbeth is starting to fall apart psychologically. He is haunted - in one sense or the other - by his guilt.

However, Macbeth realizes that there is no turning back: "I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er." (3.4.159-161). He compares his current situation to standing in the middle of a river of blood, saying that he might as well go on now and keep killing. Despite being a brave warrior, Macbeth is actually ill suited for the psychological consequences of crime.

After speaking to the witches for the second time, Macbeth's fear of the future increases. At this point, he is sick with worrying and overthinking: He declares that "from this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand" (4.1.164-165), meaning that **he will now act without thinking about the consequences**. He then decides on his first spontaneous murder: Macduff's family must be killed as a punishment for Macduff abandoning him.

The attack on the innocent Macduffs is the first murder that makes no sense strategically. It is simply cruel. Macbeth's pity seems to have disappeared along with his thinking. This is supported by the fact that the witches, in that same scene, say that "something wicked this way comes" (4.1.45) right before Macbeth enters. This suggests that Macbeth has lost his humanity: he is "wicked" and nothing but a "thing".

The rest of the play contains numerous negative references to Macbeth**.** The other characters now see him as "black Macbeth" (3.3.62), "the fiend of Scotland" (3.3.273), and a "hell-hound" (5.8.4). The very last reference to him in the play is when the new king, Malcolm, disdainfully calls him "this dead butcher" (5.9.41). Considering the praise about Macbeth in the beginning, this description **underlines the enormity of Macbeth's downfall**.

Macbeth redeems himself in the end

Macbeth puts our sympathies to the test. However, he redeems himself before he dies in several ways. One example is that **his conscience returns**. When he meets Macduff on the battlefield, Macbeth does not want to kill him because, as Macbeth puts it, "my soul is too much charged / With blood of thine already." (5.8.6-7). He already feels guilty for having had Macduff's family killed.

Another example is **Macbeth generally needs to be bullied into action:** In the final battle, Macduff must insult him to make him fight, and prior to that Lady Macbeth needed to mock Macbeth's lack of manliness to spur him on to kill Duncan. We might interpret Macbeth's hesitation as a sign of morality.

Another thing that redeems Macbeth towards the end is that **he rediscovers his honor and bravery**. Although he seems to realize that the witches have tricked him, Macbeth makes a final attempt to defy his fate and survive when he goes to fight Macduff. At the end of the play Macbeth is back on the battlefield where we first met him, once again the brave warrior. This also gives **a circular structure** to the play and to Macbeth's characterisation.

Macbeth is a tragic hero with a tragic flaw

Macbeth is a tragedy in the classical sense, and all tragedies must end with the tragic hero's great downfall. The higher the position of the hero, the deeper the fall. The hero's defeat happens because he is destined for failure and because of a failing in his character (a tragic flaw). **Macbeth's tragic flaw is his ambition**. It is his lust for power that drives him to commit the ultimate sin and kill his king and relative. That same desire also makes him go on killing and lying in order to keep his power.

Who is to blame for Macbeth's downfall?

One of the most interesting questions in *Macbeth* is the question of responsibility. Who is to be blamed for Macbeth's tragic end?

We know that Macbeth is an ambitious man. His wife tells us so in her soliloquy (1.5.18-19), and the fact that he does not react to the witches' prophecy with laughter or disbelief seems to suggest that he has already been playing with the idea of being king. It could be argued that Macbeth had the capacity to be evil all along - he just needed a catalyst or two to kick-start it.

Another interesting question is **how we interpret the supernatural elements and Macbeth's reaction to them**. If we choose to see the witches, the floating dagger, and Banquo's ghost as real, Macbeth mainly becomes a victim of evil forces beyond his control. We could, however, also interpret these elements as psychological projections of Macbeth's desires and psychological breakdown. Meaning, he sees the witches because he is already planning on killing his king. This would make him more of a bad guy.

Many modern adaptations and readings of the play prefer the second of the two interpretations. We must consider **the historical context**, though. Many Elizabethans believed in supernatural beings such as witches, ghosts, and spirits. Thus, a person's evil actions might come from being possessed by supernatural elements - just as we see Lady Macbeth inviting evil spirits to take over her body and "unsex" her in Act 1, Scene 5. So, the question of whether the play's supernatural elements are real or not may not have been an issue for the Elizabethans.

Why do we feel sympathy with Macbeth?

Even though the hero of a classical drama is flawed, it is crucial that we be able to sympathize with him in some way. As Macbeth's lust for power spirals out of control, this becomes increasingly difficult. Listed chronologically, Macbeth has:

- Associated himself with evil beings (the witches).
- Committed regicide. (On top of that, King Duncan was also Macbeth's guest and relative).
- Killed Duncan's drugged servants.
- Usurped the throne, sending Scotland into chaos.
- Blamed Duncan's sons for murdering their father.
- Had his friend Banquo murdered.
- Had Lady Macduff and her children murdered.

With all these wrongdoings, it is rather impressive that Shakespeare is able to make us sympathize with Macbeth. One of the ways he does this is to **shield us from actually witnessing Macbeth killing anyone**. Macbeth's murders of Duncan and the servants happen off stage, which creates a distance between the protagonist and his wrongdoings. Macbeth is also distanced from the murders of Banquo and Macduff's family because these acts are committed by others acting on Macbeth's behalf.

Sympathy for Macbeth is also created by **indirectly giving us access to Macbeth's mind**. Whenever he tells other characters about his feelings (such as in dialogues with his wife) or

addresses the audience in his soliloquies, we get an insight into his emotions and motives. One example is Macbeth's horror and guilt right after killing Duncan: "I am afraid to think what I have done." (2.2.64). It is *because* we see Macbeth struggling with his own conscience that he remains human to us. Also, when Lady Macbeth criticizes him for being unmanly, it is hard to not feel sorry for him.

This sympathy is also why we experience a sense of sadness in the end when Macbeth dies. Witnessing his tragic downfall is painful. It almost seems unfair when the new king, Malcolm, disrespectfully refers to Macbeth as "this dead butcher" (5.9.41). Particularly the beginning of the play showed that Macbeth was so much more than that.

2. Lady Macbeth

In many ways, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth is an ambiguous character. To some, she is the manipulative embodiment of evil. To others, she is a loyal, supportive wife. In any case, her character develops extensively over the course of the play - just like her husband's.

At first she appears stronger than her husband

From the very first moment we meet her (in Act 1, Scene 5), **Lady Macbeth is strong-willed and ambitious for her husband to succeed**. She is reading a letter from her husband about the witches' prophecy, and unlike Macbeth who initially seems doubtful, Lady Macbeth is more than ready to seize power. Knowing her husband well, she realizes that Macbeth is "not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it." (1.5.19-20). She believes he is simply not ruthless enough, and to her that is a weakness.

Lady Macbeth does not spend time reflecting like her husband does; instead she acts immediately. In Shakespeare's day, women were considered weaker than men. However, in her famous "unsex me" soliloquy, **Lady Macbeth calls upon evil spirits to remove her feminine qualities**:

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 [...]

Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall. (1.5.45-52)

She asks to be filled with cruelty and to have remorse removed from her body. She also asks that her milk be exchanged with gall, a bitter fluid produced by the liver and associated with evil. She seems to think that if she becomes stronger (more masculine), she will be able to assist her weak husband in seizing power. Her soliloquy shows that she is willing to go against nature itself to achieve her goals.

Tellingly, Lady Macbeth addresses the spirits using the imperative: When she says "unsex me" or "fill me", she is *ordering* the evil spirits to do what she wants. The Elizabethans believed in spirits as well as traditional gender roles. To them, Lady Macbeth would have seemed like a frightening and unnatural woman as she is bossing around spirits and rejecting feminine characteristics. By calling upon evil spirits she is also allowing herself to be possessed by the devil - a great sin.

Shortly after her "unsex me" soliloquy, Lady Macbeth takes charge by telling her husband: "Leave all the rest to me." (1.5.82). Thus, **she becomes a catalyst for Macbeth's attempt to gain power**. Whenever her husband gets cold feet, she mocks his lack of manliness: "When you durst do it, then you were a man." (1.7.54-55). This also underlines how she is unnaturally bold and masculine compared to her husband.

She even claims that she would have killed her own baby and "dash'd [its] brains out" if *she* had lost courage like Macbeth has (1.7.59-64). These lines paint a gruesome picture of Lady Macbeth, which is probably why many consider her a tyrant wife who bullies her weak husband into becoming a murderer.

Mysteriously, **Lady Macbeth refers to a baby and the joys of motherhood**: "I have given suck, and know / How tender it is to love the babe that milks me." (1.7.59-60). However, in the play she and Macbeth no longer have a baby and we never learn what happened to it. Her husband refers to future babies when he recognizes her strength by saying: "Bring forth men-children only; / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males." (1.7.80-82).

Again, she is portrayed as almost masculine: She is so tough that she should only ever give birth to boys.

In the end her guilty conscience catches up with her

Lady Macbeth rarely displays any humanity or weakness. One example, though, is her admittance that "had [Duncan] not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't." (2.2.15-16). Feeling as if she is murdering her own father is too much for her conscience after all. When people discover Duncan's death, Lady Macbeth faints (2.3.152). She might be overwhelmed with guilt at the realization of what they have done. It is, however, more likely that she is merely pretending to faint to draw attention away from her husband.

In any case, Lady Macbeth appears to lose her strength during the course of the play. **She starts sleepwalking, which indicates her mental breakdown**. We see this in Act 5, Scene 1, when she is clearly haunted by the murders of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff's family: "Will these hands ne'er be clean?" (5.1.39). She feels that her sin has metaphorically stained her hands with blood.

Ironically, Lady Macbeth foreshadows her own mental breakdown when she says right after the murder of Duncan: "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad." (2.2.44-45). Thinking too much about their evil doings will make them lose their minds, and this is exactly what happens.

Eventually, **Lady Macbeth commits suicide**. In Act 5, Scene 9, Malcolm refers to her as the "fiend-like queen / Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life" (5.9.41-43). Her suicide may be the logical choice for someone facing defeat and legal prosecution. However, the text indicates that she could no longer live with her guilt. This is especially supported by her sleepwalking, which indicates a troubled mind.

3. The Witches

The witches' physical appearances show their abnormality

Unlike the other characters of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, we get some information about the physical appearances of the three witches. In Act 1, Scene 3, Banquo describes them as creatures with "choppy finger[s]" and "skinny lips" (1.3.45-46). He generally describes them

as unpleasant and wild to look at. Banquo also points out that **they do not look like they belong in the human world** since they are so "wither'd and so wild in their attire, / That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth." (1.3.41-42).

On top of this, Banquo is quite **confused about their gender**: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so." (1.3.46-48). A woman with a beard is unnatural; it goes against the natural order. All in all, the witches' appearance is a sign that they are supernatural creatures who do not belong to the human world. This is also an indication that they should not be trusted. Ironically, this is exactly what Macbeth does.

Shakespeare may be toying with the idea of gender when he has Banquo refer to the witches' beards. In the Elizabethan era, all female roles were played by men, so the actors playing the witches may very well have had beards. In this light, Banquo's remark becomes comical.

We know more about the witches than the characters do

Shakespeare makes sure we always meet the witches before any of the characters do. As a result, we get an insight into their evil plan of tricking Macbeth that he does not have himself, and yet we are unable to warn him. This is called dramatic irony.

The first time we meet the witches is in Act 1, Scene 1 as they are talking ominously of a battle in relation to Macbeth. Here, the presence of **thunder underlines the danger associated with the witches**. The second time is in Act 1, Scene 3 when Banquo and Macbeth receive the first prophecy. Before the men enter, we hear the witches creating a spell to ensnare Macbeth while holding hands (1.3.31-38). As they declare that "the charm's wound up" (1.3.38), the unsuspecting men enter.

A similar situation can be found in Act 4, Scene 1 when Macbeth receives his second prophecy. Again, we first see the witches preparing another spell to trick Macbeth while throwing creepy ingredients into a cauldron (4.1.1-38). As in the opening scene, the presence of thunder underlines the danger. Soon, the unsuspecting Macbeth enters.

