

## LESSON TWO:

### The Renaissance Period 1485-1660

#### The Tragedy of Macbeth

Probably composed in late 1606 or early 1607, *Macbeth* is the last of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, the others being *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*. It is a relatively short play without a major subplot, and it is considered by many scholars to be Shakespeare's darkest work. *Lear* is an utter tragedy in which the natural world is amorally indifferent toward mankind, but in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare adds a supernatural dimension that purposively conspires against Macbeth and his kingdom. In the tragedy of *Lear*, the distraught king summons the goddess of Chaos, Hecht; in *Macbeth*, Hecate appears as an actual character.

On the level of human evil, Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy is about Macbeth's bloody rise to power, including the murder of the Scottish king, Duncan, and the guilt-ridden pathology of evil deeds generating still more evil deeds. As an integral part of this thematic web is the play's most memorable character, *Lady Macbeth*. Like her husband, Lady Macbeth's ambition for power leads her into an unnatural, phantasmagorical realm of witchcraft, insomnia and madness. But while Macbeth responds to the prophecies of the play's famous trio of witches, Lady Macbeth goes even further by figuratively transforming herself into an unnatural, desexualized evil spirit. The current trend of critical opinion is toward an upward re-evaluation of Lady Macbeth, who is said to be rehumanized by her insanity and her suicide. Much of this reappraisal of Lady Macbeth has taken place in discussions of her ironically strong marriage to Macbeth, a union that rests on loving bonds but undergoes disintegration as the tragedy unfolds.

#### Macbeth: Historical Background

Shakespeare drew from many sources when he wrote—*the Holingshed Chronicles of England* was one of these. From this source he drew much of his historical knowledge, as Holingshed was the definitive historical source of that time. The story of Macbeth comes from this source. However, Shakespeare changed several characters to meet the theatrical purpose of the play. In Holing—shed's account Macbeth is older than Duncan, but Shakespeare reverses their ages and Duncan is portrayed as the older of the two. Macbeth was written especially for James I and was performed in 1606. James I was King of Scotland when he came to the English throne; his descendants can be traced back to Banquo. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, often referred to in theatre circles as "The Scottish Play," Banquo is portrayed as an honourable man who promotes goodness and fairness. In this way, Shakespeare was keenly aware

of his audience and his political responsibilities. His plays reflect not only timeless conflicts and resolutions, but a view of the Elizabethan society.

The society in which Shakespeare lived was reflected in the characters he wrote about. London was a crowded city teeming with aristocrats, working class people, and indigents—it was a hub of activity. By today's standards the sanitation was very poor, and there were frequent epidemics of the plague. The city was infested with rats, and the fleas on the rats caused the Bubonic plague. There were no sewers, only open drains in the middle of the street. The conditions were difficult; however, the spirit of the people prevailed. It was in this society that Shakespeare wrote and created his characters. Shakespearean Theatre

The support of theatre in England varied depending on who was the reigning monarch. Queen Elizabeth I (1533 - 1603) was the monarch when Shakespeare came into the public eye. Elizabeth supported the theatre and the company performed at the castle on a regular basis. She reigned until her death in 1603 when James I became ruler.

James I was also an avid supporter of the theatre. Shakespeare's company, "Lord Chamberlain's Men," came under royal patronage and were subsequently known as "the King's Men." However, the local London government felt that actors and theatre were improper. Therefore, no theatres were allowed to be built within the city limits. These restrictions did not keep the London people from the theatres, however, and by 1600 there were more theatres than ever built on the outskirts of London. The Globe theatre was built by Cuthbert Burbage in 1599 for the Lord Chamberlain's Men. When Burbage could not obtain a lease for the original theatre, it was moved to a new site in Southwark, on the south side of the Thames River. The construction of the Globe was a joint venture between the Burbage brothers and the actors of the Lord Chamberlain's Men.

### **Summary**

The play begins on an open stretch of land in medieval Scotland. Three Witches enter and give the prophecy that the civil war will end that day and that at sunset they will meet Macbeth. The Witches are summoned to leave, but they do not leave without stating that what is normally "fair" will be "foul," and what is "foul" will be "fair."

