

Macbeth

Scene Commentary

ACT I, SCENE I

The opening scene of *Macbeth* not only introduces the audience to the supernatural element that will be carried throughout the play, but it also establishes a theme of disorder through the presence of the witches, the stormy weather, and the bleak landscape. The witches (or weird sisters) probably would have been portrayed on the stage — as they have been in modern cinematic productions — as grotesque and ugly creatures.

Audience members in Early Modern England viewed witchcraft differently than audiences do today. At that time, many people, including King James I, believed in the presence of witches and their ability to harm and destroy virtuous people.

The witches agree that they will meet Macbeth at a particular time and place, suggesting the importance of that encounter, which will occur in Act I, Scene 3.

ACT I, SCENE II

The location of this scene stands in stark contrast to the opening scene. While Act I, Scene 1 took place on a deserted heath representing disorder, this scene opens in King Duncan's camp, a model of order. The stage direction tells the reader that the camp is "near Forres." This phrase was added by an editor in response to a statement made by Banquo in the following scene. Forres would have been significant to Shakespeare's audiences because, in addition to being the Scottish capital at the time, it was the location of a famous coven of witches who allegedly attempted to shipwreck James I, the ruling King of England and Scotland.

Macbeth's valorous deeds

A wounded sergeant reports to Duncan the latest information about a battle against a Scottish nobleman, Macdonwald, who is rebelling against the king. The sergeant, an accomplished warrior who protected Malcolm during an attempt to capture him in battle, relates Macbeth's deeds on the battlefield. Before even introducing the title character, Shakespeare presents Macbeth as valorous and loyal who, "[d]isdaining fortune" (setting aside concern for his own life), found and killed the rebel (17). Here, Macbeth is the agent who restores order to the Scottish kingdom.

Duncan responds by calling Macbeth his "valiant cousin" (24). As the Notes indicate, Macbeth actually was Duncan's cousin. This piece of information will prove important later in the play, because Macbeth has a somewhat legitimate claim to the Scottish throne. But because the throne moves from father to first-born son (succession through primogeniture), Macbeth's claim to the throne would be legitimate only if Duncan had no living sons.

The line between good and evil

The sergeant speaks of "[s]hipwrecking storms and direful thunders" (26). In the opening scene, Shakespeare created a link between the three witches and stormy weather. He strengthens this link here through the adjective "shipwrecking," because in times past people believed that witches used storms to cause shipwrecks. The storms are immediately followed by reinforcements ("furbish'd arms") from the Norwegian king, Sweno (32). The implication is that Macbeth is on the side of good, while Sweno is on the side of evil with the witches; the line between good and evil is very clear. The sergeant explains that despite the renewed attack, Macbeth's good deeds and valorous behavior on the battlefield accumulate. Macbeth and his fellow captain, Banquo, are undeterred by the reinforcements and emerge victorious from the attack.

Ross, a Scottish nobleman or thane, relates that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor also joined Norway in the battle against the Scots. Ross uses mythical references, calling Macbeth the bridegroom of Bellona (the Roman goddess of war), to describe Macbeth's valor and loyalty. This scene clearly establishes Macbeth as a hero who is not only able to protect his king but does so repeatedly — defeating all of the king's enemies and traitors.

Macbeth's reward

Duncan ends the scene by ordering the rebellious Thane of Cawdor executed and his title bestowed upon the brave and valiant Macbeth. In addition to rewarding Macbeth's loyalty and reaffirming Macbeth's admirable qualities, this gift indicates the type of warrior society that existed in Scotland at the time. In a warrior society, advancement and promotion comes through valorous deeds on the battlefield and loyalty to the king. As you will see, Macbeth later advances by violating both of these tenets.

Keep in mind that Macbeth does not yet know of his new title. Shakespeare creates dramatic irony by providing more information to the audience than to his protagonist.

Shakespeare's sources

The events described in this scene, the battles in particular, appear in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (see the Introduction to *Macbeth*). The only event not included in the *Chronicles* is the precise amount of the payment (\$10,000) by Sweno to Duncan. Shakespearean scholar Sidney Lamb speculates that the payment might be an allusion to a \$10,000 gift made to King James's court by his brother-in-law, King Christian IV of Denmark. Thus, this allusion represents another link between the play and the English monarch, James.

ACT I, SCENE III

Back on the heath, in the middle of another storm, the weird sisters reunite. The opening to this scene firmly establishes the evil nature of the witches through their vengeful behavior. In his *Chronicles*, Holinshed refers to the weird sisters as “goddesses of destiny” (see the Introduction to *Macbeth*). Shakespeare does not use this name to describe them; he does not validate their claims of knowing the future and controlling fate. Therefore, the audience has no reason to trust or believe them. The audience only knows of their evil purposes.

Describing their recent activities, the weird sisters decide to send stormy weather to the seafaring husband of a woman who refused to share her chestnuts with one of the witches. This moment in the play may have historical roots. News from Scotland (1591) recounts a trial presided over by James I in which a group of witches was accused of trying to shipwreck James, who was the King of Scotland at that time. In addition to indicating that the witches sailed “in a sieve,” this account claims that the king was saved through his faith (8). Shakespeare may be alluding to this trial and account by having the witches torment a ship on the sea. If so, by invoking this historical event in the play, Shakespeare invites the audience to compare James, who was tested by witches, to Banquo and Macbeth who are about to be. Keep this comparison in mind as the play progresses.

The weird sisters’ level of evil seems to reach its peak with the display of “a pilot’s thumb” (28). Clearly, Shakespeare is establishing these weird sisters as Macbeth’s foes, though we have yet to know their purpose.

The meeting on the heath

Macbeth and Banquo arrive, and the meeting that the witches discussed in the opening scene takes place. Macbeth is literally travelling between the battle, which represents disorder, and the capital and court, which represent order. This initial interaction between Macbeth and the weird sisters is crucial for the rest of play. The witches’ two-part prophecy drives the action.

Macbeth’s first line, describing the day as “foul and fair,” strangely echoes the witches’ lines from the first scene (38). It also reminds the audience that nature is out of order. Despite the Scottish victory over their enemies, order has not been fully restored.

Before seeing the weird sisters, Banquo asks about the distance to Forres, which not only indicates that he and Macbeth are returning to the capital but also recalls the witch trial in News from Scotland; the trial took place in Forres. Upon seeing the sisters, Banquo’s response gives the modern reader an idea about their appearance. He describes them as “wither’d” and “wild in their attire” (40). Their appearance is so different that he believes that they are not of this earth. Trying to place them in a category that he can understand, Banquo wants to call them women. However, notice that he is unable to do so because they have facial hair. This ambiguity of gender is significant in placing the sisters outside of nature and out of the proper order. It seems that they do not truly belong in either gender. This ambiguity initiates a question about the definitions of gender that will continue throughout the play.

The sisters’ predictions

Upon Macbeth’s command, the first sister greets Macbeth by calling him “Thane of Glamis,” which is his current title (48). The second sister adds that he is “Thane of Cawdor,” and the third tells him that he “shalt be king hereafter” (49–50). Because we already know that Macbeth has been granted the title of Thane of Cawdor (and we assume that he does not yet know of this title), we suspect that the sisters may be trying to manipulate Macbeth. By providing the audience with this information in the previous scene, Shakespeare makes us question the sisters’ gift of prophecy. They merely tell Macbeth something that he does not yet know. Thus, the audience remains more skeptical of the prophecy than Macbeth does.

Banquo’s response provides us with a textual clue as to Macbeth’s on-stage reaction to this prophecy. He informs us that Macbeth appears fearful, which does not make sense to Banquo. In contrast to Macbeth’s reaction, Banquo boldly asks for his own prophecy, claiming that he does not fear the sisters’ words. The sisters’ second prediction indicates that Banquo will not be king himself, but his offspring will be kings.

