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

Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband about the prophecy and Duncan's imminent arrival. She decides her husband is too kind to follow his ambitions, and vows to push him to murder Duncan and take the crown that very night. Macbeth at first resists his wife's plan, but his ambition and her constant questioning of his courage and manhood win him over. That night they murder Duncan and frame the men guarding Duncan's room. The next morning, Macduff, another Scottish thane, discovers Duncan dead and raises the alarm. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pretend to be shocked and outraged. Macbethmurders the guardsmen of Duncan’s room to keep them silent, but says he did it out of a furious rage that they killed the king. Duncan’s sons think they may be the next target, and flee. Macbeth is made king, and because they ran, Duncan’s sons become the prime suspects in their father's murder. Because he knows the witches' prophecy, Banquo is suspicious of Macbeth. And because of the prophecy that Banquo’s line will reign as kings, Macbeth sees Banquo as a threat. Macbeth gives a feast, inviting many thanes, including Banquo. Macbeth hires two murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance as they ride to attend the feast. The men kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes. At the feast, Macbeth sees Banquo’s ghost, though no one else does. Macbeth’s behavior and the death of Banquo make all the thanes suspicious. They begin to think of Macbeth as a tyrant. Macduff refuses to appear at the royal court at all, and goes to England to support Malcolm in his effort to raise an army against Macbeth.

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

While the English and Scottish under Malcolm march toward Dunsinane, Lady Macbeth begins sleepwalking and imagining blood on her hands that can’t be washed off. Macbeth has become manic, cruel, and haughty—many of his men desert to Malcolm’s side. In Birnam Wood, Malcolm and his generals devise a strategy to hide their numbers—they cut branches to hold up in front of them. As Macbeth prepares for the siege, Lady Macbeth dies, perhaps of suicide. Macbeth can barely feel anything anymore, and her death only makes him give a speech about the meaninglessness of life. Then Malcolm’s forces appear looking like a forest marching toward the castle. Malcolm’s forces quickly capture Dunsinane, but Macbeth himself fights on, mocking all who dare to face him as “men born of woman.” But Macduff reveals that he was “untimely
The weird sisters’ prophecies spur both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to try to fulfill their ambitions, but the witches never make Macbeth or his wife do anything. Macbeth and his wife act on their own to fulfill their deepest desires. Macbeth, a good general and, by all accounts before the action of the play, a good man, allows his ambition to overwhelm him and becomes a murdering, paranoid maniac. Lady Macbeth, once she begins to put into actions the once-hidden thoughts of her mind, is crushed by guilt.

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

FATE

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

Unlike Banquo, Macbeth acts: he kills Duncan. Macbeth tries to master fate, to make fate conform to exactly what he wants. But, of course, fate doesn’t work that way. By trying to master fate once, Macbeth puts himself in the position of having to master fate always. At every instant, he has to struggle against those parts of the witches’ prophecies that don’t favor him. Ultimately, Macbeth becomes so obsessed with his fate that he becomes delusional.

CHARACTERS

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

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

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

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

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

Malcolm – The older of King Duncan’s two sons, and Duncan’s designated heir to the throne of Scotland. Early in the play, Malcolm is a weak and inexperienced leader, and he actually flees Scotland in fear after his father is murdered. But Malcolm matures, and with the help of Macduff and an English army, eventually overthrows Macbeth and retakes the throne, restoring the order that was destroyed when Duncan was murdered.

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

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

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

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

Lennox – A Scottish nobleman.

Ross – A Scottish nobleman.

Angus – A Scottish nobleman.

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

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

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

Hecate – The goddess of witchcraft.

Gentlewoman – Lady Macbeth’s attendant.

Siward – A warlike English lord.

Young Siward – Siward’s son.

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

Captain – A captain in the Scottish Army.

Seyton – Macbeth’s servant.

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

English Doctor – An English doctor.

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

THEMES

AMBITION

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

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becomes unable to see the half-truths behind the witches' prophecies. By trying to master fate, he brings himself to ruin.