Because we know something that the protagonist does not, we become engaged in the story. Even the fact that we cannot warn him, keeps us hooked. Watching Macbeth being ensnared by the witches is like watching a catastrophe unfolding.

The witches speak ambiguously on purpose

It is characteristic of the witches that they always speak ambiguously, which enables Macbeth to interpret their prophecies in the way he wants. For instance, they tell him that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.88-89) "until Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come" (4.1.102-104). Macbeth is manipulated into interpreting this as something *general*, meaning "no one" and "never". In fact, it ends up referring to something *specific*, namely Macduff and Malcolm's army carrying branches from Birnam Wood.

The witches' motive for speaking in riddles simply seems to be that they are evil. **They take fun in bringing down a great man like Macbeth**. Without knowing it, he hints at this himself: "Infected be the air whereon they ride; / And damn'd all those that trust them!" (4.1.154-155). Ironically, Macbeth thus foreshadows how *he* will soon be damned for having put his faith in their ambiguous predictions.

To modern readers, the witches may seem comical or silly, but they would have been viewed as frightening and perhaps rather realistic in Shakespeare's day. The Elizabethans were generally superstitious and believed in witchcraft.

4. Duncan

Duncan is a good king chosen by God

Although King Duncan plays a relatively small role in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, he has two important functions. First, his murder helps drive the action of the play. Second, he seems to represent the ideal king, whereas Macbeth seems to represent the tyrant ruler.

Duncan is an older man with two grown sons, Malcolm and Donalbain. Some of his qualities are that **he is just, gracious, and generous**. For instance, he warmly praises and rewards Macbeth for winning a battle for him. Even Macbeth acknowledges that Duncan is universally loved when he is thinking about murdering his king: "Duncan / Hath borne his faculties so

meek, hath been / so clear in his great office, that his virtues / Will plead like angels." (1.7.16-19).

- ⇨ According to the Elizabethan world picture, **a king was anointed by God**. This meant that God had put him on the throne and that he was only answerable to God, not to his people. This was called "the Divine Right of Kings". Any attempt to kill the king - regicide - was a sacrilegious act. This would mean upsetting the balance of the universe and going to Hell as a sinner.

Shakespeare underlines the divine theme by having his characters speak about Duncan in religious terms. One example is Macduff after the King has been found dead: "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence / The life o' the building!" (2.3.79-81). Duncan's body is compared to a holy temple. He has been stabbed so that his blood ran out, which means that the life of this metaphorical temple has been stolen.

5. Banquo

Banquo remains loyal to King Duncan

In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Banquo is a general in King Duncan's army and friends with Macbeth, his fellow general. In Act 1, Scene 2, a wounded sergeant describes how Banquo and Macbeth fought bravely for King Duncan "as cannons overcharged with double cracks" (1.2.41), meaning they fought twice as hard as the enemy. This shows us that **Banquo is a brave soldier who is loyal to king and country**.

Banquo remains loyal to King Duncan throughout. In Act 2, Scene 1, right before the murder of Duncan, Macbeth hints that Banquo would do well to support him in the future. Banquo answers that he will support Macbeth as long as it does not clash with his sworn loyalty to Duncan: "So I lose none / In seeking to augment it, but still keep / My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear, / I shall be counsell'd." (2.1.33-36). Sadly, this loyalty is eventually what has Banquo killed as Macbeth decides to get rid of him.

Banquo is not seduced by the witches' prophecy

We see a crucial difference between Banquo and Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 3 when they receive the witches' prophecy. While Macbeth seems to believe the predictions, **Banquo is practical and skeptical**. We see this when he asks the witches whether they are real or just figments of his own imagination: "Are ye fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?" (1.3.55-

56). This fits the idea of a soldier being a rational, down-to-earth type of person. In contrast, Macbeth "seems rapt withal" (1.3.59), meaning beside himself with wonder. Banquo's reaction to the witches shows us that he does not let his imagination run away with him.

Banquo is not afraid to scold the witches when they only deliver a prophecy for his friend. Once he has heard his own prophecy, he is still skeptical: "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." (1.3.132-135). In these lines, he is warning Macbeth about trusting supernatural creatures since they might trick you. His words therefore foreshadow Macbeth's tragic end.

Banquo's weakness is his trust in Macbeth

Despite Banquo's healthy skepticism towards the witches, he almost appears too trusting towards Macbeth. Banquo does not seem to realize that if their individual prophecies both come true, Banquo and his heirs will be in danger. Macbeth has been promised that he will become king, and Banquo that he will father future kings. This would make it logical for Macbeth to remove Banquo and his line of heirs so that Macbeth will be the one fathering future kings.
Perhaps **this is the downside of not being imaginative**: Just as Banquo cannot believe the witches are real, he simply cannot imagine that his friend would turn on him.

However, once Duncan has been murdered and Macbeth crowned as king, Banquo becomes nervous. This is clear from his soliloquy, which he addresses at Macbeth (who is not there): "Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all. / As the weird women promised, and I fear, / Thou play'dst most foully for't." (3.1.1-3).
In the end, Banquo seems to decide to give his loyalty to the new king, Macbeth, in the hope that all will end well. But Macbeth has him murdered before long. Banquo's son Fleance escapes, though, which indicates that Banquo may indeed father a line of kings.

Banquo can be read as Shakespeare's flattery of King James I

Banquo serves as a contrast to Macbeth - partly because he is more skeptical towards the witches and partly because he is more loyal than his usurping friend.

6. Malcolm

In *Macbeth*, Malcolm is King Duncan's eldest son, brother of Donalbain, and heir to the throne, which is why he is called Prince of Cumberland. In the final scene of the play, Malcolm is to be crowned as the new king. This means that Shakespeare needs to demonstrate to us throughout the play that Malcolm is in fact a worthy ruler.

Contrary to his gullible father, **Malcolm is wary and realizes he is in danger** after Duncan's murder. He decides to flee to England to persuade the English king to support him in overthrowing Macbeth (Act 2, Scene 3).

When Macduff flees too and comes to see him, Malcolm is again very cautious. He initially treats Macduff as Macbeth's spy. Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty by lying and saying that he is full of negative qualities which would make him an even worse king than the tyrant Macbeth (Act 4, Scene 3). All of this shows us that Malcolm is a clever politician.

When he marches towards Macbeth and tells his soldiers to hide their numbers by carrying branches cut from Birnam Wood, **Malcolm shows himself a cunning general**, too (Act 5, Scene 4). He also has compassion: when Young Siward is killed in battle, Malcolm grieves more for him than Young Siward's own father (Act 5, Scene 9). Compassion was an important quality in a king who would have absolute power over everyone.

In the final lines of the play, we also see Malcolm promising to reward his loyal supporters, like his late father did, which is yet another positive quality in a king (Act 5, Scene 9). Through his many virtues, **he forms a contrast to the tyrant Macbeth**. It would seem that Malcolm is the right person to heal Scotland.

7. Macduff

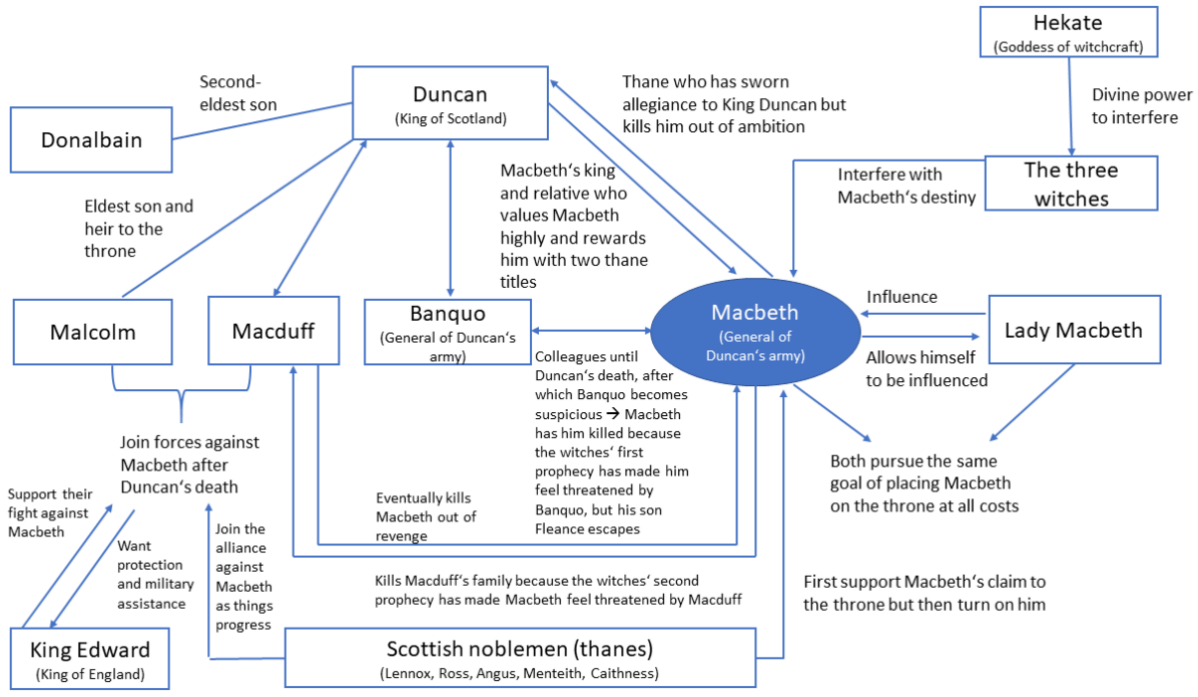
Macduff is a nobleman loyal to King Duncan and **the one who ends up killing Macbeth**. He is horrified when he learns of King Duncan's death; to him, it is a "most sacrilegious murder" (2.3.79). He is a soldier and a man of duty so he is aware of how wrong regicide is. However, you might argue that he neglects his duty - or is too naive - when he decides to flee to England and leaves his unprotected family behind. His wife, Lady Macduff, feels let down, and she and her children end up being killed by Macbeth's men as punishment for Macduff's desertion.

When Macduff learns of the death of his family in Act 4, Scene 3, he becomes distraught and blames himself for abandoning them. Malcolm cleverly encourages him to turn his frustration into a lust for revenge, and thus Macduff swears to avenge his family by killing Macbeth. Thereby, Macduff becomes a man of destiny in the play: He fulfills the part of the witches' prophecy that warns Macbeth of Macduff and states that "no man born of woman" can harm Macbeth.

When Macduff and Macbeth meet on the battlefield in Act 5, Scene 8, Macduff suddenly reveals that **he was born via C-section**, which means that he was not born of a woman the normal way. Eventually, he kills Macbeth. In Act 5, Scene 9, Macduff hands over Macbeth's head to Malcolm, whom he considers the rightful heir.

An interesting contrast between Macduff and Macbeth is that **Macduff is a traitor who ends up as a hero whereas Macbeth is a hero who ends up as a traitor**. With this in mind, we might ask ourselves who is the real hero of *Macbeth*? Macduff is the one who kills Macbeth and liberates Scotland of this cruel tyrant, which makes him a hero. However, Macbeth is the protagonist and according to the rules of tragedy also the tragic hero of the play, which is named after him.

A character map consisting of all characters and their relationships can be seen underneath:



Shakespeare's language

Verse: iambic pentameter

Almost all of Macbeth is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter. Iambic. It consists of a line of verse written with **a five-beat rhythm where an unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable**. The unit of an unstressed syllable and a stressed one is called an iamb (pronounced 'eye-am'). It sounds like this: ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM, ba-DUM.

It is illustrated in the line underneath, which Lady Macbeth tells her husband in act 1, scene 7.

But screw your courage to the sticking-place

Each line has five stressed syllables (underlined). Iambic pentameter signals **that the person speaking is a noble character**.

Verse: trochaic tetrameter

Trochaic tetrameter is sometimes seen in the plays, but very rarely in the sonnets. It is **a four-beat rhythm where a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed one**. The unit of a stressed syllable and an unstressed one is called a trochee (pronounced 'tro-kee').