Succession through death

Macbeth recovers and confronts the sisters. He informs us explicitly that he is already the Thane of Glamis; the play to this point had not established that. His statement also explains that he received the title from “Sinel’s death” (72). (According to Holinshed, Sinel was Macbeth’s father.)

Note that titles in the play are gained through the death of their holder. Macbeth cannot believe that he is the Thane of Cawdor because Cawdor is alive. But he also states that being king is not “within the prospect of belief” (75). He waivers here between belief and disbelief. If Macbeth is indeed Duncan’s cousin, Macbeth’s succession to the throne is possible, but not likely. However, his lines later in this scene indicate that he does believe it is possible; he even contemplates regicide, which would facilitate it.

Refusing to answer Macbeth’s questions, the witches vanish (by means of a trapdoor in the stage). The dialogue between Macbeth and Banquo after the weird sisters disappear reveals much about their characters. Banquo immediately doubts their appearance, suggesting that maybe they were a hallucination. Macbeth seems much more susceptible to their prediction, turning it into fact by telling Banquo that his (Banquo’s) children will be kings. In Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, the two men respond to the predictions of the witches with humor by repeating the prophecies to one another. In the play, they repeat the prophecies to each other, but Shakespeare provides no indication that they are joking as they do so.

Thane of Cawdor

Two Scottish noblemen, Ross and Angus, arrive and confirm the first part of Macbeth’s prophecy by calling him the Thane of Cawdor. Banquo, upon hearing this, refers to the prophecy as originating from “the devil” (108). Like James I, he connects the witches with evil.

Macbeth indicates his disbelief of the new title and refers to it as “borrow’d robes” (110). Clothing is an important metaphor for identity that will reappear throughout the play. For example, see Banquo’s lines 146–147 in this scene.

After being reassured that the traitorous Cawdor will be executed, Macbeth’s aside seems to indicate that he fully believes the sisters’ words. Banquo, however, is skeptical. In one of his most famous lines, Banquo expresses concern that these “instruments of darkness” may be speaking simple truths — that is, what is already fact — in order to manipulate and “betray” them (125–126).

Imperial ambition

Macbeth, not moved by Banquo’s caution, speaks another aside where he sees his current titles as prologues to an “imperial theme,” or his kingship (130). This statement is important because it is our first indication of Macbeth’s ambition to be king. Also, he refers to a suggestion that is accompanied by a “horrid image” and that will be “[a]gainst the use of nature” (136, 138). It seems clear that Macbeth already is contemplating regicide as a way of attaining

the title of king. In the space of three scenes, Macbeth has moved from being an extremely loyal and capable nobleman to someone whose ambition to be king causes him to contemplate murder.

Macbeth begins to resemble the world around him. The prediction, he says, has shaken his “single state of man” to a point that conjecture controls his mind (141). Like the turbulent weather, Macbeth’s mind is in a state of disorder. He is at war with himself.

Although he ponders regicide, an important point in this speech is that Macbeth acknowledges that killing the king would be wrong. He concludes by rationally telling himself that the prophecy will come true without his “stir” — without his killing Duncan (145). Macbeth regains control over his evil thoughts. He still wants to be king, but he is content for now to let the crown come to him.

Banquo, noticing the internal struggle that’s taking place in Macbeth, echoes Macbeth’s earlier line about borrowed robes. He explains Macbeth’s turmoil by saying that he needs time in order to become accustomed to the new titles, or “strange garments” (146).

The scene ends with the men returning to the castle. At this point, Macbeth arranges with Banquo to discuss their encounter with the weird sisters at a later time. This indicates that, despite his recent conclusion that he should not act, Macbeth is still not certain about what to do.

ACT I, SCENE IV

This scene opens at court with the rebellion having been put down successfully. The scene is important because it deals directly with the questions of royal succession that the weird sisters raised.

Before Macbeth and the other noblemen arrive, Shakespeare includes a description of Cawdor’s death, noting that he confessed his treason and repented for it. Malcolm makes the famous comment that “[n]othing in his life / Became him like the leaving it” (7–8). Cawdor’s best attribute was the nobility with which he faced his own death, acknowledging his previous actions as wrong. This description of Cawdor’s noble death does not appear in Holinshed, Shakespeare’s primary source. It is possible that Shakespeare may be foreshadowing Macbeth’s own treason and death in this scene. The fact that both men hold the title of Thane of Cawdor certainly invites this comparison. (Take note of how Macbeth dies in Act V, Scene 8. Consider what the differences in their deaths say about Macbeth.)

Hidden thoughts and schemes

Duncan’s response that it is impossible to discern the “mind’s construction” (a person’s inner thoughts) from the face invokes the disjunction between appearance and reality that will appear throughout the play (12). Immediately prior to Macbeth’s arrival, Duncan describes Cawdor as someone on whom he had built “absolute trust” (14). In giving the title to Macbeth, Duncan indicates his “absolute trust” in him as well. The bitter irony is, of course, that both Cawdors betray Duncan.

The irony of this scene deepens as Macbeth describes to Duncan the duties of a noble thane, which should be directed at the throne and country. This statement is spoken by someone who already has contemplated killing Duncan in order to take his place.

In Holinshed’s account, Duncan and Macbeth seem to be quite close to the same age, being the offspring of two sisters. In Shakespeare’s play, Duncan is more fatherly to Macbeth. The king metaphorically describes their relationship as a gardener (Duncan) tending and growing a young plant (Macbeth). Shakespeare presents the king as a mature and benevolent ruler rather than a younger contemporary of Macbeth.

Heir to the throne

Duncan names Malcolm, his oldest son, as his heir. The act of officially naming an heir was usually done in the interest of maintaining order through the smooth succession of kings. The practice of succession through the first-born male was a relatively new one at the time of Duncan’s reign. Just a few generations before, a council of thanes elected the Scottish king. Under the old system, Macbeth, as Duncan’s cousin, would have had a better chance to become king. Though the weird sisters did not specify how he would succeed to the throne, notice that Macbeth perceives the naming of Malcolm as heir as an event that could prevent the prediction from coming true.

The disjunction between reality and illusion reappears as Macbeth asks that the stars not shine on his “black and deep desires” (51). While Macbeth still realizes the difference between right and wrong, he finds himself unable to control his ambition. It is ironic that the scene begins with Duncan’s comment that it is impossible to know someone’s inner thoughts and plans, and it ends with Macbeth asking that his inner thoughts and desires be disguised.

ACT I, SCENE V

This scene marks the introduction of Lady Macbeth, one of Shakespeare’s most famous female characters. Scene 5 is also important because it provides the audience with an extended view of her character. When the scene opens, she is reading a letter from Macbeth that informs her of the predictions of the weird sisters, but claims to do so only in an effort to allow her to begin rejoicing their happy fates. The letter reaffirms for the audience Macbeth’s decision to take no action.

Lady Macbeth’s resolution

Having read the letter, Lady Macbeth’s immediate response to herself is that Macbeth’s nature is not suited to the task of regicide. Whereas Holinshed’s Macbeth has a cruel nature, Lady Macbeth informs the audience that Shakespeare’s Macbeth is “full o’ the milk of human kindness” and possesses the ambition but not the cruelty to “catch the nearest way” to the throne (16–17). She reminds us of Macbeth’s internal conflict, which we witnessed in earlier scenes.

In her soliloquy, Lady Macbeth also details her plans to “pour” her spirits into her husband’s ear so that he can overcome his nature and take the crown (25). Interestingly, in *Hamlet*, Claudius kills his brother King Hamlet by pouring poison into his ear. This connection between plays suggests a link between Lady Macbeth and regicide.

When Lady Macbeth learns that Duncan is staying at their castle that night, she becomes the first character to actually voice the regicidal act that is required. She indicates that the raven, a traditional metaphor for a messenger, will “croak the fatal entrance” of the king under her battlements (37–38). Here, she assumes a dominant role over the castle defense — its battlements — a role that is typically held by the lord of the castle.