**VIOLENCE**

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

**NATURE AND THE UNNATURAL**

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

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

**MANHOOD**

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

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

**SYMBOLS**

Symbols appear in red text throughout the Summary & Analysis sections of this LitChart.

**VISIONS AND HALLUCINATIONS**

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

**BLOOD**

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

**SLEEP**

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

**ACT 1 QUOTES**

*Fair is foul, and foul is fair.* (12)

*And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, The instruments of darkness tell us truths, Win us with honest truffles, to betray's In deepest consequence.* (125)

*Stars, hide your fires!* Let not light see my black and deep desires. (52)

*Come, you spirits That tend on mortal thoughts! unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood, Stop up the access and passage to remorse, That no compunctious visitings of nature Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts, And take my milk for gall. (30)

*Look like the innocent flower, But be the serpent under it.* (56)

*I have no spur To prick the sides of my intent, but only Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself And falls on the other.* (25)

*I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more, is none.* (47)

*Macbeth: If we should fail, Lady Macbeth: We fail! But screw your courage to the sticking-place, And we'll not fail.* (58)
ACT 2 QUOTES

Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee; I have thee not, and yet I see thee still. Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible To feeling as to sight? or art thou but A dagger of the mind, a false creation, Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? I see thee yet, in form as palpable As this which now I draw. (33)

Methought I heard a voice cry, Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep, — the innocent sleep; Sleep, that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care, The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath, Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, Chief nourisher in life's feast. (36)

ACT 3 QUOTES

Nought's had, all's spent Where our desire is got without content. (7)

I am in blood Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er. (142)

ACT 4 QUOTES

By the pricking of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes. (44)

ACT 5 QUOTES

Out, damned spot! out, I say! (34)

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow Creeps in this petty pace from day to day To the last syllable of recorded time; And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. 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. (19)

SUMMARY & ANALYSIS

The color-coded boxes under “Analysis & Themes” below make it easy to track the themes throughout the work. Each color corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

As a storm rages, three witches appear, speaking in rhyming, paradoxical couplets: "when the battle's lost and won" (1.1.4); "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.10). They agree to meet again on the heath (plain) when the battle now raging ends. There they'll meet Macbeth.

The witches' rhyming speech makes them seem inhuman, ominous, and paranormal, which, in fact, they are.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

At a military camp, King Duncan of Scotland, his sons Malcolm and Donalbain, and the Thane of Lennox wait for news of the war. A captain enters, covered in so much blood he is almost unrecognizable. The captain tells them of the state of the battle against the invading Norwegians and the Scottish rebels Macdonald and the Thane of Cawdor. Two Scottish nobleman have been especially brave, Macbeth (the Thane of Glamis) and Banquo. Macbeth killed Macdonald ("unseemed him from the nave to th' chops" (1.2.22)).

The Thane of Ross arrives, and describes how Macbeth defeated Sweno, the Norwegian King, who now begs for a truce. Duncan proclaims that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor shall be put to death, and that Macbeth shall be made Thane of Cawdor.

The blood covering the captain makes him an unrecognizable monster, just as Macbeth, who in this scene is described as a noble hero who is brave and loyal to his king, will be transformed into a monster as he becomes "covered" with the metaphorical blood of those he kills to achieve his ambitions.

Duncan rewards and trusts his subjects. This is the opposite of personal ambition. Ironically, though, he replaces one traitor with a much worse traitor.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

On the heath the witches appear. They call themselves the "weird sisters" (1.3.30) and brag of their dread and magical deeds such as killing swine and cursing a sailor to waste away.

Macbeth and Banquo enter. The witches hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and "king hereafter" (1.3.47). Banquo asks Macbeth why he seems to fear this good news, then questions the witches about his own future. They say that Banquo is "lesser than Macbeth and greater" (1.3.63) because though he'll never be king, his descendants will.

The witches are established as both wicked and magically powerful.