In Shakespeare's plays, it is mainly **supernatural creatures** that speak this way. The witches in *Macbeth* often use trochaic tetrameter:

When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

Each line has four stressed syllables (underlined). Unlike iambic pentameter, this rhythm does not follow the natural sound of English, and this makes it sound dramatic and strange. Often tetrameter is accompanied by rhyme.

Prose (written or spoken language in its ordinary form, without metrical structure.)

Generally, prose can be used as a sign of very different things. Prose is considered less "posh", which is why it is often **used to signal low social status**. This is the reason we see non-nobles or commoners speak this way in *Macbeth*.

Prose may also be **used for comical purposes**. For example, in Act 2, Scene 3, the hung-over working-class porter speaks in prose. We also typically find prose **in letters**. An example of this is Macbeth's letter to his wife in Act 1, Scene 5.

Finally, prose may be **a sign of madness**. This is why we see Lady Macbeth using fragmented and incoherent prose when her guilty conscience makes her sleepwalk (Act 5, Scene 1). Up until now, she has been speaking beautifully in upper-class blank verse (defined below). Her mental breakdown is mirrored in the breakdown of her language. Thus, prose here tells us about her state of mind.

If you need **a tip** for finding out whether certain lines are written in prose or verse, look at the beginning of each line. If the lines are in verse, each line normally starts with a capital letter. If the lines are in prose, each line typically begins *without* a capital letter (unless it is the beginning of a new sentence).

Rhyme and rhymed couplets

Rhymegenerally has many functions and may be used by very different types of characters. Most importantly, it has the function of **drawing attention** to what is being said or done.
This is why we often see rhyme in important passages in a play. Iambic pentameter does not normally rhyme, but when Macbeth decides to go out and die fighting towards the end of the play, he starts using end rhyme while still speaking in iambic pentameter:

I gin to be aweary of the sun,
And wish the estate o' the world were now undone.
Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!
At least we'll die with harness on our back." (5.5.54-57)

This is a man who realizes that all is lost, and yet he decides to fight valiantly and die like a man. His sudden use of rhyme shows us his current mental state and makes his speech more dramatic and emotional, which stirs our emotions.

Rhyme may also have the more practical function of **marking the exit of an important character or the end of a scene**. This has to do with the fact that there was no curtain that could be drawn in Elizabethan theater. Rhyme became a way of signaling a change of scene to the audience.

Like tetrameter, rhyme is also used to **indicate something supernatural**, which is why we see the witches frequently speaking in rhyme. Often, their use of end rhyme is coupled with alliteration (adjacent words beginning with the same letter, which is another type of rhyme), as well as tetrameter. One example is this, with the end rhyme being "fair" - "air": "Fair is foul, and foul is fair. / Hover through the fog and filthy air." (1.1.12-13).

The witches' language varies a lot throughout the play since they both use prose, tetrameter, and sometimes even something called iambic tetrameter, which we will not go into. The witches tend to rhyme, except when speaking in prose. Thus, their language is unpredictable - just like they are.

Finally, Shakespeare also uses **couplets**. A couplet (pronounced "cup-let" in English) is a unit of two lines that typically use the same type of meter and rhyme. Sometimes a couplet is part of a larger group of lines, and sometimes the couplet is separated from the other lines. In the examples above, Macbeth and the witches are actually speaking in **rhymed couplets**.

You may find couplets in iambic pentameter as well as in tetrameter, and sometimes they rhyme. Often the couplets mark a passage that is dramatically or emotionally important and therefore reflects the characters' state of mind.

Soliloquy

A soliloquy is **a lengthy speech that is typically spoken when the character is alone** on stage. One example is Macbeth's soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 7 when Macbeth is outlining the pros and cons of killing King Duncan (1.7.1-28). So far, we have mainly seen him as the brave warrior

and loyal subject. In this scene, however, he reveals his motives and moral scruples to us. It becomes clear that he is seriously considering murdering his king.

Another famous soliloquy in the play is Lady Macbeth's "unsex me" soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 5. This is a very dramatic and passionate speech where Macbeth's wife is asking the evil spirits to remove her feminine traits to enable her to support her husband in murdering Duncan. The two soliloquies illustrate a crucial difference between the Macbeths: While Macbeth is still hesitant and weighing the pros and cons, his wife has already made up her mind and acted upon it.

Alitteration

Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* includes numerous examples of alliteration, which means that adjacent words begin with the same letter. One example is the witches chanting that "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.12). Alliteration gives a nice ring to this central phrase while also underlining its importance in the play.

Lady Macbeth also uses alliteration several times in her soliloquy on her husband's gentle nature, such as on the letters "w" and "h": "What thou wouldst highly, / That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst wrongly win." (1.5.20-22). Again, Shakespeare is using alliteration **to draw attention to central phrases** in the play.

Alliteration also has the added advantage of making it easier for the actors to remember their lines.

Antithesis

In *Macbeth,* Shakespeare frequently uses antithesis (**opposites**) in the language of the play. Often, this is linked to the idea of good vs. evil, which is central to the play. A famous example is when the witches mysteriously claim that "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.12). How can something be good *and* bad at the same time? The strangeness of the antithesis helps demonstrate how the witches are abnormal creatures that do not belong to the normal world.

Later, Macbeth repeats this antithetical phrase: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." (1.3.39). Here, the antithesis has the function of associating him with the witches as it hints that he may be capable of evil like them. His words also foreshadow his realization towards the end

of the play: That him becoming king is not such a good thing after all - despite it seeming very desirable at first. “Fair” has turned to “foul” for him at that point.

The question of foul and fair can also be related to other parts of the story. Who is truly good (“fair”) in this play, for instance? Is it Macbeth or Macduff who is the real hero of the play?

In *Macbeth,* it is **mainly the witches who speak in antithesis**. Another example from the first scene is when they speak of the ongoing battle being “lost and won” (1.1.4), which initially makes no sense. Their prophecy for Banquo also consists entirely of antithesis such as: “Lesser than Macbeth, and greater. (1.3.67). Again, it makes no sense. However, this is a reference to the fact that although Banquo will never become king like Macbeth, he will father a famous line of kings, unlike Macbeth who dies childless.

Metaphors

One example of a metaphor is when Duncan’s son Donalbain says that “there’s daggers in men’s smiles” (2.3.170) right after the King’s murder. This tells us that Donalbain fears that he and his brother will be next. The image of a dagger makes his fear more vivid to us as well as the treachery of the people around him.

Often, the animal kingdom lends inspiration for metaphors in *Macbeth*. This goes for dangerous or poisonous animals in particular, such as snakes, toads, scorpions, and bats. A famous example is when Lady Macbeth advises her husband to “look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t.” (1.5.73-74). The metaphor of a lurking snake paints a clear picture of the friendly facade which Macbeth is to present to his unsuspecting king.

Shakespeare often makes use of **extended metaphors**, making his images stretch over several lines. One example is Macbeth talking longingly of sleep as his guilty conscience has started to prevent him from sleeping:

Sleep that knits up the ravell’d sleave of care,
The death of each day’s life, sore labour’s bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,
Chief nourisher in life’s feast. (2.2.48-51)

These lines include *six* different metaphors to describe sleep! Macbeth describes the importance of sleep in poetic terms, which helps underline his desire to be able to sleep again.

Similes

Another device frequently used in *Macbeth* is simile. This device is **used for comparison and clarification (like & as, not is)**. After having seen the witches disappear into thin air, Macbeth describes them like this: "what seem'd corporal melted / As breath into the wind." (1.3.83-84). By comparing the witches to warm breath being carried away by cold wind, he helps us imagine what their disappearance must have looked like.

Puns

A 'pun' is usually defined as a play on words, or a play upon words, but it would be more accurate to describe punning as playing with the *sound* of words to achieve particular effects. Those effects can be amusement, thought provocation, clarification or explanation. Puns can also achieve a combination of two or more of those effects. In Shakespeare's works puns are often an important part of the economy of his poetic texts.

They are everywhere

- Sometimes funny, sometimes just clever:
    - Malcolm: "There's **warrant** in that theft / Which **steals** itself when there's no mercy left." - **warrant** can either mean 'justification' or 'arrest warrant', 'steal' can mean either 'to sneak' or 'to thieve'.
- The double meanings of both 'warrant' and 'steal' reveal why Malcolm and Donalbain's actions could be viewed as suspicious. They are running awau because they fear for their lives, but it could be interpreted as running away out of guilt.
- Shakespeare uses puns to reveal what characters are thinking. In this example, Lady Macbeth isn't making a deliberate pun - she's using 'crown' to mean head, but it shows her desire to become Queen is always on her mind.
    - "And fill me from the **crown** to the toe topfull / Of direst cruelty"

Shakespeare uses wordplay to create dramatic irony

- Macduff describes Lady Macbeth as "gentle" and says that the news of Duncan's murder would "murder" her.

- In Act 2, Scene 3, the Porter's wordplay creates dramatic irony. He jokingly refers to Macbeth's castle as "hell-gate" and talks about someone who is sent to hell for commiting "treason" - the audience knows that Macbeth has commited treason by killing the King, so the Porter's words are truer than he knows.

Some charaters contradict themselves

- Shakespeare uses paradoxes and oxymorons to heighten the tension.
- The Witches' predictions are ambiguous. The things they predict seem impossible, and yet they come true. Macbeth describes their words as "lies like truth" - this is an oxymoron because lies are never truthful.
- The Witches' often speak in paradoxes - "When the battle's lost and won". This makes them very ambiguous - the audience doesn't know what their motives are, or whether they can be trusted.

Dramatic irony

Macbeth is a play which is full of confusion, surprise, and lies. This becomes clear via dramatic irony, which means that **the audience knows something which the character does not** because the playwright has made sure that our level of knowledge is greater.

One example is when King Duncan describes Macbeth's castle as a pleasant place which is good for his nerves (1.6.1-3). This comes across as fairly ironic since we have just seen the Macbeths plotting to murder him in the previous scene. Duncan is ignorant of this and does not realize that he is already doomed by coming to their castle.

Another example is when Macduff tries to keep the horrible news of Duncan's death from Lady Macbeth because "the repetition, in a woman's ear, / Would murder as it fell." (2.3.100-101). Again, this is very ironic to us as we have just seen Lady Macbeth taking part in the King's murder. She has already demonstrated to us that she does not shy away from murder.

Yet another example is when Macbeth questions Banquo about his plans on the night of the banquet in Act 3, Scene 1 and says: "Fail not our feast" (3.1.31). We know that Macbeth has just ordered two murderers to kill Banquo that same night, whereas Banquo is completely ignorant of this. Furthermore, the irony increases because Banquo does *not* fail Macbeth's feast. He returns as a ghost, which brings to mind the saying that you should be careful what you wish for.

Dramatic irony can have different functions, but it mainly has the function of keeping us engaged in the story. It is frustrating to know that Duncan is about to be killed without being able to warn him. This creates a feeling of tension which keeps us hooked.
Sometimes dramatic irony even functions as a comical element. This could be said about Duncan's naive remark about the Macbeths' castle.
Particularly in *Macbeth*, dramatic irony also helps underline how everyone is going behind each other's backs, plotting and lying.

Scenes in detail: Act 1, Scene 1: the witches

The opening scene hints that chaos is lurking

The very first scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* may seem like a scene where nothing really happens. We meet three witches accompanied by their magical animals. We learn that they plan to meet with someone called Macbeth once a battle is over. This scene is short and brisk - just like the play as a whole.

However, the idea of the opening scene is to indicate that this is a world that will soon collapse into chaos. The Elizabethans believed that everything in the universe was ordered into a strict hierarchy called the Chain of Being. Upsetting this natural hierarchy would lead to the unnatural state of chaos. In Scene 1, there are indications that order has already been disturbed. This is shown through three elements.

First, the stage directions tell us that **there is thunder and lightning**. The fact that the setting is marked by violent weather is a sign that the world is heading for a state of chaos. The witches refer to the weather directly, for instance when they "hover through the fog and filthy air". (1.1.13).