“Unsex me”

This assumption of masculinity continues in one of her most famous speeches, which comes in the form of a prayer. Interestingly, this prayer is directed toward “spirits,” which means that her religious attitudes are pagan (38). The prayer indicates that these spirits are malignant. Gender becomes a key issue as Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to “unsex” her. She wants the spirits to remove from her any feminine attributes that will interfere with her plan to murder Duncan. The request implies that men are more capable of cruelty than women. Lady Macbeth’s words are ironic because Macbeth, who has excelled in military prowess, is conflicted about committing murder. Even before her prayer, Lady Macbeth seems more suited to committing regicide than her husband.

Like Macbeth earlier, she also asks that darkness and the “smoke of hell” disguise her actions (49). It is significant that she asks for a cover for her actions, and he asks that his desires be disguised. At this point in the play, she is clearly the more active agent of the two.

Macbeth’s homecoming

When Macbeth arrives, he shows no indication that he plans to commit a crime toward Duncan. He tells Lady Macbeth that the king will depart from their household the next morning. In keeping with her more active role, Lady Macbeth warns her husband not to let his face betray his thoughts, once again invoking a separation between illusion and reality.

Lady Macbeth also describes her husband as the serpent under the bush. Interestingly, he later appropriates the same metaphor when referring to Banquo and Fleance.

Macbeth refuses to commit to any course of action regarding the sisters’ prophecy. He puts off any decisions, as he did with Banquo in the third scene, until a later discussion. However, he also does nothing to stop his wife’s preparations for the demise of Duncan.

Lady Macbeth’s active and dominant role in this situation enables the audience to feel more sympathy with Macbeth, who is obviously tormented by being caught between his ambition and his knowledge of right and wrong.

ACT I, SCENE VI

Duncan’s arrival at Macbeth’s castle transpires in this short scene. It opens with Duncan and his party in front of the castle. Shakespeare contrasts the dark and powerful discussion in the previous scene with Duncan’s trust and ignorance. Duncan comments on the castle’s “pleasant seat” and the air that is appropriate for their “gentle senses” (1–3). Ironically, there is a disjunction in appearances and reality even in nature. Whereas storms indicated a disorder in nature in earlier scenes, there is no sense of impending danger here.

Banquo’s reference in line 4 to the “temple-haunting martlet,” a bird that lives in church steeples, stands in stark contrast to Lady Macbeth’s raven in the previous scene, who was supposed to “croak” Duncan’s entrance.

In the previous scene, Lady Macbeth sent her husband to greet the king and cautioned him to disguise his thoughts. But Macbeth does not appear in this scene. Lady Macbeth greets the visitors by herself, and she seems to have no problem hiding her intentions. Like Macbeth in Act I, Scene 4, Lady Macbeth details her duties and their relationship to the king. She claims that as subjects of the king, their belongings are at his disposal, and she says that any service they provide to the king does not measure up to the honors he has bestowed on them.

Hand in hand, she conducts the king under the battlements and into her castle. Despite the frequent references to love and the pleasantness of the castle, the final image of Lady Macbeth leading Duncan into the castle is a sinister one.

ACT I, SCENE VII

This final scene of Act I is important in a number of ways. Primarily, it focuses on the Macbeths, providing an in-depth look at each character as Lady Macbeth leads the discussion of which course of action to take.

Weighing the consequences

Although Macbeth had extended asides earlier in the act, he opens this scene with his first true soliloquy. In this speech, he examines regicide rationally from a variety of perspectives. He realizes that the impact of a decision to kill the king will not end with the murder itself. The consequences of regicide would be extensive.

For instance, from a religious perspective, Duncan’s death would “jump” or risk the afterlife because murder is a mortal sin (7). Furthermore, from a more earthbound standpoint, Macbeth understands that as king he would be as vulnerable to regicide as Duncan. And finally, the act of regicide would violate not only his bond to Duncan as a subject but also his bond as a blood relative. Thus, Macbeth demonstrates that he is acutely aware of the implications of his proposed action.

Macbeth also knows that there is no good reason for him to commit such an act, because Duncan is a virtuous and good king. With horror, he also ponders the enormous grief that would grip the country if Duncan were killed. Notice that he makes this argument in terms of natural disorder, indicating that “tears shall drown the wind” if Duncan dies (25). Ultimately, his personal ambition is the only reason to commit regicide.

Rationalizing regicide

Lady Macbeth interrupts the soliloquy by asking why he is not with the king's party. At this point, Macbeth has decided once again to turn away from the evil deed of regicide. He strongly informs Lady Macbeth that they will not proceed with their plans. Notice the reappearance of clothing metaphors as she responds by asking, "Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dress'd yourself?" (35-36).

For the remainder of the scene, Lady Macbeth works to alter her husband's resolve. She begins by returning to the issue of gender, questioning his masculinity by calling him a coward.

The "poor cat i' the adage" that Lady Macbeth refers to here is the Latin phrase *catus amat pisces sed non vult tingere plantas* (45). The phrase means that the cat loves fish but does not wish to wet his feet. This saying accurately describes Macbeth; he possesses the ambition to be king but not the resolve to take the action necessary to achieve it.

Macbeth defends himself by claiming that not killing the king actually makes him more of a man. His reason tells him that killing a king, especially one who trusts him as much as Duncan does, diminishes his manhood.

Lady Macbeth's response may shed light on Macbeth's initial reaction to the prediction by the weird sisters. By referring to a previous moment where neither the time nor the place were convenient for this act — Macbeth "would make both" (52) — she seems to indicate that the plan to kill Duncan may not be a recent one. In fact, she gives us, for the first time, an indication that Macbeth may have broached the subject even before the prophecy. Possibly, Macbeth was already susceptible to the idea of regicide when he was on the battlefield defending Duncan.

Lady Macbeth next attacks her husband's honor. She claims that had she sworn to kill her own child, she would. Lady Macbeth's evil disposition seems to reach its peak in this statement as she demonstrates her monstrous determination. Through inverted logic, she indicates that honoring a commitment to regicide is more important than honoring a commitment to one's king.

Emotion versus reason

Notice that Lady Macbeth argues on emotion. Her passionate arguments contrast sharply with Macbeth's more rational exploration of the consequences of murder, which opened the scene. Pay attention to the behavior of the Macbeths after the crime. Consider whether they still act with the same respective focus on reason and emotion.

In this speech, Lady Macbeth mentions that she has been a mother. This line may be confusing because the Macbeths are childless. However, Sidney Lamb points out that Lady Macbeth had a child with her first husband; Macbeth is her second husband. Regardless, it is important to keep in mind that because Lady Macbeth is childless, she runs no risk of having to act on her horrific statement.

Lady Macbeth describes to her husband how they will commit the crime and subsequently frame Duncan's servants for the murder. After she assures him that they will not be blamed for the crime, a shift occurs in Macbeth. Although he still realizes that regicide is wrong, he commits to that course of action.

Macbeth's final line of the scene — "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" — illustrates the disparity between his face, which is false because it is not an accurate representation, and his heart, which is false because he is being traitorous (82).

The full title indicates that this play is a tragedy, and the choice that ends this first act begins Macbeth's tragic fall. Under the notion of divine right kingship (see the Introduction to Early Modern England), regicide is the highest crime. After Shakespeare's protagonist pledges himself to that course of action, we should consider whether we are still sympathetic with the play's central character, and if so, why.

ACT II, SCENE I

This scene opens with a conversation between Banquo and his son, Fleance, in the courtyard of Macbeth's castle late at night. Fleance represents the second part of the weird sisters' prophecy, which foretold that although Banquo will never become king himself, he will have a line of kings. Banquo refers to the stars as "candles" and notes that they "are all out" (5). The darkness of this night resonates with the requests we heard from Macbeth and his wife in earlier scenes for darkness to hide their evil thoughts and plans.

