

'Macbeth' by William Shakespeare – Knowledge Organiser

a. Act 1

1.1. A prologue of evil: the witches plan to meet with Macbeth. 1.2. King Duncan is told of the success of the battle and of the bravery shown by Banquo and Macbeth. He decides to reward Macbeth with the title 'Thane of Cawdor'. 1.3. The witches speak strange prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo – and Ross brings the new title to Macbeth. 1.4. Duncan announces that his son, Malcolm, will be the next king of Scotland – and Macbeth begins to worry. 1.5. Lady Macbeth reads her husband's letter telling what has happened; she welcomes him home, tells Macbeth of the plan to murder Duncan, and then prepares to receive the King. 1.6. King Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle and is welcomed warmly by Lady Macbeth. 1.7. Macbeth has second thoughts about killing Duncan but Lady Macbeth questions his manhood, changes his mind and lays out the plan for Duncan's murder

b. Act 2

2.1. Banquo and his son, Fleance, are going to bed when they encounter Macbeth who is en route to kill Duncan. 2.2. Macbeth has murdered Duncan. Lady Macbeth takes the daggers back to the murder scene as Macbeth refuses – he is beginning to regret his actions. 2.3. The porter compares Macbeth's castle to the gates of hell as the house wakes to the news of Duncan's death. Macbeth, in a panic, kills Duncan's attendants. Duncan's sons fear for their safety and flee. 2.4. Ross talks with an Old Man and discuss the unnatural events that occurred the night of Duncan's murder. Macbeth is to be crowned king.

c. Act 3

3.1. Banquo grows suspicious of Macbeth – Macbeth arranges to have him and his son murdered. 3.2. Lady Macbeth is uneasy but Macbeth assures her that everything is under control but refuses to disclose any further information. 3.3. Banquo is murdered but Fleance escapes. 3.4. The Macbeths host another banquet where Macbeth sees the Ghost of Banquo, his strange behaviour alarms his guests. 3.5. The witches meet with their Queen, Hecate, who is angry that they have been meddling with Macbeth without her consultation. 3.6. Lennox and an unnamed Lord discuss the state of affairs: Malcolm is in England, Macduff has gone to join him and the English king is raising an army to fight Macbeth.

d. Act 4

4.1. The witches assemble to meet Macbeth. Their magic apparitions appear to give Macbeth comfort at first but then cause him alarm when he sees the line of Kings. Macbeth vows to kill Macduff and his family. 4.2. Lady Macduff questions Ross about her husband's flight. A messenger arrives and tells her to flee but it is too late – she, and her family, are murdered. 4.3. Macduff has joined Malcolm in England and test each other's loyalties. Macduff learns of the death of his wife and children.

e. Act 5

5.1. Lady Macbeth sleepwalks. 5.2. A section of the army advance towards Dunsinane and Macbeth is showing signs of panic. 5.3. Macbeth attempts to reassure himself thinking of the witches' prophecies. He discusses his wife's condition and heads into battle. 5.4. Malcolm's soldiers camouflage themselves with branches from the trees of Birnam Wood. 5.5. The battle is at its height. Seyton tells Macbeth of his wife's death. A messenger tells Macbeth that Birnam Wood is moving towards Dunsinane. 5.6. Malcolm's army reaches Macbeth's castle. Battle ensues. 5.7. Macbeth encounters Young Siward and kills him. 5.8. Macduff finds Macbeth, they fight, and Macbeth is killed. 5.9. Malcolm is proclaimed King

f. Key Contextual Information

Origins and Inspiration Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' (1606) was heavily inspired by Raphael Holinshed's 'Chronicles of Scotland' (1577). An instance of inspiration is the Three Witches, whom Holinshed describes as "creatures of the elderwood ... nymphs or fairies".

Shakespeare also borrows the character of Banquo from Holinshed's Chronicles. In Chronicles, Banquo is an accomplice to Macbeth in the murder of the king, rather than a loyal subject of the king who is seen as an enemy by Macbeth. Shakespeare may have changed this aspect of his character to please King James, who was thought at the time to be a descendant of the real Banquo.

King James I

Macbeth was most likely written in 1606, early in the reign of James I, who had been James VI of Scotland before he succeeded to the English throne in 1603. James was a patron of Shakespeare's acting company, and of all the plays Shakespeare wrote under James's reign, Macbeth most clearly reflects the playwright's close relationship with the sovereign. During his reign, James I was subject to numerous assassination attempts from Catholics, most famously including the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

Witchcraft

In 1542, fifty years before Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, King Henry VIII passed the first English Witchcraft Act, which officially made the practice of witchcraft punishable by death.