Second, **the witches themselves are a sign of chaos**. The fact that they are here - walking the earth in Scotland - signals danger, since supernatural creatures do not belong in the normal world. The Elizabethans believed in witches and thought that they were the devil's servants. Their magical animals were believed to suck blood from a third nipple hidden somewhere on the witch's body. The three witches fit Elizabethan stereotypes of witches by having magical animals: They refer to "Graymalkin" (1.1.9) and "Paddock" (1.1.10), which are thought to be a gray cat and a toad.

Third, **the witches talk of a battle going on**, saying that they will meet "when the hurlyburly's done, / When the battle's lost and won." (1.1.3-4). In Scene 2, we realize they are referring to the battle between King Duncan's army and the rebel army led by Macdonwald. The fact that there is a civil war in Scotland underlines that chaos is breaking out.

The witches' language helps characterize them

The witches' way of speaking underlines their strangeness and thereby the fact that they do not belong in the normal world. Several of their lines **rhyme**, and they often use **alliteration** and **antithesis**. The following lines include all three devices: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair. / Hover through the fog and filthy air." (1.1.12-13). The end rhyme lies in "fair" - "air". The antithesis lies in the first sentence of the two: Fair and foul are each other's opposites, so how can it be both? This ambiguous way of speaking is also found in the later prophecies, which leads to Macbeth misinterpreting them.

When it comes to meter, the witches' way of speaking is quite irregular. Some of their lines are arranged into **couplets**, meaning units of two lines that often share the same form and content. One example is this:

When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain? (1.1.1-2)

These two lines have the same rhythm and length (form) and deal with the same topic (content), and this makes it a couplet. The first line is also an example of **trochaic tetrameter** because we have four feet, or trochees, where a stressed syllable is followed by an unstressed one. This type of meter is typically only spoken by supernatural creatures in Shakespeare's plays.

The opening scene has several functions

More than anything, **an opening scene must grip the audience's attention** from the start. This is exactly what the first scene in *Macbeth* does: We have ominous weather and a battle, and we have three mysterious witches.

As mentioned in the above, this opening scene also serves to indicate the chaos that will soon break out. Thus, the ominous elements such as the witches and their talk of a battle **function as foreshadowing** of what is to come. By the end of the play, Macbeth's personal battle has been "lost and won". He did become king, but he lost everything else and eventually his life. Finally, the opening scene also **introduces us to the witches** who turn out to be central characters. Although they do not take up many scenes in the play, their prophecies serve as catalysts for the overall action.

Scenes in detail: Act 1, Scene 2: brave Macbeth

Macbeth is a brave and loyal warrior

Act 1, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is set in a Scottish military camp. King Duncan and his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, are informed by a sergeant that Macbeth has defeated a rebel army consisting of the Irish, the Norwegians, and a Scottish traitor named the thane of Cawdor. This scene is the first time in the play that we get some information about Macbeth, although we do not meet him in person yet. We learn that **Macbeth is a skilled and valiant warrior who is loyal to his king**. This is indicated through the positive words which the other characters use about him. For instance, the sergeant refers to him as "brave Macbeth" (1.2.18), and Duncan calls him his "valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!" (1.2.26). Duncan's remark also informs us that Macbeth is the King's relative.

Macbeth's many qualities are also shown through the sergeant's description of Macbeth's actions during the battle. Describing how Macbeth killed the rebel leader, Macdonwald, the sergeant says that "he unseam'd him from the nave to the chops" (1.2.24). This is a rather gruesome image, but the point is that Macbeth is a great warrior.

The sergeant also says that Macbeth and his fellow general, Banquo, fought "As cannons overcharged with double cracks, so they / Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe" (1.2.41-42). The image of a cannon loaded with two balls at once underlines how eagerly Macbeth fought for his king and country.

The scene contains elements of foreshadowing

Like many of the scenes in the play, Scene 2 includes elements which foreshadow later events. For instance, we are told that Macbeth was "Disdaining fortune" (1.2.19) when he killed Macdonwald despite being severely outnumbered. This quote reveals that **Macbeth is the type of person to defy fate** and take matters into his own hands. This piece of information makes even more sense when he later receives the prophecy and decides to speed up things by killing the King himself.

Even as Macbeth goes to fight Macduff in the play's final battle, he still believes he can control fate. This is hubris (arrogance), and it has him killed. Another example of foreshadowing is **the execution of the thane of Cawdor**:

No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive
Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death,
And with his former title greet Macbeth. (1.2.72-73).

Cawdor was a thane who became a traitor, and this is exactly what will happen to Macbeth, too. The link between the two is underlined by the fact that Macbeth is given Cawdor's title. Duncan remarks: "What he hath lost noble Macbeth hath won." (1.2.76). This brings to mind the witches' talk in Scene 1 of a battle being "lost and won" (1.1.4). Macbeth wins as he is given another title, but he eventually loses everything after seizing the throne as well.

The language is characterized by imagery and iambic pentameter

The sergeant's description of the battle is very solemn and poetic. The imagery includes **similes, metaphors, and personification**. For instance, a simile is used to describe how close it was: "Doubtful it stood; / As two spent swimmers, that do cling together / And choke their art." (1.2.9-11). The battle could have gone either way, but Macbeth saved the day. Once he is done with his account, the sergeant uses personification to describe his wounds: "But I am faint, my gashes cry for help." (1.2.46).

In terms of meter, the characters speak in **iambic pentameter**. This reflects their high social status as nobles or royalty. An example of this five-beat rhythm is: "Say to the king the knowledge of the broil." (1.2.7).

The function of this scene is to show Macbeth's initial popularity

Act 1, Scene 1 is basically a testament to the privileged position that Macbeth has at the beginning of the play. He is a well-respected general and thane of Glamis, and in this scene Duncan also decides to make him thane of Cawdor. Everyone seems to admire him, and Duncan trusts him completely.

Later on, however, all of this changes. When Macbeth seizes the throne and becomes a brutal ruler, people's positive remarks about him are replaced by negative ones such as "coward" (1.8.27), "tyrant" (5.8.31), and "butcher" (5.8.41). He is also considered a traitor. The enormous difference between the remarks from scene 2 and the later remarks underlines Macbeth's downfall.

Scenes in detail: Act 1, Scene 3: the first prophecy

The scene introduces us to Macbeth

In Act 1, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, we meet the three witches again. Their presence as well as that of thunder is **a clear indication of danger**.

In the first part of the scene, the witches update each other on what they have been doing. In the second part of the scene, Macbeth and his fellow general Banquo arrive and each receive a prophecy from the witches. Macbeth will gain two new titles: thane of Cawdor and king. Banquo will be the father of future kings but not become king himself. The scene ends with Macbeth learning that he has now been named thane of Cawdor, which seems to indicate that his prophecy is in the process of coming true.

This scene is the first time we actually meet Macbeth. We have heard *of* him in Scenes 1 and 2, and Scene 2 was full of praise for Macbeth's bravery and loyalty. However, **we now get to see a darker and more ambitious side of him**. After the prophecy, he launches into a number of asides, revealing his thoughts and feelings to us. The first one is: "Glamis, and thane of Cawdor! / The greatest is behind." (1.3.123-124). These lines tell us that Macbeth is superstitious as he immediately believes the witches (unlike Banquo), and that he is excited at the idea of becoming king.

We do not only see Macbeth's ambition, though. This scene also shows that **Macbeth does have a sense of morality** which tells him that killing a king - regicide - is wrong. He describes this act as "that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature" (1.3.144-147). This indicates that he is aware of the potential consequences if he decides to act on the predictions.

Macbeth and Banquo react differently to the prophecies

When studying Macbeth's character, a comparison with Banquo reveals interesting differences between the two men. They are both soldiers and warriors, but they react differently to the witches' prophecies. Macbeth is literally spellbound when hearing his prophecy and his body even jumps, making Banquo ask: "why do you start; and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (1.3.53-54).

In contrast, **Banquo acts in a way that might be expected of a soldier**: He is practical, down-to-earth, and not superstitious. It is Banquo who asks the witches skeptical questions such as: "Are ye fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show? [...] Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear / Your favors nor your hate." (1.3.55-63). Banquo questions whether the witches are real at all, and he tells them that he is not afraid of them.
Banquo also wisely warns Macbeth that the witches may be tricking them:

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. (1.3.132-135)

Banquo's warning foreshadows what will happen to Macbeth: Because Macbeth is made thane of Cawdor ("an honest trifle"), he decides to believe that he is destined for the crown ("deepest consequence"). He kills Duncan himself, which eventually leads to his downfall.

The witches seem to prepare a spell to trick Macbeth

Act 1, Scene 3 gives a deeper insight into the witches. Before Macbeth and Banquo arrive, we see them telling each other what they have been up to. One of them has been "killing swine" (1.3.2), which was considered a very witch-like activity at the time.
Another witch is plotting revenge on a sailor because his wife would not give her some of her delicious chestnuts. The witch now plans to curse the husband so that he becomes unable to sleep: "sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid; / He shall live a man forbid." (1.3.20-22). **This curse foreshadows what will happen to Macbeth:** Once he has murdered Duncan, he is unable to sleep properly anymore.

Finally, the three witches prepare a spell, concluding with the words: "the charm's wound up." (1.3.38). This indicates that they are using evil magic to ensnare Macbeth who enters right after. This gives the impression that Macbeth was not just tempted by the prophecy itself; he was also enchanted by their evil magic. You could argue that this takes away some of the responsibility for Macbeth's cruel actions.

The characters' language reveals their position in the Chain of Being

For instance, Macbeth and Banquo speak in **iambic pentameter**. This reflects their high social status as noblemen. One example is this: "The earth has bubbles, as the water has." (1.3.81). This line consists of five iambs, with the stressed syllables underlined for clarity.
The witches are not noblemen at the top of society. Instead, they are unnatural, dangerous creatures who occupy a position outside of society. This is seen by their unpredictable language. They generally speak using a mixture of **prose and rhymed tetrameter**. An example of trochaic tetrameter is this:

I will drain him dry as hay:
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid.
He shall live a man forbid. (1.3.19-22)

Each line starts with a stressed syllable, making the words appear powerful. The almost aggressive rhythm of the meter goes well with the frightening spell which the witch plans to cast upon the unsuspecting sailor. As seen by this quote, the witches also frequently include **alliteration** and **rhyme**.

The main function of this scene is to reveal the first prophecy

This scene is dramatically important because it reveals the prophecy that becomes a catalyst for Macbeth's ambition and future actions in the play. Without this prophecy, there would be no plot.

Other functions of the scene include **the introduction of Macbeth** and the deepening of our understanding of the witches. We get to see the evil that lurks in both the witches and Macbeth.

Scenes in detail: Act 1, Scene 4: Malcom the heir

Duncan is a naive ruler

In Act 1, Scene 4 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, King Duncan comes across as a naive ruler. The former thane of Cawdor has just been executed for treason after joining a rebellion against the King. Duncan remarks about Cawdor:

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust. (1.4.13-16)

Duncan trusted Cawdor completely and never suspected anything. Therefore, he concludes that there is no way of knowing if someone is really trying to deceive you. **His words foreshadow how Macbeth will soon betray him**, just like the former thane of Cawdor did. The element of foreshadowing is underlined by the fact that Macbeth enters the stage right after Duncan's remark.

King Duncan's naivety is also shown through dramatic irony. Unlike Duncan, we know that Macbeth is already plotting to kill him. When he arrives, Duncan greets him warmly and apologizes for not having rewarded him for his role in fighting the rebellion yet. To us, Macbeth's humble reply sounds like a lie: "The service and the loyalty I owe, / In doing it, pays itself." (1.4.25-26). We know that Macbeth's greed for more power has been awakened.

Once Macbeth learns that the King plans to spend the night at his castle, he immediately takes his leave. Again, the dramatic irony becomes clear. *We* realize that he wants to get home and plan the murder before Duncan arrives. Duncan, however, interprets Macbeth's urgency as a

sign that he wants to be a good host and get everything ready. Thus, Duncan naively remarks about Macbeth that he is “a peerless kinsman” (1.4.65).