Banquo's inner battle

Despite being fatigued, Banquo is avoiding sleep because of "cursed thoughts" that invade his unconscious (8). Unlike Macbeth, Banquo is able to resist traitorous ideas when he is awake, but he cannot erase such thoughts from his dreams. The fact that Banquo is also plagued by these thoughts, albeit in his sleep, allows us to have some sympathy for Macbeth. If Banquo were able to dismiss altogether any thoughts of his family assuming control of the throne, we may condemn Macbeth further for his inability to reign in his ambitions.

When Macbeth enters the scene, he and Banquo discuss their encounter with the weird sisters. Banquo explicitly states that he does not wish to take an active role in helping Macbeth become king. He tells Macbeth, "So I lose none / In seeking to augment it, but still keep / My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear, I shall be counsell'd" (26–28). He does, however, agree to discuss the matter further as long as he will not lose honor or stain his allegiance to Duncan. Banquo resolves to honor his commitment to Duncan, placing him in opposition to Lady Macbeth, who has convinced Macbeth that commitment to regicide is more honorable than commitment to the king.

Shakespeare deviates significantly from his historical source by not having Banquo serve as Macbeth's accomplice in Duncan's murder. This deviation ennoble Banquo, who keeps his loyalty intact. It also may have served the practical political purpose of flattering James I, Banquo's alleged descendant. At the same time, this plot change removes a potential point of sympathy for Macbeth because Banquo, who harbors the same ambitious thoughts as Macbeth, does not take action against the king.

Preparing for murder

Macbeth orders his servant to "bid thy mistress, when my drink is ready / She strike upon the bell" (31–32). Some critics argue that the line does not refer to an actual drink being prepared for Macbeth. Instead, this line may provide the servant with an explanation of the ringing bell in advance. Furthermore, Macbeth's reference to the drink may metaphorically link back to the "poisoned chalice" of betrayal that he mentioned in his previous soliloquy (I.7.11). Clearly, Lady Macbeth is to ring the bell when all is ready for Macbeth to commit the murder.

Following the servant's departure, Macbeth speaks his second crucial soliloquy. Once again, there is a fissure between illusion and reality as Macbeth imagines that he sees a dagger hovering in the air in front of him. Previously, Macbeth was responsible for creating the disparity between illusion and reality; he put on a "false face" to hide his ambitions. Now, a shift has occurred, and Macbeth is the victim of the disparity between illusion and reality; he cannot distinguish between the two. Notice that the evil and disorder in which he is participating horrifies Macbeth but does not dissuade him from his course of action.

In the midst of his soliloquy, Macbeth refers to Hecate. Hecate was originally the name of the Roman goddess of the night; however, she is traditionally associated with the devil and specifically believed to be the guardian of witches. Scholars speculate that this reference may have inspired dramatist Thomas Middleton to add the appearance of Hecate in Act III, Scene 5. (See the "Introduction to Macbeth" for an explanation of Middleton's role in creating the text of the play.)

When the bell calls Macbeth to his deed, his response reveals a slight shift in thinking. When he was pondering the murder earlier, he was assured of the king's salvation because of Duncan's many virtues (I.7.16–28). Now, he hopes that Duncan cannot hear the bell that either summons the king "to heaven or to hell" (64). Macbeth is no longer certain that the king is bound for heaven, which makes the cruelty of his crime even greater.

ACT II, SCENE II

The action of this scene immediately follows the action of Act II, Scene 1. Minimal time has passed as the play's perspective switches from Macbeth to his accomplice, Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth says that she has heard an owl, which "shriek'd . . . the stern 'st good-night" (3–4). The owl, with its nocturnal behavior and night-piercing call, was thought to be the form in which the devil appeared to witches. Its cries in the night were generally considered bad omens.

Lady Macbeth's role

Lady Macbeth's lines convey her active role in the regicide. She has drugged Duncan's servants so that Macbeth can enter and leave Duncan's chamber unnoticed. (As we will see, the Macbeths also consider the servants the natural choices for men to frame with the king's murder.)

Lady Macbeth's participation in the events surrounding the murder differs from the role she plays in Shakespeare's source, the *Holinshed Chronicles*. *Holinshed* does show Lady Macbeth convincing her husband to take action against Duncan. But the act of drugging the king's guards and later placing the daggers in their possession seems to be based on a different story related by *Holinshed* — the story of the murder of King Duffe by Donwald and his wife.

Continuing the bold statements she has used in earlier scenes, Lady Macbeth claims that she would have committed the crime herself if Duncan did not resemble her father. This line is significant in a number of ways. First, it illustrates that there is a disjunction between Lady Macbeth's words and deeds. Recall that in Act I, Scene 7 she told her husband that she would kill her own child if needed, but she is not at any risk for having to perform this heinous act. Second, the link to Duncan as a father figure holds significance for Macbeth as well. As seen in Act I, Scene 4, Duncan behaves in a fatherly manner toward his seemingly loyal subject.

The deed is done

When Macbeth enters the scene, his wife says that she "heard the owl scream and the crickets cry" (16). While the owl's scream is a bad omen, crickets traditionally were thought to make noise when a murder was committed.

Macbeth has, indeed, committed the crime. Having done so, he is unable to even utter an "Amen," which indicates his separation from God (29). The separation he experiences supports the divine right theory of kingship where God appoints kings. Not only has Macbeth violated political, ethical, and moral tenets by killing his king and cousin, he also has usurped God's power by trying to appoint himself king.

Lady Macbeth is very practical in this critical moment. Seeing that Macbeth has carried the murder weapons with him, and determining that he is incapable of returning to Duncan's chamber, she takes over. She returns the daggers to the location of the crime and spreads Duncan's blood on the drugged servants guarding the king's door. She returns and chides Macbeth for becoming "lost" in his thoughts about the king's death (71). Her behavior reveals her cruel strength, but it also reveals her shortsightedness. Lady Macbeth believes that after the murder is accomplished, its consequences will be only good. This, of course, contradicts Macbeth's earlier sentiment that violence begets violence (I.7.7–10).

Images of remorse

Sleep has a great deal of significance in this scene and in the entire play. Macbeth introduces the theme of sleep in lines 35–36 when he claims to have heard a voice that banishes him from its comforts. Duncan and his servants were asleep when the crimes against them were committed. In contrast, Macbeth's paranoia and his guilt over his behavior — evidenced by his inability to return to Duncan's chamber — will prevent him from sleeping. The inability to sleep also indicates the disorder and unnaturalness of this play and, in particular, the crime of regicide. Watch for other references to sleep in the play. Try to determine how they are significant in their context and in the play as a whole.

The issue of cleanliness also arises at the end of the scene. Macbeth feels such deep guilt that he realizes all the water in the ocean will not clean him of the deed. Conversely, Lady Macbeth claims that a "little water" clears them of the deed (67). The issue of cleanliness also suggests a comparison to Banquo who, in the previous scene, agrees to discuss Macbeth's ambitions as long as doing so does not "stain" his allegiance.

This scene ends with Macbeth expressing his remorse over his crime, both by not wanting to know himself and also by wishing that Duncan was able to awake. Macbeth, incapable of sleeping, stands in direct contrast to Duncan, who is incapable of waking. Pay special attention to Macbeth's line in the next scene after he greets Lennox.

ACT II, SCENE III

In most of Shakespeare's plays, we see a variety of subplots and comic moments and characters. These dramatic devices help not only to diversify the play but, especially in the case of tragedies, also provide important and often needed moments of comic relief. Usually, comic relief occurs right after a particularly tense and dramatic scene. Having entrapped the audience in the drama and tension of the play, the dramatist will give his audience a short break with which to relax before continuing. Macbeth only has one moment of comic relief that breaks the steady and continual action of the play. It occurs at the beginning of this scene with the entrance and dialogue of the porter.