Does the fear Banquo notes in Macbeth signal that Macbeth's doomed struggle against his ambition starts the instant he hears the prophecy?
Macbeth asks how the witches know this information. But the witches vanish, making the two men wonder if they could have imagined the whole thing. Just then, Ross and Angus enter. They tell Macbeth that the old Thane of Cawdor was a traitor and that Duncan has made Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor.

Macbeth and Banquo are shocked. Macbeth asks Banquo if he now thinks that his children will be king. Banquo seems unsure, and comments that “instruments of darkness” sometimes tell half truths to bring men to ruin.

As Banquo talks with Ross and Angus, Macbeth ponders the prophecy. If it’s evil, why would it truly predict his being made Thane of Cawdor? If it’s good, why would he already be contemplating murder, a thought that makes “my seated heart knock at my ribs” (1.3.134-136)? Macbeth feels that he’s losing himself, and hopes that if fate says he’ll become king, he won’t have to act to make it happen.

Ross and Angus think Macbeth’s reverie is caused by becoming Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo agree to speak about the witches’ prophecy later.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

At a camp near the battlefield, Malcolm tells Duncan that the old Thane of Cawdor confessed and repented before being executed. Duncan notes that you can’t always trust a man by his outward show. Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus enter. Duncan says that even the gift of Cawdor is not as much as Macbeth deserves. Macbeth responds: “The service and loyalty I owe, in doing it, pays itself” (1.4.22).

Duncan is pleased. He says: “I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing” (1.4.28-29). Next, he announces that Malcolm will be heir to the Scottish throne (the kingship was not hereditary in Scotland at that time). Duncan then adjourns the meeting and decides to spend the night at Inverness, Macbeth’s castle.

Macbeth goes ahead to prepare for the King’s visit, but notes that Malcolm now stands between him and the throne. He begs the stars to “hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4.51).

Banquo guesses the witches’ plot exactly. This means that when Macbeth chooses to believe the witches and act, he knows the risks.

Macbeth is already thinking about killing Duncan, but the thought terrifies him: he’s struggling against his ambition. His thoughts about fate are classic: does fate happen no matter what, or must one act?

This exchange with Banquo is the last time Macbeth is honest in the play.

Deeply ironic that just as Duncan comments about how you can’t trust people’s outward shows, Macbeth enters. Duncan’s great strength as a king is his trust in his people and his thanes, but it also makes him vulnerable to treachery.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

At Inverness, Lady Macbeth reads a letter in which Macbeth tells her of the witches’ prophecy. Lady Macbeth worries Macbeth is too kind and honorable to fulfill his ambition and the prophecy. She decides to question his manhood to make him act.

A servant enters with news that Duncan will spend the night and leave the next day. Lady Macbeth says Duncan’s visit will be fatal, and calls on spirits to “unsex me here… and take my milk for gall” (1.5.39-46).

Macbeth enters, and says Duncan will spend the night and leave the next day. Lady Macbeth says Duncan will never see that day. She counsels Macbeth to look like an “innocent flower,” but be the viper hiding beneath it (1.5.63). Macbeth remains unconvinced. Lady Macbeth tells him to leave the plan to her.

ACT 1, SCENE 6

Duncan, Malcolm, Donalbain, Banquo, Lennox, Macduff, Ross, and Angus arrive at Inverness. Duncan comments on the sweetness of the air; Banquo notes that martlets, a species of bird that usually nests in churches, have nested in the castle.

Lady Macbeth warmly greets the King and the thanes, though Macbeth is nowhere to be seen.

Ironic that Duncan thinks the castle where he’ll be murdered is beautiful. Also shows what beauty Macbeth loses when he gives in to his ambition.

At this point, the planned murder weighs more on Macbeth than on Lady Macbeth.

ACT 1, SCENE 7

Macbeth, alone, agonizes about whether to kill Duncan. He’d be willing to murder Duncan if he thought that would be the end of it. But he knows that “bloody instructions, being taught, return to plague the inventor” (1.7.10). Also, Macbeth notes, Duncan is a guest, kinsmen, and good king. He decides ambition is not enough to justify the murder.