Duncan makes Malcolm his heir

In Act 1, Scene 4, a crucial event happens: King Duncan names his eldest son his royal heir: “We will establish our estate upon / Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter / The Prince of Cumberland.” (1.4.43-45). In medieval Scotland, the eldest son would not automatically become king after his father. By securing a royal line, Duncan is probably trying to stabilize his kingdom which has recently been under attack.

The news makes Macbeth conclude that this provides a problem for his own desire to become king. **Macbeth’s aside shows that he immediately starts scheming**: “The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap, / For in my way it lies.” (1.4.55-57). The aside also shows that Macbeth does not trust fate to deliver what was promised to him in the witches’ prophecy. He seems to think that he must kill Duncan and Malcolm himself for the prophecy to come true.

It is also worth mentioning that Macbeth does have some claim to the Scottish throne. He is related to King Duncan and he is a well-respected, powerful nobleman. Thus, his secret dreams of the throne are not entirely far-fetched.

The language contains imagery and iambic pentameter

The scene contains several types of imagery that underline the fight for the throne which goes on below the surface. Addressing Macbeth and Banquo, **Duncan uses a metaphor of planting**: “I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing.” (1.4.32-33). What he probably means is that he is doing what he can to further the careers of Macbeth and Banquo, thereby hoping to make them even more loyal to him.

Duncan’s metaphor also creates an image of the king as a kind of god who watches over every living thing in his care. This goes well with the fact that the Elizabethans believed that a king was God’s representative on Earth.

In his aside, **Macbeth uses personification about his murder plans**:

Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4.57-60)

Here, Macbeth is personifying the stars and light as he addresses them directly and portrays them as something living with eyes. He does not want light to "see" what he is about to do, meaning that he does not want anyone to see. He also asks that "the eye wink at the hand", meaning that people's eyes must be shut to what he is about to do to the King in the moment he does it. He does not want to be exposed.

In terms of meter, the characters speak in **iambic pentamenter**, although the meter is fairly irregular in this scene. The best examples of iambic pentameter are Malcolm's solemn description of Macdonwald's death and Macbeth's aside. This type of meter is typically used by nobles, which is why it reflects the characters' high social status.

The function of this scene is to raise tension

In the previous scene, Macbeth was told by the three witches that he would become king. At that point, the only obstacle to that was King Duncan. Macbeth appeared to trust fate to make him king, without him having to do anything: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir." (1.3.154-155).

Now, however, Macbeth learns that Malcolm will succeed Duncan, meaning that **there are effectively two kings that need to be removed**. This creates tension in the play because it is at odds with the prophecy. Macbeth could have taken this as a sign that he was not meant to become king. He could also have questioned the validity of the prophecy. Instead, he decides to act upon it himself. This resolve creates even more tension as we can see where this is going.

Scenes in detail: Act 1, Scene 5: Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth's soliloquies help characterize the Macbeths

In Act 1, Scene 5 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, we meet Lady Macbeth for the first time. She is reading a letter from her husband, which informs her of the witches' prophecy. She then launches into two breathtaking soliloquies, one mainly about her husband's nature (1.5.15-30) and one mainly about her own (1.5.42-58). The scene ends with the arrival of Macbeth.

The first soliloquy outlines Macbeth's nature

In her soliloquy on Macbeth's nature (1.5.15-30), Lady Macbeth demonstrates that she knows her husband well. Speaking as if her husband were there, she says: "yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness." (1.5.16-17). **Macbeth's nature is full of compassion and humanity**, but to Lady Macbeth this quality is a weakness. Later in the play, she indirectly refers back to this as she continually accuses her husband of being cowardly.

In her soliloquy, she recognizes that Macbeth is ambitious and desires to be powerful: "thou wouldst be great; / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it." (1.5.18-20). The problem is that **Macbeth does not possess the necessary negative qualities to make his ambitions reality**, such as brutality and cynicism. Later in the play, however, Macbeth becomes a tyrant who is both brutal and cynical.

The final lines of this soliloquy reveal vital information about Lady Macbeth's own character:

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;
And chastise with the valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crown'd withal. (1.5.25-30)

Just like Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 3, she immediately believes in the prophecy. This shows that **she, too, is superstitious**. She refers to the witches in positive terms as "metaphysical aid", which shows that she does not fear them or suspect them of tricking Macbeth. She also seems to believe that fate is involved.

The soliloquy shows that Lady Macbeth is aware of her influence over her husband. She cannot wait for him to return so she can talk him into forgetting his fear and seizing the crown ("the golden round"). As Macbeth's letter puts it, she is his "dearest partner of greatness" (1.5.11).

The second soliloquy outlines Lady Macbeth's nature

Lady Macbeth's second soliloquy is even more unnerving than her first. In her famous "unsex me" soliloquy (1.5.42-58), her own character becomes clear. **She addresses evil spirits and the night, ordering them to remove her feminine characteristics:**

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 [...]
Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall. (1.5.45-52)

Just as she considers her husband weak, Lady Macbeth does not want any "weak" (i.e. feminine) traits herself, such as kindness and remorse. She seems to believe that these traits would prevent the Macbeths from seizing the throne. Grammatically **she uses the imperative** such as "come!". The fact that she is bossing about evil forces underlines her dominant nature.

Today, Lady Macbeth might seem like a confident gender bender and go-getter. However, this is not the way most Elizabethans would have seen it. The Elizabethans believed in traditional gender roles as well as the dangers of the supernatural, so seeing a noblewoman like Lady Macbeth act this way would have seemed extremely unnatural and frightening. According to the Elizabethan world view, Lady Macbeth is not supposed to be stronger than her husband or to dominate him, just as she is not supposed to address evil forces and have her femininity removed.

Basically, **Lady Macbeth goes against her place in the Chain of Being**, which means that she goes against God's will. Also, Lady Macbeth's behavior associates her with the witches, because she is addressing evil spirits and making herself unnatural like them. Her request for evil spirits to "de-nature" her underlines the sense of chaos, which has been building right from the first scene of the play.

You might want to check out Lady Macbeth's "unsex me" soliloquy on YouTube. There are many adaptations available. Seeing it performed will allow you to notice the tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language, which may show you just how dramatic this soliloquy is.

The language is marked by different pronouns, meter, and prose

As mentioned in our Language section, **the characters' use of pronouns reflects their relationship and social status.** While "thou" signals intimacy, "you" is more formal and signals respect. In his letter, Macbeth addresses his wife with "thou" (including "thee" and "thy"). Lady Macbeth replies with the same level of intimacy in her first soliloquy which she addresses at Macbeth using "thou".

As Lady Macbeth goes on to address the mighty spirits in her second soliloquy, she switches to the more formal "you". When Macbeth arrives, she now addresses him with "you". The change in pronoun towards her husband may be to show her respect or it may simply be because nobles typically address each other like this, even when they are close.

In terms of meter in this scene, the Macbeths speak in **iambic pentameter**. This is how nobles usually speak so it reflects their high social status. In contrast, the letter which Lady Macbeth is reading out is **prose**, which is typical of letters in Shakespeare.

The main function of this scene is to introduce Lady Macbeth

The primary function of this scene is to introduce Lady Macbeth, so that we recognize the influence she will have on Macbeth's decision to kill Duncan. She presents herself as a strong, determined woman who is ambitious on her husband's behalf.

The scene also **deepens our understanding of Macbeth** and highlights the differences between the spouses. This is a parallel to Act 1, Scene 3 which showed us the differences between Macbeth and Banquo.

Finally, the scene **adds to the sense of chaos and unnaturalness** which has been building right from the very first scene of the play.

Scenes in detail: Act 1, Scene 7: The decision

In his soliloquy, Macbeth gets cold feet about killing Duncan

Act 1, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is set at night in the Macbeths' castle where King Duncan is currently staying. In the first part of the scene, Macbeth delivers a soliloquy in which he weighs the pros and cons of going through with the murder of Duncan.

In reality, Macbeth is mainly listing the arguments *against* the murder. First, he is aware that if he becomes king through the murder of the current king, **he risks teaching others that they could kill him in turn**. Thus, his evil plan might "return / To plague the inventor" (1.7.9-10). Second, Macbeth has moral scruples because **Duncan is both his king, his relative, and his guest** (1.7.12-16). By killing Duncan in his sleep, Macbeth would be breaking the trust between them and neglecting his duty as a loyal subject, relative, and host. Particularly Duncan's position as king makes the crime virtually impossible: Killing a king - regicide - was considered the worst possible sin.

Third, **Duncan has been a good king** who is loved by everyone, which makes it even harder to kill him: "Duncan / Hath borne his faculties so meek […] that his virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off." (1.7.16-20). Macbeth also concedes that "He hath honour'd me of late" (1.7.34), referring to the title of thane of Cawdor which Duncan has recently rewarded him with.

In the end, Macbeth gets cold feet. Murdering his king just does not feel right. As Lady Macbeth enters, he tells her that "We will proceed no further in this business" (1.7.33).

Lady Macbeth convinces her husband to commit the murder

Lady Macbeth enters the stage in the second part of the scene. Once she realizes that her husband no longer wants to go through with their plan, she feels let down. She immediately accuses him of being a coward:

Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour

As thou art in desire? [...]
And live a coward in thine own esteem." (1.7.42-44 + 1.7.46)

Lady Macbeth seems to know her husband's weak points. He is essentially a warrior, so being accused of cowardice is bound to provoke him. **She also challenges his masculinity**: "When you durst do it, then you were a man." (1.7.54). This is something she does several times in the play. She simply will not allow her husband to display what she sees as weakness.

In this scene, Lady Macbeth comes across as very determined and strong-willed. She also reveals to us that **she has been a mother at some point**:

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 his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (1.7.59-64)

These words are truly horrible, as Lady Macbeth declares that she would rather kill her own baby than go back on a sworn oath. In the Elizabethan era, women were supposed to be gentle, feminine, and nurturing. Here, Lady Macbeth comes across as anything but. Her angry words portray her as cynical and - some would say - masculine.

We never learn what happened to the baby she is referring to, so it might have died in its infancy. The fact that the Macbeths' marriage is a fruitless one underlines how there is no future in their union. This is confirmed when they both die in the end. Just as the witches' prophecy foretold, Macbeth will never father a line of kings.

After scolding her husband, Lady Macbeth takes charge and **shows herself as a cunning schemer**. She plans to drug Duncan's guards: "His two chamberlains / Will I with wine and wassail so convince" (1.7.70-71). She also suggests that they "make our griefs and clamour roar" (1.7.87) after the murder, meaning that she and Macbeth should appear upset to avoid suspicion.

Macbeth is easily swayed by his wife

It seems that Macbeth is convinced into sticking with the plan by a combination of Lady Macbeth's confidence and her jabs about him not being a man. After her glowing speech about being willing to kill her own baby, Macbeth appears to be impressed:

Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males. (1.7.80-82)

He is saying that Lady Macbeth's spirit ("mettle") is so strong and bold that she should only give birth to sons. The underlying assumption here is that men are strong while women are weak. This was a common notion at the time. In any case, Lady Macbeth seems to transcend the boundaries of her gender. She is as strong as any man.

In the end, Macbeth allows himself to be persuaded to go through with the murder, making him conclude: "I am settled [...] False face must hide what the false heart doth know." (1.7.89 + 1.7.92). This shows Lady Macbeth's influence over her husband. In fact, this is already indicated as she first enters the stage. Macbeth says: "I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent" (1.7.25-26). Right after, Lady Macbeth enters, buzzing with brisk energy. Shakespeare seems to imply that **Lady Macbeth is her husband's "spur"**, driving him on to greatness as well as his doom.