King Duncan learns that Macbeth has been victorious and has defeated Macdonwald. The Thane of Cawdor has betrayed Duncan and is accused of being a traitor. Duncan orders the Thane of Cawdor's execution and announces that Macbeth will receive the title of Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo leave the battlefield and meet the Witches. The Witches state the prophecy that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and king and that Banquo will be the father of kings, but not king himself. Macbeth has been victorious on the battlefield and the war is at an end—to what greatness should he now aspire?

The Witches spark the ambitious nature in Macbeth, as he knows his rise to power would greatly be enhanced by being named Thane of Cawdor. After the Witches vanish, Ross and Angus arrive and announce that Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor. Banquo is sceptical of the Witches, but Macbeth, driven by a desire for power, considers killing Duncan to gain the crown. Macbeth is overwhelmed by the image, yet his desire for power is still present, as stated in a letter he sends to Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth to act on his thoughts, telling him that she will guide and support his plan to kill King Duncan. While Duncan is visiting Inverness, Macbeth's castle, Macbeth kills Duncan as he sleeps. After the murder is discovered, Macbeth kills the servants, whom he accuses of

Duncan's murder. Duncan's sons, fearing for their own lives, flee Scotland. Macbeth is crowned king. Banquo raises suspicions that Macbeth killed Duncan. Macbeth hires two men to kill Banquo and his son Fleance, whom Macbeth fears will become king, as the Witches foretold. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes.

The Witches conjure a spell, and Apparitions reveal to Macbeth three prophecies that will affect his future. He is told to beware of Macduff, that no man born of woman can harm him, and he will not be conquered until the forest at Birnam marches to Dunsinane. Macbeth is also shown a procession of kings with the last king looking in a mirror—the reflection is that of Banquo.

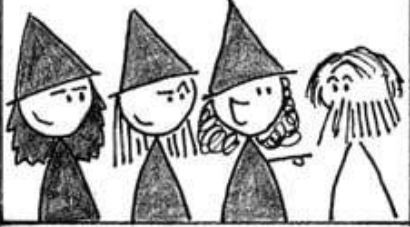
Macbeth orders Macduff's family to be murdered and leaves for England to confront Macduff. When Macduff hears of the massacre of his family, he vows to seek revenge on Macbeth. He joins Malcolm in his quest to depose Macbeth.

The army proceeds in camouflage by carrying a branch from Birnam Wood into battle. Alarmed by this, Macbeth fears the Witches' prophecy will come true. Macbeth is told of Lady Macbeth's death by her own hands, and he laments the nature of his life.

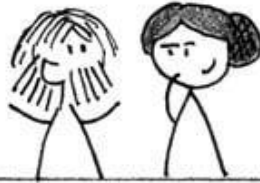
Macbeth fights Macduff, and Macbeth boasts that he cannot be killed by any man born of woman. Macduff informs Macbeth that he was surgically removed from his mother's womb and thus was not born of woman. Macduff kills Macbeth in battle and hails Malcolm as King of Scotland. Malcolm vows to restore Scotland to a peaceful country.

# MACBETH: ONE PAGE SUMMARY

Three witches tell Macbeth he will become king.



Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth he will become king.



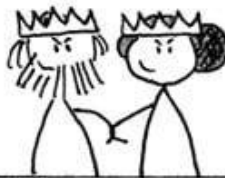
Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth to kill the king.



Macbeth kills the king.



Macbeth becomes king.



Macbeth has his friend Banquo murdered.



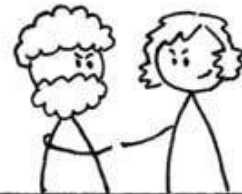
Macbeth gets more prophecies from the witches.



Macbeth kills the family of Macduff, Thane of Fife.



Macduff joins up with Malcolm, son of the dead king.



Lady Macbeth goes mad and dies.



Macduff and Malcolm dress up like trees and attack Macbeth.