Duncan thinks of his role as King in terms of what he can give. He’s like a gardener in nature; putting his country above his own desires...

...Macbeth, in contrast, thinks in terms of what he can take. This makes his relationship with nature adversarial.

Lady Macbeth enters, asking where he’s been. Macbeth tells her they won’t murder Duncan. She questions his manhood. Macbeth replies: “I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is none” (1.7.46-47). But Lady Macbeth continues: she says she has nursed his baby, but if she’d known her husband was such a coward she’d have rather “dashed [the baby’s] brains out” (1.7.56).

Ironic that Duncan thinks killing Duncan will only end up leading to more bloodshed, and ruin his honor, which he prizes.

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth debate about manhood and courage. She says it’s taking what you want. He says it’s the power to put responsibility before selfishness, the power to not take what you want.
Macbeth asks what will happen if they fail. Lady Macbeth assures him they won’t fail if they have courage. She outlines the plan: she’ll give Duncan’s bedroom attendants enough wine to ensure they black out from drunkenness. Then she and Macbeth will commit the murder and frame the attendants. Macbeth, impressed by her courage, agrees.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

It is after midnight in Inverness. Banquo talks with his son Fleance and notices the stars aren’t shining. He prays to restore the natural order and prays to "restrain me in the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose" (2.1.7-8).

Macbeth enters. Banquo tells Macbeth his sleep has been troubled by dreams of the weird sisters. Macbeth claims never to think about them. But he suggests they talk about the witches soon, and adds that if Banquo supports him when the time comes he’ll reward him and honor Banquo for it.

Banquo says he’ll be receptive to whatever Macbeth has to say provided he loses no honor in seeking to gain more. Banquo and Fleance head off to bed.

Alone, Macbeth sees a bloody dagger floating in the air. He can’t grasp it, and can’t decide whether it’s a phantom or his imagination. “Nature seems dead” to him (2.1.50).

Offstage, Lady Macbeth rings the bell to signal that Duncan’s attendants are asleep. Macbeth goes to murder Duncan.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

Lady Macbeth waits in agitation for Macbeth to do the deed. She comments that had the sleeping Duncan not looked like her father she’d have killed him herself.

Macbeth enters. He’s killed Duncan and Duncan’s attendants. His hands are bloodstained and he’s upset that when one of the attendants said “God bless us” in his sleep, he was unable to say “Amen.” He also thought he heard a voice say “Macbeth does murder sleep” (2.2.34).

Lady Macbeth soothes him and tells him to wash his hands, but notices he’s still carrying the daggers he used to kill Duncan. Macbeth refuses to return to the scene of the crime. Lady Macbeth, furious, runs off to plant the daggers on the attendants.

Lady Macbeth’s tragedy is that she doesn’t realize that murdering Duncan will torment and ultimately destroy her. Macbeth’s tragedy is more profound: he does realize it, and still gives in to his ambition.

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Compare Macbeth’s nervousness to Lady Macbeth’s calm, collected behavior.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

A porter goes to the door and doorknocks, looking for whoever is knocking. He imagines he’s guarding hell, but the knocking is not from anyone he knows. Macduff and Lennox describe the terrible storm that raged the previous night and sounds like “strange screams of death” (2.3.52).

Macduff cries out in horror and runs onto stage. Macbeth and Lennox ask what happened, then run to Duncan’s chamber. Banquo, Malcolm, and Donalbain wake. Lady Macbeth enters, pretending not to know what happened, and expressing horror when Macduff tells her of the murder. Macbeth returns, and wishes he had died rather than have to see such a thing. Malcolm and Donalbain enter and ask what’s happened. Lennox tells them that Duncan was murdered by his drunken attendants.

Lady Macbeth returns, her hands now as bloody as Macbeth’s. But she’s calm, and identifies the ‘mysterious’ knocking as someone at the South entrance. She says: “a little water clears us of this deed” (2.2.65), and tells Macbeth to go and put his nightgown down so no one will suspect them.