The guardian of the gate

Even in the porter's humorous dialogue, however, Shakespeare embeds serious threads and allusions. Notice how disorderly the porter is; he is drunk, unkempt, and surly. In addition, his first line refers to the "porter of hell-gate" (2). In his 20-line opening speech, he mentions the devil or hell a total of five times. Though he is being humorous, there is a sinister parallel between his activity — opening the gates of Macbeth's castle — and opening the gates of hell.

The porter's statement about the "farmer that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty" refers to the farming practice of hoarding crops in times of abundance and low prices in order to make a great profit in time of famine (4–5). According to Sidney Lamb, for this reason some farmers would hang themselves when wonderful harvests were predicted.

The porter also describes the knocker as an equivocator. This line has been used to place the composition of Macbeth in 1606, because the porter is most likely referring to a Jesuit thinker named Henry Garnet who wrote *A Treatise of Equivocation*. This work claimed that a statement was not a lie if it could be viewed as truth from another perspective. The porter indicates this notion by saying that his equivocator "could swear in both the scales against either scale" — meaning the person could take any side of an argument and it would be true (9–10). Garnet, in addition to being a Catholic (which was illegal in England at this time), was convicted and executed for his role in the Gunpowder Plot, the 1605 assassination attempt of James I.

The porter opens the gate to let in Macduff and Lennox, who have come to summon Duncan. The theme of sleep makes a reappearance in this scene in the humorous exchange between Macduff and the porter. The porter says that drink "is a great provoker of three things . . . nose-painting, sleep, and urine" (25–27). (Nose-painting refers to the red color of the nose that often occurs when a person is inebriated.) The porter clarifies that drink's relationship to lechery is a complicated one: "[I]t provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance" (28–29). This comical statement hauntingly echoes Macbeth's initial indecision after hearing the sisters' prophecy. He had the desire to become king but not the will to act on that desire.

Unnatural night

Macbeth enters and greets Macduff and Lennox. Macbeth's brief exchange with them, through line 65, exemplifies the theory of equivocation that the porter alluded to. If we can view his responses from the right perspective, they are actually truthful.

As Macduff goes to the king's chamber, Lennox reveals that nature has been "unruly" the entire night (54). He claims to have heard "strange screams of death" in the air (56). The "obscure bird" that "[c]lamour'd the livelong night" is, again, the owl (60). Compare his report to Macbeth's predictions of the effect of Duncan's death on Scotland in Act I, Scene 7, Line 16–27. (Note that in Shakespeare's tragedy *Julius Caesar*, Caesar's "unnatural" death is also followed by extreme disruptions in nature.)

Macduff returns and reports the king's death. His reference to Duncan's body as the "Lord's anointed temple" is another statement of the divine right theory of kingship, because the king is God's appointed deputy (69). Macduff shouts to wake the household, telling its inhabitants to "[s]hake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit, / And look on death itself!" (77–78). Consider how this description of sleep relates to other sleep references in the play.

The question of gender also reappears in this scene as Macduff tells Lady Macbeth that merely hearing about the terrible deed would murder her. The irony in this line is twofold. First, of course, Lady Macbeth has been an active participant in the deed. Second, Macduff's statement will eventually prove true. Duncan's murder will haunt Lady Macbeth until she takes her own life. Ultimately, the crime does kill her.

Feigning innocence

Macbeth tries to hide his crime by killing the king's servants, claiming that he does so out of rage over their murder of Duncan. Notice that Macduff, however, is immediately suspicious of Macbeth's action. Macduff asks Macbeth directly why he killed them. Macbeth claims that his actions originate from his devotion and loyalty to the king. He tries to cover his traitorous deeds by demonstrating an intense loyalty to the crown, which he displays with his murderous rage against the servants.

Notice that in his defense, Macbeth describes the wounds on Duncan as "a breach" in nature (114). Nature has been disrupted by this act of regicide.

Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, also suspect that the servants were not the murderers. They decide to flee for their own safety. That the sons are not yet to the grieving stage (their "tears / Are not yet brew'd") seems to be a comment on Macbeth's grief, which is already great (124–125). They may suspect that his grief is insincere; however, we, knowing Macbeth's inner thoughts, realize that he seems to have remorse for his actions.

In reading the play, many of the visual and audible aspects are lost. It is important to imagine this scene and its great chaos. People shout and cry, bells ring, a large number of exits and entrances occur, characters are only half-clothed, and Lady Macbeth even faints. The stage is very busy and noisy.

Calm in the chaos

In the midst of this chaos stands Banquo. He solidly attempts to restore order to the scene. It is also likely that he already suspects Macbeth for the crime. Therefore, his resolve to fight "treasonous malice" is significant (133). Banquo is still unwilling to compromise his honor and loyalty in order to fulfill the prophecy. Many scholars and critics have attributed this admirable portrayal of Banquo as a tribute to James I, because James is supposed to have been a direct descendent in Banquo's line of kings.

The disordered scene ends with Duncan's sons fleeing to Ireland and England. Malcolm suspects that a kinsman did the murder, because someone related to them would have the most cause to kill Duncan. This statement begins to pose the question of motive. The servants had no reason to kill their king, although Macbeth and his wife want everyone to believe that their drunken stupor is to blame. With Malcolm already named as Duncan's heir, anyone who wanted the Scottish throne would have to kill him, too. A kinsman would have a good chance to be crowned if Malcolm died.

It is interesting that rather than assume control of the country, Malcolm flees. What might Shakespeare be saying about Malcolm in this scene?

ACT II, SCENE IV

This short scene, which ends the second act, extends the disorder of the previous scene to the entire country of Scotland and relates some of the other major disturbances in nature.

Ross, a Scottish nobleman, discusses the recent events with an old man and then with Macduff. Dramatically, scenes like this are used to keep the audience aware of events through discussion rather than stage presentation. In effect, it allows the play to speed up by glossing over events that are essential but would have lengthened the play.

Disordered nature

The old man and Ross discuss the disorders in nature that are still occurring as a result of the regicide. Many of these events occur in Holinshed's account of King Duffe's death, but Shakespeare integrates them into the Duncan story in order to emphasize the theme of disorder and chaos. (See the "Introduction to Macbeth" for details about Holinshed's accounts.)

Interestingly, Ross notes that darkness grips both night and day. This darkness is significant, because both Macbeth (in Act I, Scene 4) and Lady Macbeth (in Act I, Scene 5) request darkness to hide their deeds. Ironically, the darkness does not hide their actions; rather, it occurs in response to their deeds. Why might this be the case?

Also note that the owl reappears. Sidney Lamb notes that the use of the owl is an alteration from Holinshed, who mentions a hawk. In light of the frequent appearance of the owl in relation to Macbeth's deed, this deviation illustrates Shakespeare's close integration of his source material into his own themes. The murder of a falcon by a lower bird, in this case the owl, parallels Macbeth's crime of regicide and associates him with the owl.

Shifting suspicions

Macduff's entry and discussion with Ross helps to accelerate the plot to the point where Duncan's sons, having fled, are suspected of the crime. Again, the motivation of the servants is called into question. Because the servants had nothing to gain from the murder, Macduff concludes that they were hired or induced to do it. As we know, he is not quite correct but close.

In addition, we learn that Macbeth has been named king. It is interesting that in being named as king, Macbeth's claim to the throne derives from a system other than that of divine right. As we saw in the "Introduction to Macbeth," the system of accession transformed from an election by thanes to the process of primogeniture and divine right only a few generations before the historical Macbeth became King of Scotland.

Macduff's final lines in the scene mark the reemergence of the clothing metaphor. Macduff is concerned that "our old robes sit easier than our new," meaning that he suspects things will not go as well under Macbeth's reign as they did under Duncan's (38).