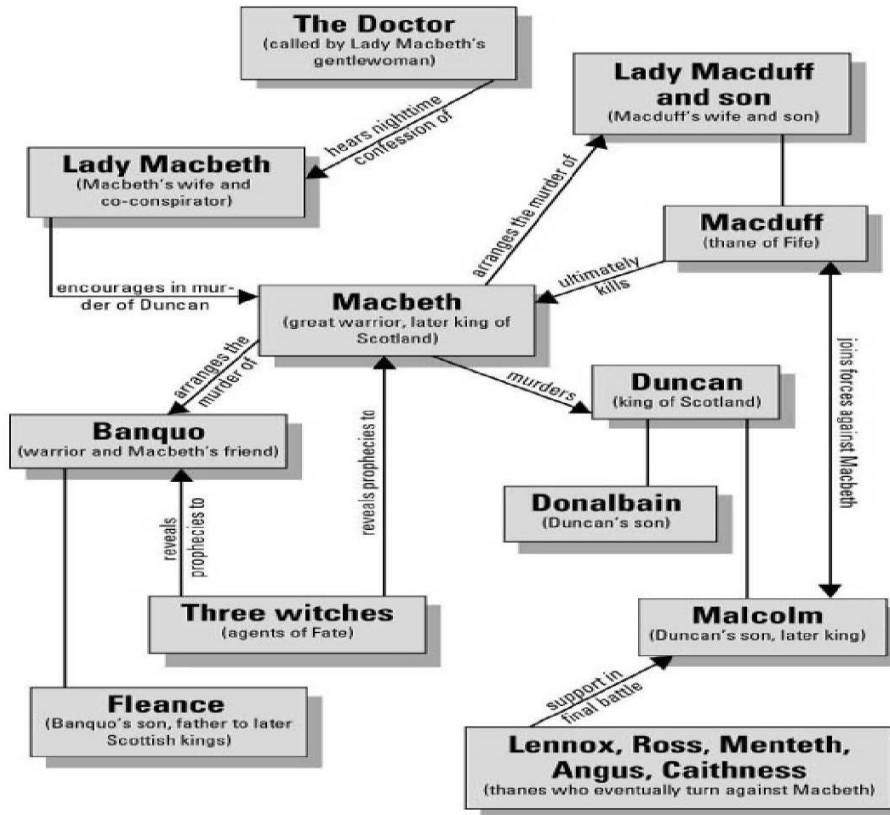
Macduff kills Macbeth.



# CHARACTER MAP

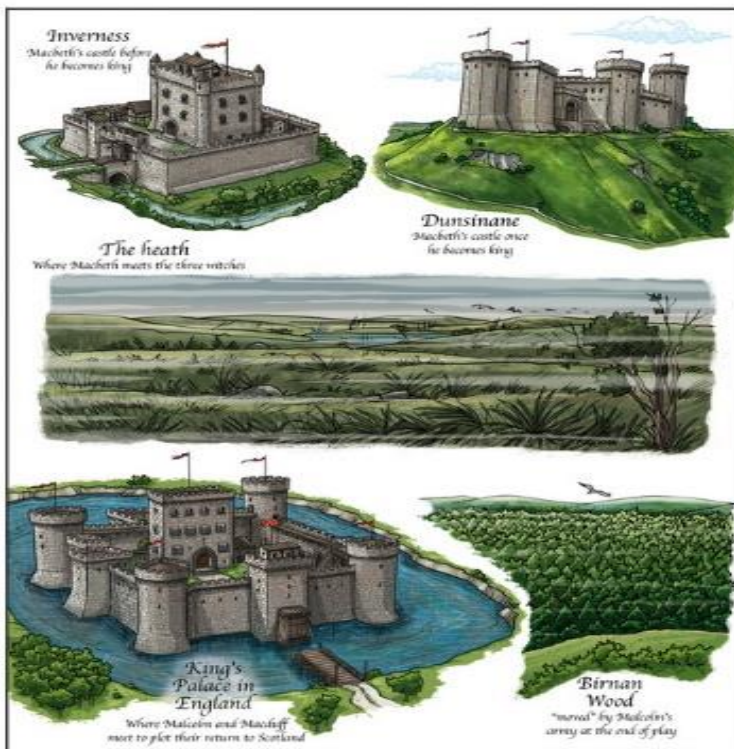
## Map of character relationships

This diagram illustrates how key characters relate to each other.



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## Setting



Macbeth is set in Scotland in 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Important places in the play are Forres, Inverness, Dunsinane.