Macbeth wishes that the knocking could wake Duncan.

As Macbeth gets closer to the murder, nature starts to go haywire. Banquo believes true manhood means acting honorably—just what Macbeth used to believe.

Banquo is open about the troubling “dreams” the witches have inspired in him. Macbeth, who has decided to act on his own selfish ambition, is not.

Banquo is also struggling against ambition. Earlier Macbeth begged the weird sisters to hide the stars to hide (1.4.51). They have.

Interesting that in Macbeth, most of the violence happens offstage.

The unnatural act of killing Duncan has caused havoc in nature.

As they wait for Macduff to return, Lennox describes the terrible storm that raged the previous night and sounded like “strange screams of death” (2.3.52).

Everyone is being "natural" and honest in their grief except Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They are the snakes hiding behind the “innocent flower.” Everything they do now must protect their secret. This secrecy becomes their defining trait, warping them.

The Porter provides a moment of ironic comedy. He imagines he’s guarding hell, but with the murder of Duncan he really is guarding a hellish place.

The unnatural act of killing Duncan has caused havoc in nature.

Macbeth shows remorse.

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Lady Macbeth is calm. She identifies the "mysterious" knocking as someone at the South entrance. But she is naïve, thinking water can wash away her guilt.

As Macbeth gets closer to the murder, nature starts to go haywire. Banquo believes true manhood means acting honorably—just what Macbeth used to believe.

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Lady Macbeth returns, her hands now as bloody as Macbeth’s. But she’s calm, and identifies the ‘mysterious’ knocking as someone at the South entrance. She says: “a little water clears us of this deed” (2.2.65), and tells Macbeth to go and put his nightgown down so no one will suspect them.

Macbeth wishes that the knocking could wake Duncan.

As Macbeth gets closer to the murder, nature starts to go haywire. Banquo believes true manhood means acting honorably—just what Macbeth used to believe.

Banquo is open about the troubling “dreams” the witches have inspired in him. Macbeth, who has decided to act on his own selfish ambition, is not.

Banquo is also struggling against ambition. Earlier Macbeth begged the weird sisters to hide the stars to hide (1.4.51). They have.

Interesting that in Macbeth, most of the violence happens offstage.

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The thanes agree to meet in the hall to discuss what's happened. Malcolm and Donalbain, though, remain behind. They realize that one of the thanes is probably the murderer and fear that they'll be the next targets. They decide to flee: Malcolm to England and Donalbain to Ireland.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Ross and an old man stand near Macbeth's castle. They discuss the unnatural portents just before and after Duncan's murder: darkness during the day, owls killing hawks, horses eating one another.

Macduff enters. He says it seems Duncan's attendants did commit the murder, and that because Malcolm and Donalbain fled they likely were behind the plot.

Macduff then says Macbeth has been made king, and that he has already gone to Scone for the coronation. Ross heads to the coronation. But Macduff returns to his own castle at Fife.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

In the royal palace of Forres, Banquo states his suspicion that Macbeth fulfilled the witches' prophecy by foul play. But he notes that since the prophecy came true for Macbeth, perhaps it will come true for him as well.

Macbeth enters, with other thanes and Lady Macbeth. He asks Banquo to attend a feast that evening. Banquo says he will, but that meanwhile he has to ride somewhere on business. Macbeth asks if Fleance will be riding with him. Banquo says yes, then departs. Once he's alone, Macbeth sends a servant to summon two men. As he waits for them to arrive, he muses if the witches prophecy is true, then Banquo's descendents will be king, and he'll have murdered Duncan for nothing.

The two men (identified in the stage directions as "murderers") enter. Macbeth tells them it's Banquo's fault they're poor, then questions their manhood for bearing such offenses. The murderers agree to kill Banquo and Fleance.

ACT 3, SCENE 2

After sending a servant to fetch Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, waits, and muses that she has what she desires but isn't happy.