The language reflects their relationship

The **pronouns** which Shakespeare characters use with one another can tell us something about their relationship. In this scene, Lady Macbeth mainly addresses her husband with "you", which is common among nobles and signals respect. However, she switches to "thou" as she rebukes Macbeth for backing out. Notice how she starts out with "you" but ends with "thou":

Was the hope drunk
Wherein <u>you</u> dress'd <u>yourself</u>? [...]
From this time
Such I account <u>thy</u> love. Art <u>thou</u> afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? (1.7.38-39 + 1.7.41-44)

Typically, "thou" can express intimacy (for instance between spouses), or it can signal a lack of respect. Both interpretations are possible here. Lady Macbeth may be making the change because she wants to appeal to the intimacy she and her husband share, while also voicing her disappointment in him.

There is another element in Lady Macbeth's language that shows how she feels about her husband. Despite Lady Macbeth being the one to call the shots, many of her lines are phrased as **rhetorical questions**. This is seen in the first lines of the quote above, as well as in the following example: "What beast was't then, / That made you break this enterprise to me?" (1.7.52-53). Macbeth is not really supposed to reply. The point is that she is mocking him to make him change his mind.

Other aspects of the language can be analyzed as well. The Macbeths mainly speak in **iambic pentameter**, which underlines their high social status. Also, Macbeth's soliloquy has quite a lot of **imagery**. In some of the lines, metaphors, similes, and personifications intertwine. One example is this:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other. (1.7.25-28)

The spur is a metaphor, while ambition is personified as a rider who vaults into his saddle only to fall down on the other side of the horse. Particularly the image of the overeager rider indicates that Macbeth's ambition will lead to his doom.

The function of this scene is to show the decision being made

Act 1, Scene 7 shows how difficult a choice it is for Macbeth to decide on killing King Duncan. There are numerous reasons why he should not do it - particularly in relation to morality. Macbeth realizes that if he goes through with this, he will never be the same.

Through his **soliloquy**, we get to follow Macbeth's thought process. He carefully lists the reasons why he should not kill Duncan and arrives at the logical conclusion that they must drop the plan. However, through his **dialogue** with Lady Macbeth we see him being persuaded back into sticking with the murder plot. In that way, the scene offers a detailed insight into what goes through someone's mind when deciding to kill someone.

Scenes in detail: Act 2, Scene 1: The floating dagger

Macbeth lies, while Banquo insists on remaining loyal to Duncan

Act 2, Scene 1 is set in Macbeth's castle where King Duncan is spending the night. Banquo is there, too, with his son, Fleance. He seems nervous, which is indicated by the fact that he gives Fleance his sword as well as his dagger for protection (2.1.5-6). We also hear that the night is very dark.

When entering, **Macbeth presents himself as a "friend"** (2.1.13) to Banquo and Fleance. This is the first of two lies that Macbeth gives in this scene. We can tell it is a lie since we know that he is already planning to kill Duncan and is probably ready to get rid of Banquo, too, if he will not support Macbeth. This is hinted when he asks Banquo to be loyal to him: "If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, / It shall make honour for you." (2.1.31-32).
The witches' prophecy stated that Banquo would father a line of kings, which makes him a rival to Macbeth's own future heirs. This probably explains why Macbeth wants to keep him close.

However, Banquo's friendly but firm reply shows that he insists on remaining loyal to King Duncan above anything:

So I lose none
In seeking to augment it, but still keep
My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear,
I shall be counsell'd. (2.1.33-36)

What Banquo is saying is that he will happily support Macbeth *if* that does not conflict with his loyalty towards the King. By saying so, he effectively signs his own death warrant; Macbeth later has him killed.

Macbeth's second lie is about his preoccupation with the prophecy. When Banquo mentions the three witches, Macbeth replies: "I think not of them." (2.1.26). This is obviously untrue, since the previous scenes have shown his fascination with the prophecy.
At this point, Banquo has not seen through Macbeth's lies yet. As the two men part that night, they are still good friends, at least on the surface.

In his soliloquy, Macbeth sees a floating dagger

Once Banquo and Fleance leave the stage, Macbeth suddenly thinks he sees a dagger floating in the air. This makes him launch into a soliloquy. **Macbeth feels like the dagger is pointing him towards Duncan's bedchamber**, particularly since he was planning to use daggers when killing the King that night: "Thou marshal'st me the way that I was going; / And such an instrument I was to use." (2.1.50-51).

After a while, Macbeth notices blood appearing on the dagger:
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. [...]
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. (2.1.54-57).

Up until now, Macbeth has been doubtful as to whether he should really kill the King. He interprets the floating, bloody dagger as a sign that he should. The "bloody business" he refers to is his intention to murder King Duncan.

It is unclear whether the dagger is really there or merely a figment of Macbeth's imagination. If we interpret the play's supernatural elements as real - such as the dagger, the witches, and Banquo's ghost - it possibly takes some of the blame away from Macbeth, simply because he is tricked or spurred on by evil forces outside of his control. In our Themes section, we discuss the question of responsibility.

Towards the end of the scene, a bell is heard. It is probably Lady Macbeth ringing the bell to let her husband know that his night drink is ready, as requested earlier (2.1.39-40). However, Macbeth seems to interpret the bell as a symbolic death bell and another sign that he should go through with the murder:

I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell. (2.1.70-72)

To Macbeth, the bell rings for Duncan, signaling his death.

The language contains imagery and iambic pentameter

In this scene, **the dagger and the bell function as symbols of the murder** of King Duncan, which Macbeth is about to commit. This is also the way Macbeth interprets these elements himself. The symbols underline the tension which has been steadily building, as we expect the murder to be carried out any time soon now.

Macbeth's soliloquy contains beautiful **imagery**, particularly **personification**. For instance, Macbeth personifies his murder plans: "It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes." (2.1.56-57). His "bloody" murder plans almost speak to him, making him see the floating dagger which points him towards the King.

Also, Macbeth addresses the dagger and the earth directly, effectively personifying them: "Thou sure and firm-set earth, / Hear not my steps, which way they walk." (2.1.64-65). He does not want to be discovered by anyone while committing the murder and asks the earth to turn a deaf ear.

In terms of meter, the characters speak in **iambic pentameter** in this scene. This is the way nobles normally speak, which is why the meter can be said to reflect the characters' high social status. One example of the five-beat rhythm of iambic pentameter is this: "I **have** thee **not**, and **yet** I **see** thee **still**." (2.1.43).

The function of this scene is to create tension

Scene 1 of Act 2 is the last scene before the murder of King Duncan. Thus, the main function of this scene is to raise the tension as much as possible before Macbeth's point of no return (the murder). In the previous scenes, Macbeth has been agonizing about whether to commit the murder or not, but in this scene his resolve becomes final. His determination is particularly boosted by the fact that he sees a bloody dagger before him. As Macbeth leaves the scene with the ominous words "it is done" (2.1.70), we fear for Duncan's life.

It is worth noting that **we never see Macbeth's murder of Duncan**. It takes place sometime between Scenes 1 and 2 of Act 2. By shielding us from the murder, Shakespeare makes it easier for us to retain some sympathy for Macbeth, despite him becoming a killer. This sympathy is important since Macbeth is the main character and tragic hero of the play.

Scenes in detail: Act 2, Scene 2: The murder of Duncan

Macbeth and his wife react differently to the murder

Act 2, Scene 2 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* presents the murder of King Duncan - the play's key event that propels Macbeth on to greatness as well as doom. In this scene, the Macbeths meet inside their castle at night, immediately after Macbeth has stabbed the sleeping Duncan to death.

At this point, the spouses react very differently to having killed the King. **Macbeth is horrified at what he has done**. He seems lost in thought as he talks about hearing someone saying a prayer when he had just killed the King. Macbeth was unable to reply "amen", as you should: "I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' / Stuck in my throat." (2.2.42-43). His inability to obtain blessing refers to the sin of regicide, which he has just committed. The Elizabethans believed that a king was God's representative on Earth, which meant that regicide would send you directly to Hell.

Macbeth also thinks he heard a voice crying: " 'Sleep no more!/ Macbeth does murder sleep'." (2.2.46-47). This foreshadows the insomnia that will plague him after the murder.
Macbeth's hands are stained with Duncan's blood, and he thinks his bloody hands as yet another symbol of the sin that he can never wash off: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No." (2.2.75-76). Macbeth believes that morally he will never recover from killing his king and relative.

Lady Macbeth has an entirely different reaction. Her part in the murder has been to lay out the daggers and drug Duncan's servants, making them unable to defend him and framing them as his killers. However, **Lady Macbeth does not share in her husband's guilt** at this point. Instead, she mocks him for his weakness: "My hands are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white. [...] As little water clears us of this deed." (2.2.79-83). Her hands are equally stained because she had to carry the daggers back to Duncan's bedchamber and smear the servants with his blood.

Lady Macbeth is the one who keeps her cool in this stressful scene and constantly advises her distraught husband. She tells Macbeth that "these deeds must not be thought / After these days; so, it will make us mad." (2.2.44-45). Unlike her husband, she is aware of the danger of dwelling on your sins. However, her advice to her husband foreshadows how her own guilty conscience will later catch up with her. In Act 5, she starts sleepwalking and eventually kills herself.

Although Lady Macbeth may appear cold and cunning in this scene, she does reveal a more human side when she admits that she felt unable to kill Duncan herself: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had don't." (2.2.15-16). Despite having asked evil spirits to remove her feminine characteristics, she still seems to have some compassion left in her.

It is an important dramatic point that **Shakespeare has Macbeth kill Duncan off-stage**. Because we never see him commit the murder, it becomes easier for us to retain some sympathy. This is necessary in a tragedy. If we do not feel for the tragic hero, we will not pity him once he falls. Also, the guilt which Macbeth displays helps redeem him. He is not proud of what he has done, which makes him more likable.

Their language helps characterize them

The way a character speaks often holds vital information about that character. Grammatically, **Lady Macbeth sometimes uses the imperative**. Already in Act 1, Scene 5 we saw her commanding evil spirits to obey her will, and now we see her instructing her husband with the same confidence: "Give me the daggers" (2.2.67) and "get on your night-gown"

(2.2.87). Her direct language underlines how she has taken charge and shows that she is the type of person to keep a cool head.

As a contrast, some of Macbeth's lines are much more poetic and reflective in nature. For instance, he has some beautiful **metaphors** on sleep (2.2.47-51) and guilt (2.2.74-78). Among other things, sleep is described as "sore labour's bath, / Balm of hurt minds" (2.2.49-50). The images underline how Macbeth is already longing for the sleep that he will no longer be able to get.

Concerning the meter in this scene, both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth speak in **iambic pentameter,** such as: "I am afraid to think what I have done." (2.2.64). We have underlined the five stressed syllables. The use of iambic pentameter reflects the couple's high social status since noblemen in Shakespeare typically speak this way.

The murder functions as Macbeth's point of no return

The dramatic function of this scene is to present the murder of King Duncan, so that Macbeth must spend the rest of the play dealing with the consequences of this crime. The murder of Duncan is Macbeth's point of no return; once he kills the King, there is no turning back.
This scene also **deepens our understanding of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth**. They may be partners in crime, but they have vastly different ways of dealing with the moral side of murder.

Scenes in detail: Act 3, Scene 4: The banquet

Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost

Act 3, Scene 4 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is referred to as "the banquet scene". Here, the consequences of Macbeth's murder of King Duncan start to show. Macbeth and his wife throw a banquet - a feast - to celebrate his coronation. A murderer that Macbeth has secretly hired informs him that Banquo is dead but his son has escaped. This is bad news since the prophecy said that Banquo's sons would become kings. Macbeth then thinks he sees Banquo's ghost in his seat and has a humiliating breakdown in front of his guests.

We may **interpret the appearance of Banquo's ghost in two ways:** Either it is really there, or it is merely a figment of Macbeth's imagination. If the ghost is real - as most Elizabethans would perhaps think - it is a sign that God is punishing him for his killings. If the ghost is

imaginary - as most modern readers would think - it is a sign that Macbeth is falling apart psychologically because he is riddled with guilt and fear.