The play opens with Scotland being invaded by Norway and it's fighting back.

## Major Themes

In *Macbeth*, **ambition** conspires with unholy forces to commit evil deeds which, in their turn, generate **fear, guilt and still more horrible crimes**. Above all, *Macbeth* is a character study in which not one, but two protagonists (the title character and Lady Macbeth) respond individually and jointly to the psychological burden of their sins. In the course of the play, Macbeth repeatedly misinterprets the guilt that he suffers as being simply a matter of fear. His characteristic way of dealing with his guilt is to face it directly by committing still more misdeeds, and this, of course, only generates further madness. By contrast, Lady Macbeth is fully aware of the difference between fear and guilt, and she attempts to prevent pangs of guilt by first denying her own sense of conscience and then by focusing her attention upon the management of Macbeth's guilt. In the scene which occurs immediately after Duncan's death, Lady Macbeth orders her husband to get some water "and wash this filthy witness from your hand" (II.i.43-44). He rejects her suggestion, crying out, "**What hands are here. Ha! they pluck out mine eyes! / Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?**" (II.i.56-58). But she in turn insists that the tell-tale signs of his crime cannot be seen by others, that "a little water clears us of this deed" (II.i.64). But midway through the play, Lady Macbeth loses both her influence over her husband and the ability to repress her own conscience. Once her husband has departed to combat against Macduff's forces and Lady Macbeth is left alone, she assumes the very manifestations of guilt that have been associated with Macbeth, insomnia and hallucinations, in even more extreme form.

As for the motive behind the theme of guilt, it is **ambition for power**, and it does not require much for Macbeth to embrace the weird sisters' vision of him as the ruler of all Scotland. Macbeth is ambitious, but it is Lady Macbeth who is the driving force behind their blood-stained rise to the throne(s) of Scotland. Lady Macbeth is awesome in her ambition and possesses a capacity for deceit that Shakespeare often uses as a trait of his evil female characters. Thus, when she greets her prospective victim in Act I, she "humbly" tells King Duncan that she has eagerly awaited his arrival and that her preparations for it are "**in every point twice done, and then double done**" (I.vi.14-18). The irony here is that double-dealing and falsity are at hand, and Lady Macbeth's ability to conceal her intentions while at the same time making hidden reference to them has a startling effect upon us.

Beyond the evil that human ambition can manufacture, Macbeth has a **super-natural** dimension to it; indeed, the play opens with the three witches stirring the plot forward. Even before his encounter with the three witches, Macbeth finds himself in an unnatural dramatic world on the "**foul and fair**" day of the battle (I.iii.39). Things are not what they seem. After his first conclave with the witches, Macbeth is unable to determine whether the prophecy of the witches bodes "ill" or "good." He then begins to doubt reality itself as he states that "nothing is / But what it is not" (I.iii.141-142). The prophecy, of course, is true in the first sense but not what Macbeth takes it to be in the second. In like manner, the three predictions made to Macbeth in the first scene of Act IV seem to make him invincible; but the "woods" do march and Macbeth is slain by a man not ("naturally") born of woman.

Not only does an unnatural world overturn reality in Macbeth's experience, in Lady Macbeth's experience, this movement beyond nature is self-invoked. In an oft-cited speech, Lady Macbeth actively conjures up supernatural forces to change her into a creature without conscience or human (or "feminine") compassion.

Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe topful  
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,  
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
Th' effect and it! (I.v.40-47)

Lady Macbeth alters herself into a monster, "de-sexing" herself into an embodiment of evil akin to the demon goddess Hecate. As many scholars have pointed out, unlike Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff, Macbeth and his wife are childless; there is no succession of kings behind Macbeth as there is behind Banquo. Having shorn herself of the ability to generate an heir, Lady Macbeth undergoes an alienation from both her gender and, as discussed below, from her marriage to Macbeth.

