

Macbeth

Macbeth begins the play as a heroic and triumphant figure, the noble Thane of Glamis, a general in the Scottish army who has just defeated the insurgent King of Norway. As a reward for his valor and loyalty, King Duncan transfers the title of Thane of Cawdor to Macbeth. However, prior to receiving this news, Macbeth encounters the Three Weird Sisters, who greet him as the Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and future King of Scotland. Macbeth is initially wary of the witches' prophecy, but after he discovers that he has been named Thane of Cawdor, his belief in their prophecy is cemented and his thoughts turn to how he might become king. From that point on, Macbeth sinks deeper into murder and treachery as he becomes a regicidal tyrant in the eyes of the people of Scotland.

Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is Macbeth's wife and "dearest partner of greatness." At the start of the play, she is the more dominant figure in the marriage, viewing her husband as weak and lacking the necessary willpower to achieve their mutual ambitions. Upon receiving Macbeth's letter about the witches' prophecies, Lady Macbeth is thrilled by the prospect of becoming queen. She calls out to the "spirits" to "unsex" her and turn her "womanly" attributes into more masculine ones so that she might become "cruel" enough to murder King Duncan herself. However, after Duncan's death, both Lady Macbeth's sanity and power in her marriage begin to decline. By the start of act V, she is sleepwalking and hallucinating about having blood on her hands, with the court doctor's proclaiming that she would be better off with a priest than a physician. She ultimately takes her own life, and Macbeth laments that she died at a time when he is unable to mourn her properly.

Banquo

Banquo is a general in the Scottish army and Macbeth's friend. He is with Macbeth when the witches deliver their prophecy. When he asks them to tell him about his own future, they inform him that though he will never be king, his children will be. Ever the loyal kinsman, Banquo refuses to assist Macbeth in his plot against the king and views the witches as evil beings. However, their prophecy with regards to Banquo's children becoming kings is enough to pique Banquo's curiosity, even as it puts him and his son, Fleance, within the dangerous territory of Macbeth's ambition. Ultimately, Banquo dies in defense of his son, ensuring that his legacy continues at the cost of his own life.

Duncan

Duncan is the King of Scotland. He is characterized as a fair and wise king who is generous with his kinsmen and just with his people. Duncan awards Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor as a reward for

his bravery in the battle against the King of Norway. However, despite the king's virtues, the Macbeths murder Duncan in his sleep, sending Scotland into a spiral of chaos and disorder.

Macduff

Macduff is the Thane of Fife and the man who ultimately ends Macbeth's reign of terror. Macduff is a loyal thane who lacks the ambition of both Banquo and Macbeth, instead working to support whomever he sees as the rightful king. He quickly grows suspicious of Macbeth after Duncan's murder, refusing to attend Macbeth's coronation. However, his own sense of honor blinds him to the danger in which he has left his family after his flight to England. After hearing that his family was massacred, Macduff vows revenge, going on to defeat Macbeth in combat and restore order to Scotland

Malcolm

Malcolm is the eldest son of King Duncan and the rightful heir to the Scottish throne. Duncan officially names Malcolm as his heir in act I, scene IV, cutting off Macbeth's prospects for ascending the throne. After discovering that their father has been murdered, Malcolm and his brother Donalbain decide to flee Scotland and take refuge in neighboring courts. Malcolm flees to England, where he forms an agreement with the King of England in order to retake the throne of Scotland from Macbeth. When Macduff arrives in England, Malcolm is initially mistrustful, but the two eventually become allies. At the end of the play, Malcolm and the English forces are victorious, and Malcolm prepares to set right the harms that Macbeth has inflicted on Scotland.

The Witches

The witches, often referred to as the three "weird sisters," are Macbeth's dark and mysterious guides on his descent into evil and tyranny. The play opens with their premonition that "fair is foul, and foul is fair," establishing their moral ambiguity and suggesting that, in the world of the play, things aren't always as they seem. When the witches first meet Banquo and Macbeth in act I, scene III, they are described as androgynous and "not like the inhabitants o' the earth." However, their prophecies prove fairer than their foul appearances portended, and, after becoming king, Macbeth seeks them out a second time. The witches deliver three more prophecies, lulling Macbeth into a false sense of security that ultimately brings about his downfall.