ACT III, SCENE I

The third act of this play marks the beginning of Macbeth's reign as King of Scotland. The principal event of this act will be a banquet, described in Act III, Scene 4, at which Macbeth hopes to acquire the support of the thanes. As early as Act I, Macbeth realized that he will be as vulnerable to traitors as Duncan was. Therefore, his actions are driven by his desire to safeguard his position.

Macbeth changes in this act; his thoughts and deeds take on a more sinister character. Note these differences as you read and consider why this change has occurred.

Banquo's suspicions

In the opening soliloquy of this first scene, Banquo voices the first explicit suggestion that Macbeth murdered Duncan. (The fact that Banquo is the first to suspect Macbeth of the crime could be another way that Shakespeare flatters King James I.) In doing so, Banquo also considers that because the witches' predictions for Macbeth have come true (regardless of the hand Macbeth played in making them happen), their prediction for him might come true as well. Although Banquo may be flirting with temptation here, he never mentions his intention to commit any nefarious deeds. His words merely indicate that he might hope to be the father of a line of kings. Macbeth interrupts Banquo's musings, so we never actually learn the full extent of his thoughts.

The discussion between Macbeth and Banquo is tense. A chasm now lies between them — a coldness is evident in their speech. In particular, note Banquo's line to Macbeth in which he calls him "your highness" and speaks of the "indissoluble" tie between them (15–17). How might an actor deliver this line? Earlier in the play, there was discussion concerning the disjunction between a person's face and his heart. Does Banquo's face represent his heart here?

Banquo seems to suspect that Macbeth plans further wrongdoing. His answers to Macbeth's questions are vague and, though seemingly accurate, do not provide any substantial information.

Violence leads to violence

After Banquo leaves, Macbeth delivers his third soliloquy. Here, he demonstrates his realization that violence spawns violence and his evil actions must continue. He notes that being king is worthless if he is not safely king — that is, if he becomes a victim of regicide. After the first crime has been committed, other crimes must follow in order for him to retain his position.

Interestingly, Macbeth fears Banquo, not Duncan's sons. In particular, he seems disturbed by Banquo's careful answers to his questions. He asserts that Banquo "hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour / To act in safety" (52–53). Banquo's previous interaction with Macbeth could be described as safe if Banquo was considering killing Macbeth.

Macbeth also notes in Banquo a “royalty of nature” (49). This line is significant because it continues the flattering portrait of Banquo and places him on the side of nature in opposition to Macbeth, whose deeds and ascension to the throne are unnatural. Banquo’s previous resolve to remain honorable casts doubt on any treacherous intentions. It further suggests that Macbeth’s fears of Banquo may be unfounded.

Macbeth seems particularly distraught that, according to the prophecies, the murder of Duncan will benefit Banquo’s line rather than his own. (Macbeth, of course, has no son to assume the throne.) Macbeth laments that he has defiled his own mind for Banquo’s descendants.

Macbeth’s soliloquy again shows his acute awareness of the consequences of his actions. “[R]ancours,” or spite, has filled his “vessel of . . . peace” (66). His ambition again controls him. He is not satisfied with being king but wants to produce a line of kings as well, despite the fact that he does not have any children.

Though much of this play seems to be in praise of King James, Macbeth’s assertion that his actions enable Banquo’s descendants to become kings may implicate James. As we saw in the Introduction to Macbeth, James I tied his ancestry back to Banquo. If Macbeth’s assertion here is correct, then James held his royal position as a direct result of Macbeth’s act of regicide.

The soliloquy reaches its climax as Macbeth invites fate into his “list” or enclosed ground (70). Macbeth determines to battle fate, to try to change the second prediction of the weird sisters. This implies that Macbeth believes he achieved the crown not through the witches’ prophecy but through his own actions. Interestingly, this assertion of free will makes Macbeth fully responsible for Duncan’s death by removing the explanation of fate as the cause of his crime. Macbeth’s final statement in the soliloquy — “champion me to the utterance” — also seems to indicate his decision to kill Banquo (71).

Defying prophecy

The soliloquy ends with the arrival of two murderers. Though the preceding speech seemed to indicate that Macbeth just now decided on a course of action (to get rid of Banquo), his first line to the murderers illustrates that he has been considering Banquo’s death for a longer time. He has even previously spoken to these men, planting in them seeds of hatred for Banquo.

Throughout their exchange, Macbeth persuades the two men to murder Banquo by accusing him of being the cause of their troubles. Macbeth tells them that Banquo’s “heavy hand hath bow’d you to the grave / And beggar’d yours for ever” (88–89). Interestingly, in telling the men that Banquo is responsible for their station in life, he also claims that they previously believed that Macbeth’s “innocent self” was responsible (78). These lines imply that Macbeth, before he succumbed to his ambition, helped thwart their questionable behavior.

Macbeth asks the men if they believe in the Christian principle of loving their enemy. Their response is quite interesting; they assert that they are men. This exchange seems to place men in opposition to Christianity and may serve as a criticism of the masculine warrior society, where promotion is gained through violence.

Macbeth next discusses the hierarchical structure of men, referring to ranks and file. (See the Introduction to Early Modern England for a discussion of the universal hierarchy.) By killing Duncan, Macbeth clearly violated that hierarchy. Here, he offers the same opportunity to transgress that hierarchy to the murderers.

Distorted logic

Interestingly, Macbeth’s strategy with the murderers is very similar to the one his wife used to convince him to kill Duncan. To spur the murderers into action, Macbeth questions their manhood and position in society. He insightfully plays to their own ambitions of increasing their station as well as proving their manhood. According to Macbeth’s disordered logic, killing Banquo, an innocent man, will prove that they are not “the worst rank of manhood” (102). The audience, of course, realizes that killing an innocent man will prove exactly the opposite. Macbeth adds to the murderers’ incentive the promise of favor through his “love” (105).

Macbeth also resembles his wife in this deed by planning the murder and arranging the time and place for it, though not directly committing it.

The plan to kill Banquo is Macbeth’s first onstage act as king. Compare him to Duncan, who commanded a large army of valiant soldiers in his defense. Macbeth, in contrast, commands two murderers in order to protect himself from someone who has yet to perform an aggressive act against him. Furthermore, he includes Banquo’s son Fleance in the crime. He plans to kill two innocent men in order to feed his ambition.

Macbeth accuses Banquo of plotting against his life (115–116), but the audience knows that this is not necessarily true. In light of Banquo’s previous resolve to retain his honor, it seems even more unlikely.

Macbeth’s last line, about Banquo’s soul finding heaven, echoes the line about Duncan’s soul immediately prior to his murder (I.1.64). Despite his descent into tyranny and the knowledge that he is sacrificing his own salvation, Macbeth remains concerned with the afterlife.

ACT III, SCENE II

This scene again focuses on the Macbeths and their relationship. It becomes immediately clear that Macbeth’s indecision is gone. He no longer needs Lady Macbeth in order to act, although now they both psychologically suffer for their actions.

“Doubtful joy”

In the opening lines, Lady Macbeth acknowledges that she and her husband have not gained any happiness even though their desires to be king and queen have been met. She also begins to see more fully the consequences of their actions. She laments their “doubtful joy” — their fear that they themselves will be the victims of usurpers (7).

Upon Macbeth’s arrival, she tries to reassert her pragmatism. She argues that brooding over their acts will not bring them any peace. Although she voices a resolute conviction that “what’s done is done,” we know from her previous lines that she realizes that this is not the case (12). Also, notice that she

misinterprets her husband's behavior. He is no longer brooding over their past crimes but plotting future ones. This lack of insight stands in contrast to Lady Macbeth's first appearance, when she accurately predicted his thoughts and apprehensions. This scene indicates the gulf that is widening between them.

Responding to his wife's assertion with his rational knowledge that he must continue the violence in order to maintain the throne, Macbeth invokes the metaphor of the snake. The traditional metaphor associates the snake with the devil, so the image is an interesting one for Macbeth to choose. This choice seems to be an attempt to place himself on the side of good, even though his later lines in this scene acknowledge his relationship to evil.