Macbeth enters. She asks why he spends so much time alone. Macbeth responds: "We have scorchd the snake, not killed it" (3.2.15). He fears someone might try to kill him as he killed Duncan, and seems envious of Duncan's "sleep" (3.2.25).

Lady Macbeth reminds him to be "bright and jovial" at the feast. Macbeth tells her to act the same. But then Macbeth moans, "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (3.2.37) because Banquo and Fleance are still alive.

Macbeth says that before the night is through there shall be a "deed of dreadful note" (3.2.45), but adds that she's better off being innocent until she can applaud what has happened.

...but does Macduff suspect him already? It isn't clear. But the paranoid Macbeth must think he does: violence creates fear which leads to violence.

Further havoc in nature caused by the murder of Duncan and destruction of the natural order.

Macbeth's plot worked! If he could be a good and virtuous King, perhaps it will all turn out well...

Macbeth's work has been done. In order to keep power built by violence, more violence is always needed. Macbeth knew this would happen; he's caught in the vicious cycle of violence...

...and that vicious cycle begins to take a psychological toll on Macbeth.

Macbeth tries to protect Lady Macbeth: traditional male-female roles.

The Third Murderer is an unsolved mystery. No critics know who he is or why he's there.

Macbeth's effort to control fate seals his doom. Fleance lives and Banquo's death makes the Thanes suspicious.

ACT 3, SCENE 3

The two murderers lie in wait a mile from the royal castle. A third murderer joins them, sent by Macbeth. Banquo and Fleance enter. The murderers attack. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. The murderers return to the castle to tell Macbeth what's happened.

ACT 3, SCENE 4

Macbeth bids all the lords welcome to the feast. Just at that moment, he notices that one of the murderers is standing at the door. The murderer tells Macbeth that Banquo is dead but Fleance escaped. Macbeth comforts himself that Fleance will not be a threat for quite some time.

Lady Macbeth calls to Macbeth and asks him to return to the feast and sit. But Macbeth doesn't see an empty seat at the table. When Lennox enters, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost sitting there. Macbeth alone can see the ghost. He astonishes the thanes by shouting at the empty chair.

Macbeth uses the same methods to get the murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance that Lady Macbeth used against Macbeth: he questions their manhood.

Macbeth learns that his first attempt to control fate has failed.

Is Banquo's ghost real or a figment of Macbeth's guilty mind? The uncertainty emphasizes that Macbeth's fate is part of him, caused by his character: his ambition and guilt.

Lady Macbeth tells the thanes not to worry, that since childhood Macbeth has suffered fits. She pulls Macbeth aside and once again questions his manhood. The ghost disappears. Macbeth rambles about murders and spirits risen from the grave until Lady Macbeth reminds him of his guests. He echoes her story about his fits, then leads a toast to the missing Banquo.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth continue to try to lie to keep their secrets and hold on power, but these lies become less and less effective as guilt about the violence they have committed begins to effect them.
The ghost reappears and Macbeth, terrified, starts shouting at it. Lady Macbeth tries to play down her husband’s strange behavior. The ghost again disappears. Macbeth is amazed that everyone could be so calm in the face of such sights. When Ross asks what sights, Lady Macbeth steps in and asks the guests to leave at once. The thanes exit.

Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth, “Blood will have blood” (3.4.121), and asks what Lady Macbeth makes of the fact that Macduff does not appear at the royal court. He decides to visit the weird sisters to find out more about his fate.

He says: “I am in blood / Stepped in so far” (3.4.135) that turning back is as difficult as continuing on.

ACT 3, SCENE 5

The weird sisters meet with Hecate, the goddess of witches. She rebukes the sisters for meddling with Macbeth without first consulting her. But she says she’ll help them when Macbeth comes to see them tomorrow. She says that they’ll show him visions that will give him confidence and “draw him to his confusion” (3.5.29).

ACT 3, SCENE 6

Lennox and another lord talk sarcastically about Macbeth and the too great similarities between the murders of Duncan and Banquo, with Donalbain and Malcolm accused of the first and Fleance blamed for the second.