The waking world of reality and the unnatural world of evil intermingle in the paranoid hallucinations and, most markedly, in the insomnia of Macbeth and of Lady Macbeth. After Duncan's murder, Macbeth hears that internal, voice which commands him to "sleep no more" (II.ii.37). Restive to the end, Macbeth's insomnia is noted by his wife. She attempts to explain the more vivid and horrifying experiences that he undergoes, such as seeing Banquo's spectral effigy at the feast, by referring to natural causes, telling her husband that his vision stems from the fact that he lacks sleep. But then Lady Macbeth herself falls victim to a deep, somatic disorder. As the doctor who treats her insomnia is told, Lady Macbeth only begins to sleepwalk and to compulsively wash her hands when Macbeth is no longer present, the tyrant having taken to the field to stop Malcolm, Macduff, and their fellows from overturning his reign. In the end, Lady Macbeth enters into a limbo state of madness, sleepwalking between a horrible reality and a vision of the hell it portends.

The deterioration of Macbeth and of Lady Macbeth as individuals is closely paralleled by the collapse of their marital relationship. Oddly, among all of Shakespeare's married couples, the Macbeths of Act I and Act II show the highest degree of bonding and cooperative spirit. The very first time that we see Lady Macbeth, she is reading a letter from Macbeth prefaced by the fond salutation, "Dearest Partner of Greatness." There is in the first two acts of the play a mutual admiration between the two, a dual respect based on their shared conviction that the manly Macbeth is fit to be king, while the commanding Lady Macbeth is his natural consort. When Lady Macbeth is first told that Macbeth has executed their plan and killed the king, she cries out "My husband."

But a change occurs in the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Act II of Shakespeare's play. Once Duncan has been dispatched, Lady Macbeth becomes increasingly unimportant to her husband. After the murder of the King, Macbeth begins to withdraw from his marriage to Lady Macbeth. It is significant that Macbeth does not convey the graphic details of the King's death to his wife and that he departs (wisely, in fact) from his instructions to leave the daggers of the king's guards behind. Moreover, he keeps his plot against Banquo and Fleance from his wife, and she has no role at all in the killing of Macduff's family. Indeed, following her ineffectual efforts to control Macbeth when he sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet, Lady Macbeth virtually disappears from the plot. Not only is Lady Macbeth no longer directing the action in the natural domain of the play, she is now excluded by her husband from partaking in either the natural or the supernatural progression ahead.

When we see her again, Lady Macbeth is virtually unrecognizable, a shaken shell of her former self. As noted above, critical opinion about Lady Macbeth has moved in the direction of seeing her as either a pathetic character or as redeemed by her own suicide, in the sense that it demonstrates her underlying humanity. What is truly pathetic, as opposed to monstrous, about Lady Macbeth of Act V is that she no longer has any role in her partnership with Macbeth. She has voluntarily relinquished her natural role as Macbeth's wife to mobilize him into action, and in the unnatural world into which she has entered, she is no match for the witches who have assumed the function that she once performed on behalf of her partnership with Macbeth. Pathetically, Lady Macbeth yearns for the natural union

that she had with her husband, for the role of nurturer and comforter, and that is no longer available to her. Lady Macbeth's last words are not expressions of guilt, but tender solicitous of care from her husband: "give me your hand ... to bed, to bed, to bed" (V.i.66-68).

## *The Macbeths' Character Analysis*

### ➤ *Lady Macbeth*

The very name of Lady Macbeth conjures a legion of evil associations, for the female protagonist of Shakespeare's Scottish Tragedy has come to represent feminine treachery. Lady Macbeth's ambition, her duplicity, and, the unnatural absence, indeed, the outright rejection, of such female values as compassion and nurturance mark her as a heartless villain, more monster than woman. It is, of course, Lady Macbeth herself who spawns the plot to kill Duncan, who determines the setting and the specific actions through which this bloody deed will take place. The speech in which she "de-sexes" herself (Act I, scene v) is one of the most frightening expressions of unnatural evil in all of Shakespeare's works, ranking alongside the evil speeches of Iago, Richard III and the bastard Edmund of *King Lear*.