Macbeth is so agitated that he comes close to revealing to his thanes that *he* is the one behind the murders of Duncan and Banquo. He almost screams at the ghost: "Thou canst not say I did it: never shake / Thy gory locks at me." (3.4.60-61). Apparently the ghost has bloody hair ("gory locks"), which fits the description of Banquo's violent death: "safe in a ditch he bides, / With twenty trenched gashes on his head." (3.4.29-30). This is a clear sign that Macbeth's sense of guilt is becoming too much for him.

In any case, the evening ends in humiliation for the Macbeths, despite Lady Macbeth's desperate attempts to cover for him. The thanes leave, probably thinking that their new ruler is unfit to rule, and perhaps also responsible for Duncan's death.

The Macbeths begin to drift apart

Lady Macbeth does not see the ghost. She does her best to save face for both of them, partly by making excuses to their guests and referring to Macbeth's behavior as nothing but a "fit" (3.4.65), and partly by secretly trying to talk some sense into her husband. For instance, **she challenges his masculinity** by asking: "Are you a man?" (3.4.68) and "What, quite unmann'd in folly?" (3.4.85). This relates to one of the play's themes: masculinity vs. femininity.

The banquet scene can be read as a turning point in the relationship between Macbeth and his wife. Until now, they have been close and plotted the murder of Duncan together, and Lady Macbeth has been the driving force. However, Macbeth has not told his wife that he has had Banquo killed that same night. We don't know why he keeps this from her, but his lack of trust in her seems to mark a downward spiral for their relationship.

It is perhaps also worth noticing how, after the thanes have left, **Lady Macbeth grows strangely quiet**. This behavior does not match the energy and initiative she has displayed so far. Most of the lines in Act 3, Scene 4 after the guests have gone are spoken by Macbeth. This indicates that now he is the one taking the initiative. Lady Macbeth only makes small comments on trivial things such as the time of day: "Almost at odds with morning, which is which." (3.4.149).

There are many ways to interpret this, but Lady Macbeth's sudden passiveness may be a sign that she is shocked to see the effect of Duncan's murder on her normally strong husband. Perhaps even the resilient Lady Macbeth is starting to feel guilt. After this scene, she disappears from the play until Act 5, Scene 1 when we learn that she has started sleepwalking and is haunted by what she has done. At that point, she and her husband seem to have drifted apart.

Blood and unnatural bodies point to Macbeth's guilt

In the banquet scene, Macbeth makes two crucial remarks on blood. In both, **blood symbolizes his guilt**. After the feast, he remarks that "blood will have blood" (3.4.144), which means that he is realizing how one murder will lead to another. So far, the murder of Duncan has led to the murder of Banquo.

However, Macbeth also says: "For mine own good, / All causes shall give way: I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er." (3.4.159-161). He concludes that he has already come too far - there is no turning back now. He has already killed his king and his loyal friend, so he might as well continue killing to stay in power. This is when Macbeth leaves his sense of morality behind to become a cruel tyrant.

Furthermore, **this scene is full of bodies that are not behaving naturally**. This again points to Macbeth's guilt. One example is that the murderer who informs Macbeth of Banquo's death has Banquo's blood on his face (3.4.14-16). This is unnatural since blood ought to be inside the body.

Another example is Banquo's ghost which refuses to act like a normal dead body. As Macbeth says: "The times have been, / That, when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end; but now they rise again." (3.4.91-93).

A third example is Lady Macbeth's remark that her husband is unable to sleep: "You lack the season of all natures, sleep." (3.4.164). Not being able to sleep is a sign that something is wrong with your body or mind.

The language mainly consists of iambic pentameter

In Shakespeare's plays, a character's way of speaking reflects its social status. The majority of the characters in this particular scene are noblemen or royalty. This is the reason they mainly speak in iambic pentameter, meaning a five-beat rhythm.

Sometimes, **we see characters completing each other's verse** - especially if the characters are close. In the following example we have put the five stressed syllables in bold:

MACBETH

If I stand here, I saw him.

LADY MACBETH

Fie, for shame! (3.4.86-87)

Many of the lines in this scene are quite short because they are short remarks or exclamations. This means that the individual line does not necessarily contain five iambs, as is the norm with iambic pentameter. Shakespeare solves this by having characters complete each other's verse. This preserves the rhythm of the play.

The scene functions as the play's dramatic climax

This scene is the play's dramatic climax. Macbeth is at the peak of his power, but morally and psychologically he is in a bad place, and from now on things start going downhill. His thanes start distrusting him, and he is increasingly destroyed by what he has done. There is a sad paradox in the fact that power-wise Macbeth is at his highest, but morally he is at his lowest.

Scenes in detail: Act 4, Scene 1: The second prophecy

The witches seem to prepare another spell to trick Macbeth

In Act 4, Scene 1, Macbeth seeks out the three witches to get some answers to what troubles him about their original prophecy, which was delivered in Act 1, Scene 3. However, before Macbeth enters the stage, **we see the witches engaged in a very witch-like activity**: They chant and dance around a bubbling cauldron while throwing scary and disgusting ingredients into it, such as the "Finger of [a] birth-strangled babe" (4.1.30). The witches then conclude that "the charm is firm and good" (4.1.38). Afterwards, the unsuspecting Macbeth enters.

All of this indicates that the witches have prepared a spell to trick Macbeth, just like they did in Act 1, Scene 3. There is no doubt that Macbeth's own lust for power spurs him on, but we

could also interpret the witches' spell as a sign that he is being manipulated or enchanted. This would take away some of the responsibility for his cruel actions. Also note how **the presence of thunder underlines the danger associated with the witches**.

Also note that **the witches refer to Macbeth as evil**: "Something wicked this way comes." (4.1.45). Right after this remark, Macbeth enters. This underlines how Macbeth has become a cruel tyrant at this point. He is no longer the good and loyal soldier he was in the beginning; power has corrupted him.

Macbeth demands a second prophecy from the witches

When Macbeth arrives, he is troubled. Having seized the throne unlawfully is stressful, and he worries that something will go wrong. His desperation makes him quite bossy towards the witches: "answer me / To what I ask you." (4.161-62). The witches then summon their masters, meaning spirits or supernatural forces, to have them deliver another prophecy to Macbeth. In turn, three apparitions (or ghosts) appear, followed by a line of kings.

The first apparition is an armed head

The first apparition looks like an armed head, meaning a head wearing a battle helmet of sorts. The apparition warns Macbeth to "beware Macduff" (4.1.78). This warning **foreshadows** how Macbeth will eventually be killed by Macduff. Therefore, the armed head possibly symbolizes Macduff's rebellion against Macbeth - or Macbeth's own head which is eventually cut off by Macduff.

The second apparition is a bloody child

The second apparition looks like a bloody child and states that "none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.88-89). Macbeth interprets this as "no one", but this part of the prophecy **foreshadows** how Macduff will later reveal that he was born via C-section. Thereby, he was technically not born by a woman. The bloody child could then symbolize Macduff as a baby when he was ripped from his mother's womb.

Macbeth is relieved, but still decides to take matters into his own hands:
Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?

But yet I'll make assurance double sure,
And take a bond of fate: thou shalt not live. (4.1.90-92)

These lines tell us that **Macbeth does not trust fate to deliver**. Just as he decided to kill King Duncan himself to ensure that the first prophecy came true, he now decides to have Macduff killed to make sure the second prophecy will happen. According to classical tragedy, Macbeth's behavior is hubris, meaning the arrogant idea that you can control fate.

The third apparition is a child with a crown and a tree

The third apparition looks like a child with a crown on its head and holding a tree. It states:

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him. (4.1.102-104)

Macbeth interprets this as "never" since woods normally cannot move. However, this part of the prophecy **foreshadows** how Malcolm's soldiers will soon shield themselves behind branches cut from Birnam Wood as they are attacking Macbeth's castle. Once again, the ambiguity of the prophecies lead him into trouble. To conclude, the crowned child holding a tree symbolizes Malcolm. He is the rightful heir to the throne, and he and his men will later carry branches.

A show of eight kings and Banquo's ghost

As mentioned above, Macbeth seems to think he can control his own fate. This makes him quite bossy towards the witches and apparitions. He is desperate to know if Banquo's sons will ever reign in his kingdom and threatens the witches if they do not tell him: "I will be satisfied: deny me this, / And an eternal curse fall on you!" (4.1.116-117).

The witches then show him: A line of eight ghostly kings appear, the latter holding a mirror to indicate that Banquo's royal line will go on forever. Banquo's ghost follows the kings, indicating that he is the origin of this royal line.

Macbeth decides to act without hesitation from now on

Once the witches have vanished, Macbeth is informed that Macduff has fled to England. This means that Macduff has committed treason towards him, and it seems to confirm the first apparition's warning about Macduff. Up until now, Macbeth has been very hesitant. Deciding to kill King Duncan took him quite a while, while his wife was much more spontaneous and dynamic.

Now, however, Macbeth decides that in the future he will act upon his impulses immediately: "The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand." (4.1.164-165).
Right after, **Macbeth decides to have Macduff's family murdered** and "give to the edge o' the sword / His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line." (4.1.168-170). As revenge for Macduff's treason, he plans to destroy his entire line, despite the family being innocent. This is unnecessarily brutal and shows that Macbeth has become a cruel tyrant who will stop at nothing to stay in power.

The language is characterized by two kinds of meter

The characters speak in two different types of meter in this scene, depending on who they are. The witches speak in **trochaic tetrameter**. This forceful, four-beat rhythm begins with a stressed syllable and does not match the natural ring of English. Tetrameter is normally only spoken by supernatural creatures in Shakespeare's plays. Thereby, the witches' language underlines their position as unnatural creatures existing outside of the natural order.

Frequently, tetrameter is combined with rhyme in the type called **rhymed couplets**. An example of the witches' way of speaking is this:

Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the cauldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog. (4.1.12-15)

There is a strong sense of rhythm in these lines due to the use of tetrameter and rhyme. Combined with the witches dancing around a cauldron, it makes them seem very strange, scary, and witch-like.

In contrast, Macbeth speaks in **iambic pentameter**. This five-beat rhythm is closer to standard English and is usually spoken by nobles and royalty in Shakespeare's plays. Thus, the iambic pentameter reflects Macbeth's high social position. An example is: "Infected be the air whereon they ride." (4.1.154).

Another element is Macbeth's use of **anaphora and repetition** when first addressing the witches. He starts six sentences in a row with the word "though", an extract reading:

Howe'er you come to know it, answer me:
Though you untie the winds and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up; [...]
Eve till destruction sicken; answer me. (4.1.52-55 + 4.1.61)

As you can see, Macbeth also repeats the phrase "answer me", once in the beginning and once in the end. This command to the witches thereby functions as a frame.

The function of this scene is to reveal the second prophecy

Just as the first prophecy became a catalyst for Macbeth's ambition and future actions, the second one does as well. Because of this prophecy, Macbeth decides to punish Macduff by killing his family. Ironically, this makes Macduff swear revenge, turning him into a bigger threat than before. **It appears to be Macbeth's own actions that fulfill the prophecy**.
This second prophecy is just as ambiguous as the first one. It paradoxically makes Macbeth overconfident while also making him more paranoid. He becomes overconfident when he concludes that he cannot be killed until woods move, and his paranoia increases as he learns that Banquo's line of heirs will really seize power one day. All of this helps drive the action of the play forward.

Scenes in detail: Act 5, Scene 1: Lady Macbeth sleepwalks

Lady Macbeth is plagued by feelings of guilt

Act 5, Scene 1 is set at night in the Macbeths' castle. A doctor and a gentlewoman (a lady-in-waiting to the Queen) observe Lady Macbeth sleepwalking.

In this scene, we meet **a very different Lady Macbeth compared to the determined and remorseless woman we saw earlier in the play**. Now she appears restless and distressed. It is clear that Lady Macbeth is haunted by the many murders she and her husband have orchestrated. This is shown in several ways.

First, the gentlewoman says that Lady Macbeth has been sleepwalking for a while: "Since his majesty went into the field, I have seen her rise from her bed." (5.1.3-4). Lady Macbeth's inability to remain in her bed shows that she is deeply troubled. The fact that her husband is not with her underlines how they have drifted apart, each haunted by their own conscience.
Second, the gentlewoman reveals that Lady Macbeth "has light by her continually; 'tis her command" (5.1.20-21). It appears that the Queen has grown afraid of the dark, probably because it reminds her of how she and Macbeth killed King Duncan while he slept.