Macduff, the lord says, has gone to England to meet with Malcolm and try to get the English King Edward and his lords to gather an army to help them defeat Macbeth. The rumor is that Macbeth sent a messenger to Macduff. Macduff rebuffed the messenger, who turned his back as if to say that Macduff would pay for that decision.

Both men hope Macduff remains safe and soon returns with the armies of Malcolm and England to free Scotland from Macbeth.

ACT 4, SCENE 1

In a cavern, the weird sisters throw awful ingredients such as “eye of newt and toe of frog” (4.1.14) into a cauldron full of a boiling brew. Hecate arrives, and all dance and sing. One witch cries out “Something wicked this way comes” (4.1.62). Macbeth enters. He commands the witches to answer his questions.

The witches conjure up three apparitions. First, a floating head appears and tells Macbeth to beware Macduff.

Next, a bloody child appears. The child says that “no man of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.95-96).

Finally, a child wearing a crown and holding a tree appears. It says that Macbeth will not be defeated until Great Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth is pleased: since forests don’t march, he must be invincible!

Macbeth wants to know one more thing: will Banquo’s heirs have the throne? The witches perform a final conjuring. Eight kings appear walking in a line, the eighth holding a mirror, and all of them followed by Banquo’s ghost. Macbeth, furious at this sign that Banquo’s heirs will get the throne, demands answers. But Hecate mocks him and the witches vanish.

ACT 4, SCENE 2

At Fife (Macduff’s castle), Lady Macbeth is angry. She demands to know why Macduff has gone to England, leaving her behind. She thinks Macduff is a coward. Ross says Macduff’s flight could result from fear of losing his family for the good of his country.
After Ross leaves, Lady Macduff turns to her son. She tells the boy that his father is dead. The boy does not believe her, but asks if his father is a traitor. Lady Macduff says yes, Macduff is a traitor: a man who swore an oath and broke it and now must hang. The boy thinks if traitors allow themselves to be hanged they must be fools, since there are undoubtedly more traitors than honest men in the world.

A servant bursts in to warn of coming danger, then rushes out. Before Lady Macduff or her children can run, murderers enter the chamber, stab Macduff’s son, and chase Lady Macduff offstage.

**ACT 4, SCENE 3**

In England, near the palace of King Edward, Macduff urges Malcolm to quickly raise an army against Macbeth. But Malcolm says Macduff might actually be working for Macbeth, a suspicion heightened by the fact that Macduff left his family behind and unprotected in Scotland.

Malcolm then adds that he delays attacking Macbeth because he fears that he himself would perhaps be even a worse ruler. Malcolm describes himself as so lustful, vicious, and greedy that he makes Macbeth look kind. Macduff cries out in horror, and says he will leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Malcolm then reveals that none of his self-description was true: it was a trick to test Macduff’s loyalty. Malcolm now believes that Macduff is loyal to Scotland and not Macbeth, and that he has an army of ten thousand men commanded by the English Lord Siward, ready to invade Scotland.

Just then a doctor enters. Malcolm speaks with the doctor, then tells Macduff that King Edward of England is so saintly that he can cure disease.

Ross enters. He tells Malcolm that if he invaded the Scottish people would line up to join his army against Macbeth. Finally, Ross tells Macduff his family has been murdered. Macduff cries out in anguish. Malcolm tells him to fight it like a man. Macduff responds that he must also “feel it like a man” (4.3.223). But they agree that Macduff’s anger and grief should be used to fuel his revenge.

Macduff’s son is wise beyond his years, noting that those who put themselves above society far outnumber those who put the common good above their own selfish ambitions.

Macbeth has ordered the murder of the innocent. His loss of humanity is complete, and the seeds of his self-destruction are sown.

**ACT 5, SCENE 1**

It is night in Macbeth’s castle of Dunsinane. A doctor and a gentlewoman wait. The gentlewoman called the doctor because she has seen Lady Macbeth sleepwalking the last few nights, but she refuses to say what Lady Macbeth says or does.