During this response, Macbeth also echoes his wife's lines with his envy for the dead who are safe and free from torment. He notes that treason has done all it can to Duncan. The bitter irony is that the same treason is not finished torturing Macbeth.

The disparity between illusion and reality reappears when Macbeth recommends that they use their faces to mask their hearts; they cannot let Banquo know their murderous plans. The roles of Macbeth and his wife have now reversed; he serves as the driving force in their continued course of evil.

Comfort in darkness

Note the way in which Macbeth's speech becomes blacker, containing more references to evil such as Hecate and the bat. That process began with the simple request for darkness to hide his desires (I.4.50). At this point in the play, Macbeth has moved from attempting to hide in the dark to finding his comfort there (39). Furthermore, Macbeth's speech has acquired the darkness and invocation of supernatural evil that Lady Macbeth's speech previously contained. Evil seems to be consuming Macbeth. He thrives and grows from it — making himself strong through ill deeds.

Lady Macbeth moves from determining what action to take and how to accomplish it to not even knowing Macbeth's plans. She is forced to ask him, "What's to be done?" (44). Macbeth does not tell her of his plans, urging her to remain "innocent of the knowledge . . . Till thou applaud the deed" (45-46).

The scene ends with Macbeth inviting his wife to accompany him. Literally, this invitation is to leave the scene, but because of the darkness in his last speech, Macbeth may be inviting her to join him in his evil. Notice the parallel between Macbeth leading his wife offstage in this scene and Lady Macbeth leading Duncan offstage (into the castle) in Act I, Scene 6.

ACT III, SCENE III

Despite its brevity, this scene is very important to the play because it reminds the reader of the theatrical nature of the text. With its emphasis on lightness and darkness as well as its action, the scene is much richer visually than textually. Similar to the special effects of modern movies, the assassination of Banquo is a spectacle designed to thrill the audience. This is also the first time that the violence in this play occurs onstage. All of the other deaths transpire out of the audience's view. Why might Shakespeare have chosen this scene to be dramatized? What is the effect of having this scene as the first onstage violence?

The presence of the third murderer is an excellent indicator of Macbeth's increasing paranoia. He sends a third murderer to ensure that the first two carry out the murders. He does not seem to trust anyone. Keep in mind that he refused to inform Lady Macbeth of his plans in the previous scene.

Many readers and critics question the identity of the third murderer, speculating that he (or she) may have been one of the major characters in disguise. No textual evidence exists to support this conjecture.

Notice that although Banquo is killed, Fleance escapes; thus, Macbeth's plan to defy the witches' prophecy fails. Literally carrying the torch when he flees, Fleance allows darkness to consume the scene. Moreover, the connection between Fleance and light symbolically opposes the connection between Macbeth and darkness.

ACT III, SCENE IV

This scene portrays the banquet that Macbeth and Banquo discussed in Scene 1 of this act. Pay close attention to the ways in which Macbeth attempts to curry the favor of the other thanes and to impose order on the disorder that his crimes cause.

In Holinshed's Chronicles, Banquo is murdered on his way home from the banquet rather than upon his arrival back at Macbeth's castle. By altering the course of events, Shakespeare can have Banquo's ghost appear at the feast.

External and internal order

With the first lines, Macbeth attempts to impose order by commanding the thanes to sit according to himself to these thanes, he disrupts the order by being the "humble host" and sitting "i' the midst" of them (4, 10).

Macbeth's own mental order is disturbed a few lines later when he learns of Fleance's escape. He descends back into disorder as he begins to sense his inability to contradict the prediction of the weird sisters. Fleance's escape preempts the security that he felt Banquo's death would bring him.

Notice the reference to the "casing," or, encompassing, air of the castle, which echoes Duncan's arrival to Macbeth's castle in the first act (23).

After hearing the murderer's report, Macbeth asks, "But Banquo's safe?" (25). Macbeth is not asking whether Banquo escaped the attack with his life; he asks whether Banquo is now incapable of causing him any further problems. Interestingly, he again refers to Banquo and Fleance by using snake metaphors, which are traditionally associated with the devil.

Banquo's ghost joins the feast

The ghost of Banquo enters the scene and sits in Macbeth's seat. Literally, the ghost may have chosen his seat according to Banquo's rank. (Remember that Macbeth was not sitting in the king's accustomed position.) The ghost's choice of seats is symbolic, as well. Despite being dead, Banquo fills Macbeth's place — that is, his offspring, not Macbeth's, will be future kings.

Macbeth's question — "Which of you have done this?" — implies that he may believe he is seeing Banquo's corpse rather than his ghost (49). Macbeth thinks that what he sees is reality. But no one else sees the ghost, suggesting that it may be an illusion. Most likely in an Early Modern production, the ghost would have been visible to the audience whereas Macbeth's earlier hallucination of the dagger would not have been.

At this point, the relationship between appearance and reality falls apart, even for the audience. Sidney Lamb asserts that this confusion could be an allusion to King James's work on witches, called *Daemonologie*, which contends that ghosts were punishment for the guilty or faithless. That would explain why Macbeth can see the ghost but none of his guests can. It does not explain, however, why Lady Macbeth cannot see the ghost. Though she is not specifically guilty of Banquo's death, she does seem faithless.

Traditional belief at the time assumed that a ghost would bleed profusely in the presence of its killer. Thus, this scene may have been quite gory on the stage.

Unlike modern plays, the printed texts of Shakespeare's play contain very few stage directions. Some aspects of performance can be located in internal stage directions. A good example of this type of direction occurs when Macbeth addresses the ghost. He tells him not to "shake [his] gory locks" (51). This indicates that the ghost shook his head in response to Macbeth's initial question. These clues are invaluable for helping to determine what transpired onstage during an Early Modern production of one of Shakespeare's plays.

Questioning Macbeth's manhood

From Lady Macbeth's question to her husband, "Are you a man?" (58) to Macbeth's lines that end with "Than such a murder is" (82), Macbeth and his wife are having a private conversation that the thanes cannot hear. Note that she facilitates this conversation by telling the thanes to ignore Macbeth. This would have been accomplished onstage by having the couple move to a remote portion of the stage, probably toward the front. This position would allow the audience members to hear their dialogue while creating the illusion that the dinner guests cannot.

During this private conversation, Lady Macbeth again raises the question of masculinity by associating her husband's reaction to the ghost with a "woman's story at a winter's fire" (65). She equates the ghost to the "air-drawn dagger" Macbeth saw earlier, but Early Modern audiences may not have agreed with her criticism (62). To many of Shakespeare's contemporaries, the ghost would be viewed not as an hallucination but as a "real" spirit.

Though Macbeth attempts to recover from the fit that the ghost creates in him, each return of the ghost upsets him anew. Interestingly, Macbeth seems to be most concerned that the ghost is interrupting his attempts to secure the support of the thanes. The ghost's numerous entrances and exits disrupt Macbeth and send the banquet into disorder. Macbeth manages to force the ghost to disappear, but disorder has already ruined his feast.

In line 99, Macbeth's challenge to the ghost — "[w]hat man dare, I dare" — echoes an earlier line in the play, "I dare do all that may become a man" (I.7.46). Both of these lines come in response to threats to his masculinity, indicating Macbeth's sensitivity to threats and implications that he is not a "man."

Like the weird sisters earlier in the play, the ghost of Banquo vanishes by means of a trapdoor in the floor of the stage. Note that the ghost's final departure returns Macbeth's masculinity to him.

The feast disbands

The feast is so disorderly that Lady Macbeth dismisses the custom of leaving according to rank and asks the thanes to depart at once.