Minor Characters

Fleance

Fleance is Banquo's son. After Macbeth sends murderers after Banquo and Fleance, Banquo fights off the murderers while Fleance flees. In Shakespeare's source material, the legendary semi-historical accounts of the Holinshed Chronicles, Fleance eventually goes on to sire a son who returns to Scotland and begins the Stuart line of monarchs. King James I of England, Shakespeare's patron, was a Stuart, and

many scholars have speculated that the the play's gracious portrayal of Banquo was meant to flatter the king.

Ross

Ross is a Scottish thane who serves as a messenger throughout the play. Ross first appears in act I, scene II, when he reports to Duncan about Macbeth and Banquo's victory over the Norwegian forces. He later defects to Malcolm's cause after it becomes increasingly clear that Macbeth is a tyrant. Ross's role as a messenger is often used to introduce information about events that happen offstage, such as when he reports about the deaths of Macduff's family and Young Siward.

Donalbain

Donalbain is Duncan's younger son and Malcolm's brother. After his father's murder, he flees to Ireland, hoping that separating from his brother will safeguard him. Macbeth spreads the rumor that Malcolm and Donalbain were responsible for their father's death, using their hasty escape as evidence of their guilt.

Hecate

In ancient Greek mythology, Hecate is the goddess of witchcraft. She is presented as the queen of the witches, and she chastises the three "weird sisters" for speaking to Macbeth without her. The three weird sisters seem to fear Hecate, remarking nervously about her "angerly" expression and hastening to do what she asks. Hecate devises the plan to lull Macbeth into a false sense of security by issuing misleading prophecies in act IV, scene I, claiming that "security is mortals' chiefest enemy."

There is controversy surrounding whether Hecate was included in the original manuscript of the play or whether she was added in a later edition. Some Shakespearean scholars believe that a different poet is responsible for the scenes featuring Hecate, citing their incongruous tone and verse structure as evidence.

Siward

Siward is the English Earl of Northumberland and Malcolm's uncle. He leads the army that Malcolm uses to reclaim Scotland from Macbeth. Siward is a stoic man who values honor and courage. When he hears that his son died in battle, his primary concern is whether his son died an honorable death. When he

hears that his son's wounds were on his front rather than on his back, he says that he could not "wish [Young Siward] to a fairer death" and refuses to mourn him further.

The Doctor

The Doctor is called in to assess Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking. Upon hearing her talk in her sleep, he becomes convinced that her malady is not physical, but spiritual. He suggests that the only cure for what ails Lady Macbeth, and Macbeth himself, is to confess to a priest.

Lady Macduff

Lady Macduff is Macduff's wife. She loves her children and is not afraid to challenge her husband's decisions, which is evident when she criticizes Macduff's decision to flee to England. After the witches tell Macbeth to fear Macduff, Macbeth sends murderers to Macduff's home. The murderers kill Lady Macduff and all of her children, which gives Macduff great grief when he hears the news in England.

Lady Macduff is most often read as a foil for Lady Macbeth due to her status as a loving wife and mother. Though she is outspokenly critical of her husband's decisions, she does not mock him or insult him. She also worries for herself and her children in Macduff's absence, highlighting her compassion and sensibility. In addition to foiling Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff's murder is also used to reinforced Macbeth's villainy and descent into true tyranny.

Lennox, Menteith, Angus, Caithness

Lennox, Menteith, Angus, and Caithness are Scottish thanes who desert Macbeth when Malcolm's forces arrive. Lennox begins the play in the company of King Duncan and is an insecure statesman. However, after Duncan's death and Macbeth's ascension, he quickly becomes suspicious. In act III, scene, VI, Lennox indicates his support for Malcolm and Macduff's plan, noting all of the "strangely borne" events around Scotland. The desertion of Lennox and the other Scottish lords emphasizes just how poor of a ruler Macbeth is.

Murderers

The three murderers are hired by Macbeth to kill Banquo and Fleance. They were originally angry with Macbeth, but Macbeth convinces them that Banquo is the true cause of their misfortune. They successfully murder Banquo, but Fleance escapes, leaving open the possibility that the witches' prophecies will come true.