Witches were usually, but not always, women, and could trigger suspicions of witchcraft by engaging in unconventional lifestyles, such as living alone or in isolation from a community. While she is presented in different terms, Lady Macbeth's allusion to summoning up demonic spirits to help her carry out her plan in Act 1, Scene 5, would also possibly have invoked ideas of witchcraft, especially given the sexualized language she uses.

King James, who ruled England when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, was convinced that a group of witches were plotting to bring about his death and played an active role in the North Berwick witch trials, which implicated dozens of people on witchcraft charges and led to multiple executions. He also methodically researched and wrote about witchcraft, publishing his book 'Daemonologie' in 1597. This work was a detailed account intended to inform the population about the origins and practices of black magic, as well as make a theological case justifying the persecution of witches under Christian law.

h. Act 1 Key Quotations

"thunder and lightning" (stage direction, 1.1) "fair is foul and foul is fair" (Witches, 1.1) "unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps and fix'd his head upon our battlements" (Captain, 1.2) "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater", "Not so happy, yet much happier", "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none" (Three witches, 1.3) "Stay, you imperfect speakers. Tell me more...Speak I charge you." (Macbeth, 1.3) "Stars, hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires" (Macbeth, 1.4) "yet I do fear thy nature is too full o'th'milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way" (Lady Macbeth, 1.5) "Come, thick night, And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell" (Lady Macbeth, 1.5) "He's here in double trust...whoshould against his murderer shut the door not bear the knife myself" (Macbeth, 1.7) "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent but only vaulting ambition" (Macbeth, 1.7) "We will proceed no further in this business." (Macbeth, 1.7) "When you durst do it, then you were a man." (Lady Macbeth, 1.7)

j. Act 2 Key Quotations

"Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible to feeling as to sight?" (Macbeth, 2.1) "The very stones prate of m whereabouts" (Macbeth, 2.1) "Consider it not so deeply" (Lady Macbeth, 2.2) "These deeds must not be thought after these ways; so it will make us mad" (Lady Macbeth, 2.2) "I'll go no more. I am afraid to think what I have done; Look on't again, I dare not." (Macbeth, 2.2) "To know my deed, 'twere best not to know my self" (Macbeth, 2.2) "here's an equivocator that could swear in both scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven" (Porter, 2.3) "There's daggers in men's smiles" (Donaldbain, 2.3) "a falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd" (Old Man, 2.4) "thrifless ambition" (Ross, 2.4)

i. Act 3 Key Quotations

"I fear thou played'st most foully for it" (Banquo, 3.1) "Our fears in Banquo Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature Reigns that which would be feared." (Macbeth, 3.1) "Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown" (Macbeth, 3.1) "We have schorc'd the snake, not kill'd it" (Macbeth, 3.2) "Be innocent of the knowledge dearest chuck till thou applaud the deed" (Macbeth, 3.2) "Thou canst not say I did it; never shake they gory locks at me!" (Macbeth, 3.4) "I am in bloody stepp'd in so far that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er" (Macbeth, 3.5) "tyrant" (Lord and Lennox, 3.6) "our suffering country under a hand accurs'd" (Lennox, 3.6)

k. Act 4 Key Quotations

"by the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes" (Witch, 4.1) "I conjure you by that which you profess....answer me" (Macbeth, 4.1) "seek to know no more" (Witches, 4.1) "Deny me this, and an eternal curse fall on you. Let me know" (Macbeth, 4.1) "Filthy hags, why do you show me this?"

l. Act 5 Key Quotations

"Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" (Lady Macbeth, 5.1) "This disease is beyond my practice" (Doctor, 5.1) "Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O." (Lady Macbeth, 5.1) "I have almost forgot the taste of fears" (Macbeth, 5.5) "Macduff was from his mother's womb Untimely ripped." (Macduff, 5.8)

g. Key Vocabulary

- **Divine Right of Kings:** the doctrine that kings derive their authority from God not their subjects
- **equivocal:** using ambiguous or evasive language
- **soliloquy:** speaking one's thoughts aloud when by oneself or regardless of any hearers, especially by a character in a play.
- **paradox:** a seemingly absurd or contradictory statement
- **antithesis:** a person or thing that is the direct opposite of someone or something else.
- **Great Chain of Being:** a hierarchical structure of all matter and life, thought by medieval Christianity to have been decreed by God. The chain begins with God and descends through angels, humans, animals and plants to minerals
- **chiasmus:** grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order.
- **despot:** a ruler or other person who holds absolute power, typically one who exercises it in a cruel or oppressive way.
- **regicide:** the action of killing a king.
- **hubris:** excessive pride or self-confidence.