Third, the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth is constantly trying to wash her hands clean: "Out, damned spot! out, I say!" (5.1.31). She keeps seeing stains of Duncan's blood on her hands and complains that "Here's the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!" (5.1.45-47). Her paranoia and obsessive behavior indicate that she is going through a mental breakdown.

Her guilt makes her reveal the murders to the doctor and the gentlewoman

Lady Macbeth talks to herself while sleepwalking, and this is how she ends up revealing to the doctor and the gentlewoman that the Macbeths are behind the murders of Duncan, Banquo, and the Macduffs. The gentlewoman has already heard her say this while sleepwalking before, whereas the revelations are new to the horrified doctor.
The gentlewoman remarks: "I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body." (5.1.49-50). What she is saying is that being Queen (and thereby having a "dignified" body) is worth nothing if it means carrying around such horrible deeds in your heart.

Her sleepwalking reflects the unnatural state of the world

Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking is not just a sign of her own mental breakdown. On a much larger scale, it is also a reflection of the unnatural and chaotic state of the world which is the result of Macbeth's regicide. We could say that Scotland as a whole is also having a breakdown.

The Elizabethans believed that everything in the universe was connected and had its place in a fixed hierarchy called the Chain of Being. Murdering a king would automatically throw everyone into chaos, and this might even be reflected in the very bodies of people and animals. ***Macbeth* is full of unnatural bodies - bodies which are no longer behaving naturally**. As an example, Macbeth is unable to sleep all together, while Lady Macbeth sleepwalks.

The doctor refers to Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking as "A great perturbation in nature" (5.1.8), meaning a disturbance in the natural order of things. He also links the Macbeths' murderous deeds to Lady Macbeth's mental state when saying that "unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1.65-66). His comments thereby seem to support the idea that seizing power unlawfully will upset not only the individual body but the universe itself.

The language is characterized by prose

Act 5, Scene 1 is unique in the sense that all the characters mainly speak in prose rather than verse. In Shakespeare, prose can reflect a person's social status as a non-noble, but it can also reflect that the person is upset psychologically or maybe even mad.

Lady Macbeth is particularly interesting in terms of language. As a person of nobility, she normally speaks in beautiful iambic pentameter, but in this scene she only speaks in prose. (This is seen by the fact that each of her lines does not begin with a capital letter as is otherwise the norm in iambic pentameter). Her speech appears rambling, which is seen by this example:

Out, damned spot! out, I say! – One: two: why,
then, 'tis time to do't. – Hell is murky! – Fie, my
lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? (5.1.31-33)

In these lines, Lady Macbeth first addresses the stains of blood she imagines on her hands and then her absent husband. She also speaks of "doing it" (the murder of Duncan) and of Hell, as if she fears ending up there. Her speech is incoherent and chaotic. Her sudden use of prose **reflects Lady Macbeth's descent into madness**. We might say that her mental breakdown is mirrored by a breakdown in her language.

The doctor and the gentlewoman also mainly speak in prose. This is probably meant to show that their social status is lower than Lady Macbeth's, just as it may reflect how shocked they are to learn of Lady Macbeth's dark secrets.

This scene also contains two major **symbols**. The blood on Lady Macbeth's hands is an obvious symbol of her guilt, while her sleepwalking is a symbol of the unnatural state of the world after King Duncan's death.

The function of this scene is to show the change in Lady Macbeth

It is interesting to contrast the weakened Lady Macbeth in this scene with the headstrong, confident woman we meet in the beginning of the play. In Act 1, Scenes 5 and 7, we see her summoning evil spirits and persuading her husband to kill King Duncan. After the murder, in Act 2, Scene 2, she takes charge completely when Macbeth is paralyzed by what he has done. Lady Macbeth's final show of strength is in Act 3, Scene 4 when she tries to save her husband's face as he sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet. After this, she seems to disappear from the play until Act 5, Scene 1. The change in her is immense: She now appears guilt-ridden, afraid, and lonely. She does not seem to regret any of the murders as she concludes that "What's done cannot be undone". (5.1.61-62). However, it is clear from her mental state that **the cost has been extremely high**.

This scene is the last time we meet Lady Macbeth. We hear of her death in the end of the play, presumably by suicide. Dramatically, Act 5, Scene 1 serves as a shocking portrayal of what power and guilt can do to a human being.

Scenes in detail: Act 5, Scene 5: Lady Macbeth dies

Macbeth is informed that his wife has died

The setting of Act 5, Scene 5 in *Macbeth* is one of chaos. Outside Macbeth's castle, the army led by Malcolm is about to attack, and inside the castle, Macbeth receives the news that Lady Macbeth is dead.

Macbeth goes through a psychological change in this scene. He starts out eager to fight the disloyal thanes who abandoned him for Malcolm. He hopes to cheat fate by preventing the witches' second prophecy from coming true. That prophecy included three predictions: That

he should be wary of Macduff; that no man born of woman can kill Macbeth; and that it will not happen until Birnam Wood moves.

Suddenly, cries of women - probably Lady Macbeth's maids - are heard. Macbeth is then informed: "The queen, my lord, is dead." (5.5.18). Later on in the play, we learn that she took her own life. **Macbeth's reply to his wife's death is strange:** "She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word." (5.5.19-20). This is an ambiguous reply. One possible interpretation is that Macbeth coldly remarks that his wife chose a very inconvenient time to die because he is busy with the attacking army. This would underline how the couple has drifted apart in the second half of the play.

Another - slightly more positive - interpretation of Macbeth's remark could be that he is simply pointing out that Lady Macbeth would have died eventually. Their castle is under attack, and dying by your own hand is perhaps preferable to being taunted and executed by your enemies.
The news of Lady Macbeth's death seems to inspire **his ensuing soliloquy about the meaninglessness of life**. In the second part of this soliloquy, Macbeth says:

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. (5.5.25-30)

These words show how Macbeth has suddenly given in to sadness and disillusion. He compares a man's life to a candle, which only burns for a short time, and to an actor, who is forgotten as soon as he leaves the stage. Life is short and fragile and, even worse, means "nothing".
He never mentions his wife directly, but we might interpret his soliloquy as a sign that his wife's death was the final straw for him. Without his partner in crime, he is all alone.

Macbeth is informed that Birnam Wood is coming to his castle

After the news of Lady Macbeth's death, Macbeth receives the second round of bad news: unbelievably, Birnam Wood is moving towards his castle. (More specifically, Malcolm's

soldiers are shielding themselves behind branches cut from this wood). Macbeth is shocked by the news; for the first time, he seems to doubt the prophecies: “I pull in resolution, and begin / To doubt the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth.” (5.5.47-49). The fact that he refers to the witches as “the fiend”, which means “devil”, shows his growing realization that he has been tricked.

The thought of just being **fate’s plaything** is almost too much to bear. His will to live shrinks even further: “I gin to be aweary of the sun.” (5.5.54). However, he eventually summons some of his old defiance and decides to go out and at least die like a soldier: “Blow, wind” come, wrack! / At least we’ll die with harness on our back.” (5.5.56-57).

The language is characterized by imagery and iambic pentameter

The language in this scene is full of imagery. One example is Macbeth’s **metaphor** of having “supp’d full with horrors” (5.5.14). He thereby describes how he is barely able to hold in all the horrible things he has done and seen.

Another example is the use of **personification** in Macbeth’s soliloquy where life is personified as an actor (5.5.25-30). The soliloquy also includes **alliteration** such as “poor player” (5.5.26) and “a tale / Told” (5.5.28-29), which makes these lines stand out.

The meter in this scene is **iambic pentameter**, which reflects Macbeth’s high social status. In the last four lines of the scene, Macbeth also starts **rhyming**. This has the double function of drawing attention to what is being said and marking the official ending of a scene.

The function of the scene is to mark the beginning of the end

In this scene, Macbeth realizes that this is the beginning of the end for him. He loses his loyal wife, but perhaps **he realizes that he has lost himself** as well because the many killings have made him amoral and cynical. After having believed firmly in the good of the prophecies, he also starts to realize that the witches have tricked him. Now Birnam Wood is moving towards his castle - a sure sign that Macbeth is about to die.

Along with the tragic hero, we - the audience - realize that this will indeed end in tragedy. At the same time, this realization may also **initiate our sense of catharsis**. Witnessing Macbeth’s suffering evokes negative emotions in us, such as pity or fear, but it will eventually lead to an

emotional “cleansing”. This might be through our relief that this is not *our* life, or through the realization that Macbeth had to die.

Themes

Ambition

One of the major themes of *Macbeth* is ambition. In itself, having ambition is often a positive human quality, but Shakespeare’s play tells the story of a man whose lust for power ends up destroying him. Macbeth’s ambition is ignited by the witches’ prophecy in Act 1, Scene 3, but we get the impression that he has been thinking about becoming king before then. His many asides in this scene show how quickly he starts playing with the idea of being king.

The play shows **how political ambition can turn you into a monster**. Macbeth initially does not have the brutality and cynicism that must accompany great ambitions. His wife describes him as not being “without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it.” (1.5.19-20). We might call this softness or moral character. In any case, it makes Macbeth ill-suited to usurp the throne. However, as things spiral out of control, Macbeth puts his conscience aside and turns into a brutal tyrant. From then on, he puts our sympathy to the test.

Macbeth’s ambition also makes him paranoid and blind. Once his initial prophecy has come true, he expects Banquo to be equally ambitious about having his own prophecy come true. Thus, Macbeth reads his own ambition into Banquo and eventually has him killed. However, Banquo was innocent, just like Duncan. Shortly after seizing the throne, Macbeth realizes that *becoming* king is not enough - he needs to *remain* king. And that requires more killings and more lies.

Macbeth’s ambition is closely connected to his role as the tragic hero with the tragic flaw. **His flaw is his ambition**, which he fails to see the danger in before it is too late. His ambition is ultimately what leads to his downfall.

Fate vs. Free will (can be seen in regard to Ovid’s Metamorphoses, hybris, nemesis)

Macbeth is heavily influenced by its Elizabethan context. Paradoxically, **the Elizabethans believed in free will while also believing in destiny**. Although superhuman forces controlled the universe, humans had been given free will and the gift of reason by God. It was then up to

the individual to use his or her abilities the right way. As a tragic hero, Macbeth fails to do this. Partly because he is flawed, and partly because he is tricked by supernatural beings.

The play raises the question of responsibility: Is Macbeth's tragic end entirely his own fault, or was he manipulated into it by the witches and his wife? In connection with this, we have the question of whether the play's supernatural elements, such as the floating dagger, Banquo's ghost, and to some extent the witches, are real or just figments of Macbeth's imagination? If we think of these elements as real - particularly the witches - it takes away some of Macbeth's responsibility because we can argue that he was manipulated by evil forces.

In connection with this, it is an important point that **Macbeth does not trust fate to sort everything out for him**. Although he initially says that "chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.154-155), he soon decides to take matters into his own hands. In order to make the prophecy of becoming king true, he kills King Duncan himself. Later, he has Banquo murdered too because Banquo, according to the prophecy, poses a threat to Macbeth's royal line.

When Macbeth seeks out the witches and gets the second round of prophecies in Act 4, Scene 1, he still does not trust that fate will deliver. He is here told to be wary of Macduff and concludes: "But yet I'll make assurance double sure, / And take a bond of fate: thou shalt not live [Macduff]." (4.1.91-92). However, as Macduff himself has fled, Macbeth has Macduff's family killed instead. Ironically, this decision causes Macduff to swear revenge and to eventually kill Macbeth in Act 5, Scene 8. Once again, Macbeth's own actions seem to make the prophecy come true.

In classical tragedies, it was considered arrogant for the tragic hero to think that he could control fate (hubris). It is an interesting question whether the same could be said for Macbeth. After all, the play was written during the Elizabethan era when there was a certain amount of belief in the power of free will.