But this appraisal of Lady Macbeth's evil character, while certainly accurate, requires qualification if not some revision. There is, to begin, her affection toward Macbeth—a genuine, if distorted, bond of love holding the two together. More important, Lady Macbeth is humanized by her own decline into guilt-ridden madness. Until the death of Duncan, Lady Macbeth seems, in the words of A. C. Bradley, to be "invincible and inhuman." But when she reappears in Act V, Lady Macbeth has been reduced to a wretched state, and (presumably) to the taking of her own life. Touchingly, the "mad" Lady Macbeth turns to her function of protecting her husband even though Macbeth has quit all domestic concerns to defend his ill-gotten throne. As the doctor and others observe her actions, Lady Macbeth seems caught in the routine of assuring Macbeth that he has no cause for fear, as she speaks the lines: "*Wash your hands, put on your night gown / Look not so pale. I tell you yet again / Banquo's buried. He cannot come out on's grave*" (V.i.62-64). Here Lady Macbeth is speaking to both her absent consort and to herself. But the union between Lady Macbeth and her husband has disintegrated under the weight of the evil that they have done and of the further evil that Macbeth does for their sake.

### ➤ *Macbeth*

Macbeth commits a trio of heinous crimes in the course of the play: the regicide of Duncan, the murder of his closest friend, Banquo (and attempted murder of Fleance), and the wanton slaughter of innocents in the persons of Macduff's wife and child. Given all this, we may tend to forget that prior to his encounter with the weird sisters, Macbeth is a hero, a loyal warrior in service of the legitimate king of Scotland, Duncan. His decision to accelerate or to manifest the witches' prophecy that he will rule is marked by pangs of guilt at the thought of the sin entailed in the act of killing a king who had amply rewarded his courage and fidelity. Shamed into sin by Lady Macbeth, Macbeth assumes a practical orientation toward the crime at hand. When thoughts of slaying Duncan to obtain the crown first enter Macbeth's mind, his chief concern is that they not be detected. He proclaims, "*Stars, hide your fires / Let not light see my black and deep desires*" (I.iv.50-52); on the cusp of crime, he again calls on nature to mask his motives, entreating the earth, "Hear not my steps which way they walk" (II.i.57). As a man of action, Macbeth is convinced that, if only he can hide his crime and further the prophecy



given to him by the witches, his ill feelings will naturally dissipate. This belief underlies his reaction to the murderer's news that Fleance has escaped the fate that Macbeth planned for him. Learning of this flaw in the execution of his scheme, Macbeth laments: *"Then comes my fit again. I had else been perfect; Whole as the marble" (III.iv.19-21)*. From Macbeth's standpoint, the reason that the ghost of Banquo appears at the feast is that the loose end of Fleance's remaining alive has left him *"cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in to saucy doubts and fears" (III.iv.23-24)*.

Those doubts and fears lead Macbeth back to the witches and toward still more evil deeds. Having dispatched Banquo to prevent one prophecy from coming true, he is later warned about Macduff and then seemingly reassured that no harm can befall him unless miraculous conditions occur—the marching of a wood, the appearance of a man not born by woman. These things, of course, do take place, making Macbeth a victim of his own understanding. Macbeth reaches tragic heights in the soliloquy on the meaninglessness of life that he speaks after learning of Lady Macbeth's death. But even after it is plain that the prophecies of the witches are working toward his destruction, Macbeth displays his mettle. In their final encounter, Macbeth tells Macduff that *"The mind I sway by, and the heart I bear / Shall never sag with doubt, nor shake with fear" (V.iii.9-10)*. He is then told by Macduff that his adversary is not "of woman born." Yet even after the last prop has fallen, Macbeth tells Macduff to *"Lay on."* Macbeth sinks into a slough of evil, his mind becomes disordered, yet in the final step, his warrior's instinct returns to him.

### Gender and sex roles

Another important issue in *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's ambiguous treatment of gender and sex roles. In many instances, the playwright either inverts a character's conventional gender characteristics or divests the figure of them altogether. Lady Macbeth is perhaps the most obvious example of this dispossession. In Act I, scene v, she prepares to confront her husband by resolving to "unsex" herself, to suppress any supposed weakness associated with her feminine nature so that she can give Macbeth the strength and determination to carry out Duncan's murder. After the king is killed, however, her feelings of guilt gradually erode her resolve, and she goes insane. Macbeth is perhaps the character most affected by the question of gender in the tragedy. From the beginning of the play, he is plagued by feelings of doubt and insecurity, which his wife attributes to "effeminate" weakness. Fearing that her husband does not have the resolve to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth cruelly manipulates his lack of self-confidence by questioning his manhood. Some critics maintain that as a result of his wife's machinations, Macbeth develops a warped perspective of manliness, equating it with the less humanistic attribute of self-seeking aggression. The more the protagonist pursues his ideal understanding of manliness—first by murdering Duncan, then Banquo, and finally Macduff's family—the less humane he becomes. Commentators who subscribe to this reading of Macbeth's character argue that the ruthlessness with which he strives to obtain this perverted version of manhood ultimately separates him from the rest of humankind. Through his diminishing humaneness, the protagonist essentially forfeits all claims on humanity itself—a degeneration, he ultimately realizes, that renders meaningless his ideal of manliness.