Lady Macbeth enters, holding a candle, but asleep. Lady Macbeth keeps rubbing her hands as if to wash them while saying “out, damned spot” (5.1.30). Then Lady Macbeth seems to relive her attempt to convince Macbeth to kill Duncan, concluding with the words: “Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him” (5.1.33-34).

The horrified doctor and gentlewoman watch as Lady Macbeth then relives conversations with Macbeth after the murder of Banquo and hears an imaginary knocking and rushes off to bed. The doctor says the disease is beyond his power to cure, and that “unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles” (5.1.61-62). He also says he dares not speak about what he’s just witnessed.

Lady Macbeth’s guilt makes it impossible for her to hide the horrors that she and Macbeth have committed. Her conscience is rebelling against the unnatural fiend that ambition has turned her into.

**ACT 5, SCENE 2**

Lennox and other Scottish lords and soldiers discuss the situation: Malcolm and his army are at Birnam Wood. Macbeth, in a constant rage verging on madness, is fortifying the stronghold of Dunsinane.

The lords agree that Macbeth is tormented by his terrible actions, and that those who follow him do so out of fear, not love. The lords ride to join Malcolm.

With the mention of Birnam Wood and Dunsinane, the audience can see that Macbeth’s fate is approaching.

Macbeth’s efforts to maintain power through violence have, in fact, turned people against him and made him weak.

**ACT 5, SCENE 3**

Macbeth dismisses all reports about Malcolm’s army, saying he’ll fear nothing until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane and mocking Malcolm as a man born of woman. He shouts for his servant Seyton to bring his armor, then muses how sick at heart he feels, how withered his life has become.

He asks the doctor about Lady Macbeth, then commands that the man cure her. In an aside, the doctor says that if he could escape Dunsinane, no fee of any size could bring him back.

Macbeth is fearful because of the prophecies, but he seems to wish he weren’t. He knows his life is awful, but he’s so gripped by ambition that he can’t turn back.

Macbeth seems totally out of touch with reality. He is a man warped beyond any semblance of humanity.
ACT 5, SCENE 4

In Birnam Wood, Malcolm walks with Macduff, Siward, Young Siward, and others Scottish and English lords. Malcolm gives orders that to hide the size of their army, all soldiers should cut a branch from a tree and hold it upright as they march.

ACT 5, SCENE 5

Macbeth laughs at the coming army, but seems bored by his lack of fear. Suddenly, a woman cries out. Seyton investigates, and returns with news that Lady Macbeth has died. Macbeth gives a speech about life: “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,” concluding that life “is a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / signifying nothing” (5.5.18-27).

ACT 5, SCENE 6

Malcolm orders his men to throw down the branches they carry. The first charge against Dunsinane commences under Siward and Macduff.

ACT 5, SCENE 7

In the fighting, Macbeth encounters and fights Young Siward. Though Young Siward is brave, Macbeth quickly kills him and says in a mocking tone that he fears no man of woman born.

ACT 5, SCENE 8

Macduff searches for Macbeth, vowing to kill him to avenge his family. Emphasis on Macduff’s need for revenge against Macbeth. The play is building suspense.

ACT 5, SCENE 9

Malcolm and Siward meet. They have easily captured the castle because Macbeth’s men barely fight back.

ACT 5, SCENE 10

Macbeth and Macduff meet. Macbeth says he has avoided fighting Macduff because he has too much blood on his hands already.

ACT 5, SCENE 11

Malcolm, Siward, Ross, and others enter. Ross tells Siward of Young Siward’s death. Siward asks if his son died from wounds on the front or back. Ross replies the front. Siward is content, denying Malcolm’s comment that his son is worth more mourning than that.

Macduff shows his loyalty to King and country.

Malcolm accepts the thanes’ loyalty and makes them all earls (a higher rank). He pledges to “plant” a new peace, and to heal the wounds Macbeth and his “fiend-like queen” (5.11.35) inflicted on Scotland.