### QUOTES     *Analyse the following quotations from the play*

- Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine (2.2)

- “Macbeth does murder sleep” (Macbeth) (Act II, Scene 2)
- “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.” This quote is from one of the most famous soliloquies in Macbeth
- .... look like the innocent flower, But be the serpent under't. (1.5.63)
- All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.(V 1)
- “Come, you spirits / ...unsex me here, / ... make thick my blood; / Stop up the access and passage to remorse” (Lady Macbeth) (Act I, Scene 5)
- "...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." (Act I, Scene 7)
- Here's the smell of the blood still: all the  
perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little  
hand. Oh, oh, oh! (Act V, Scene 1)

### Literary terms

Hamartia (tragic flaw) A term coined by Aristotle to describe "some error or frailty" that brings about misfortune for a tragic hero. The concept of hamartia is closely related to that of the tragic flaw: both lead to the downfall of the protagonist in a tragedy. Hamartia may be interpreted as an internal weakness in a character (like greed or passion or hubris); however, it may also refer to a mistake that a character makes that is based not on a personal failure, but on circumstances outside the protagonist's personality and control.

Tragic hero A tragic hero is a type of character in a tragedy, and is usually the protagonist. Tragic heroes typically have heroic traits that earn them the sympathy of the audience, but also have flaws or make mistakes that ultimately lead to their own downfall. In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, Romeo is a tragic hero. His reckless passion in love, which makes him a compelling character, also leads directly to the tragedy of his death

Soliloquy A dramatic convention by means of which a character, alone onstage, utters his or her thoughts aloud. Playwrights use soliloquies as a convenient way to inform the audience about a character's motivations and state of mind. Shakespeare's Hamlet delivers perhaps the best known of all soliloquies, which begins: "To be or not to be."

Foil A character in a work whose behavior and values contrast with those of another character in order to highlight the distinctive temperament of that character (usually the protagonist). In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Laertes acts as a foil to Hamlet, because his willingness to act underscores Hamlet's inability to do so.

Hubris or Hybris Excessive pride or self-confidence that leads a protagonist to disregard a divine warning or to violate an important moral law. In tragedies, hubris is a very common form of hamartia

Iambic pentameter A metrical pattern in poetry which consists of five iambic feet per line. (An iamb, or iambic foot, consists of one unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable.

Line A sequence of words printed as a separate entity on the page. In poetry, lines are usually measured by the number of feet they contain. The names for various line lengths are as follows:

monometer: one foot

dimeter: two feet

trimeter: three feet

tetrameter: four feet

pentameter: five feet

hexameter: six feet

heptameter: seven feet

octameter: eight feet

The number of feet in a line, coupled with the name of the foot, describes the metrical qualities of that line.

Meter When a rhythmic pattern of stresses recurs in a poem, it is called meter. Metrical patterns are determined by the type and number of feet in a line of verse; combining the name of a line length with the name of a foot concisely describes the meter of the line. Rising meter refers to metrical feet which move from unstressed to stressed sounds, such as the iambic foot and the anapestic foot. Falling meter refers to metrical feet which move from stressed to unstressed sounds, such as the trochaic foot and the dactylic foot.

Pun A play on words that relies on a word's having more than one meaning or sounding like another word. Shakespeare and other writers use puns extensively, for serious and comic purposes; in *Romeo and Juliet* (III.i.101), the dying Mercutio puns, "Ask for me tomorrow and you shall find me a grave man." Puns have serious literary uses, but since the eighteenth century, puns have been used almost purely for humorous effect.