Remember that Macduff is the only living thane who does not attend the required feast. This absence, as we shall see, will be very costly to Macduff's family. Macbeth's paranoia causes him (rightly in this case) to suspect that Macduff's absence is an act of defiance. This paranoia has led Macbeth to establish an extensive spy system, through paid servants, in every nobleman's household.

Macbeth's lines end with an extremely important revelation that he has already committed too many crimes to turn back. His only choice, he claims, is to continue his violence and his tyranny. Keep in mind that in Holinshed's account, Scotland enjoyed ten years of peaceful rule under Macbeth. Here, it seems to have only taken a matter of days for that peace to disintegrate.

The scene ends on the question of reality versus illusion as Macbeth tries to convince himself that Banquo's ghost was just an illusion. (These lines echo Banquo's lines in Act I, Scene 3, where he suggests that the weird sisters may have been illusions.) Macbeth consoles himself with the notion that because he is a beginner in evil, it will get easier as he continues.

ACT III, SCENE V

Many critics argue that this scene is out of line with the progression of the play and was most likely added at a later date (around 1609) by playwright Thomas Middleton. The additions likely were made to capitalize as much as possible on the interest in witches and to take advantage of mechanical devices available in the private, indoor theaters.

Although Shakespeare may not have been its author, do not dismiss this scene as unimportant. Its addition may reflect Early Modern dramatic tastes, and it draws attention to the highly collaborative nature of the theatre that many scholars and critics have glossed over in the past.

This scene does include some of the themes that Shakespeare would have engaged. Specifically, Hecate's disapproval of the weird sisters' meddling with Macbeth highlights an important aspect of Macbeth's character. Hecate asserts that Macbeth "[l]oves for his own ends" (13). Macbeth's self-centered ambitions and desires prevent him from being loyal to anyone but himself; he is not even loyal to those who aided in the fulfillment of those ambitions. Hecate is right, of course. Macbeth has already attempted to defy the sisters' prophecy by trying to destroy Banquo's line.

Hecate informs the audience of a plan to fool Macbeth with a false sense of security that will eventually cause his downfall. Though some scholars argue that this scene is pointless, it explains Hecate's motivation. Evil forsakes Macbeth because of his selfish ambition.

ACT III, SCENE VI

Like Act II, Scene 4, this scene contains only discussion that informs the audience of events without having to stage them. Again, this discussion takes place between a minor character and an unnamed one (the lord).

The thanes lose faith

Lennox's speech reveals a great deal about the thanes' sentiment concerning Macbeth. Macbeth has lost their support as they have begun to suspect and even become aware of his crimes. Certainly, as we have already seen, the country has been in a state of disorder since the murder.

Lennox prefaces his lines by signaling that he has already determined the other lords' beliefs. This wariness seems to suggest that opposition against Macbeth is not yet widespread or that, maybe, the thanes are aware of Macbeth's spies (III.4.131–132). The thanes are also still within the king's palace and therefore would have to be careful with their speech.

Lennox mocks the theory that Malcolm and Donalbain killed their father and implicated themselves by fleeing. He argues that according to the same logic, Fleance killed Banquo because he fled the murder scene. An underlying sarcasm seems to punctuate his lines as he summarizes much of the political action up to this point in the play. He asks if Macbeth's murder of the chamberlains "[w]as not . . . nobly done?" (14). This summary serves the double purpose of reminding the audience of these events and casting them in the light shared by the other noblemen. Despite this sarcasm, Lennox's position is clear when he refers to Macbeth's banquet as "the tyrant's feast" (22).

Organizing rebellion

Note that the lord's lines do more than recount previous events. He indicates Malcolm's and Macduff's separate activities in England as well as their plans to enlist the English to aid in the removal of Macbeth from the throne. This information is significant, and the scene parallels the first act where we learned of Macbeth's new title before he met the weird sisters. The audience now knows of the impending rebellion, and we know that it is spearheaded not by Malcolm but by Macduff. This information will be crucial when Macbeth visits the witches.

The lord also refers to Macbeth as a tyrant and refers to Malcolm's "due of birth," which is, of course, another statement supporting patrilineal succession (25).

The lord follows with a description of the English king, Edward. Notice the words surrounding the English king. They include "pious," "grace," "pray," and "holy" (27, 30). Edward stands on the opposite side of the good versus evil dichotomy from Macbeth, who lost the ability to pray as soon as he committed regicide.

The lord also provides more information about the conditions in Scotland since Macbeth's reign began, and he expresses his hope for a restoration of order. Note the additional reference to sleep in line 34.

This scene also has a discontinuity that editors have not been able to resolve. The lord's lines indicate that Macbeth is aware of Macduff's flight and is making preparations. But, in the next act, Macbeth learns onstage that Macduff has fled. This nonlinearity suggests that this scene originally may have been placed later in the play.

ACT IV, SCENE I

The fourth act is one of the longest in *Macbeth* and contains one of the most visually rich scenes (Scene 1) and one of the most static scenes (Scene 3). It prepares us for the final act where Macbeth and his enemies will meet in battle, resolving the extended action of the play.

In this first scene, the weird sisters and Hecate reappear, continuing the strong supernatural presence in the play. As in Act I, Scene 3, the witches give prophetic information to Macbeth that shapes his course of action throughout the rest of the play. Keep in mind the differences between the prophecies delivered in the first act and this scene, the ways they are delivered, and the interaction between the witches and Macbeth in these two scenes. Consider what these differences say about Macbeth and the witches' role in his behavior. Notice how these changes affect our perception of Macbeth and our level of sympathy for him.

Calling on the spirits

In the first three lines of this scene, the witches are listening to their spirits (sometimes called familiars), who often inform them when it is time to commit evil. The unnaturalness of the witches is visibly represented through their appearance, textually represented through their speech, and dramatically represented through the colorful contents of their cauldron. Shakespeare used many sources, including *News from Scotland* and King James's *Daemonologie*, to create the list of ingredients that the witches put into their brew.

Interestingly, dramatic portrayals of witches have not changed much in the centuries since Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*. Today's witches may use more disturbing ingredients in their brews, such as human body parts, but it is not uncommon to see modern portrayals of witches using "eye of newt and toe of frog" — many times copying Shakespeare's exact language (14).

Many scholars think that Hecate's reappearance at this point is again the work of playwright Thomas Middleton. (See the "Introduction to *Macbeth*.") Notice that Hecate stays onstage but does not participate in the action for about a hundred lines. This awkward presence without dialogue seems to indicate that her character was a later addition that was not completely integrated into the text. Again, the song the witches sing does not appear in its entirety in the Folio text. It was common practice in Early Modern dramatic texts to include only the title of a song, because most of the readers of such a text were already familiar with it.

Macbeth seeks a new prophesy

Notice the urgency with which Macbeth addresses the witches. He demands answers to his fearful questions. He now needs their information and wants it despite what harm and destruction it causes. He actually invites disorder and the destruction of religion (“pyramids”) and political states (“palaces”) (57). His villainy seems to be on the verge of madness.

Macbeth is given the choice of hearing the prophecy from the weird sisters or seeing it from their masters, presumably Hecate and the Devil. He chooses to learn his fate directly from the sisters’ masters saying, “Call ’em: let me see ’em” (63). Macbeth is unable to process the apparitions alone, so the illusions speak to him as well.

Holinshed’s account of this story includes the basic prophetic statements but does not include the apparitions. Deviating from the Chronicles allows Shakespeare to further explore the theme of illusion versus reality. The apparitions are at once illusions and representatives of Macbeth’s future reality. They speak truthfully, but their words are so carefully chosen that they convince Macbeth that any threat against him is an illusion. He is unable to interpret them accurately, so he cannot distinguish where illusion ends and reality begins. They lull Macbeth into a false confidence.

The addition of the apparitions is also linked to the medium in which Shakespeare wrote, because these “illusions” would have been relatively easy to stage and their presence would add to the spectacle of the play. The presence of a trapdoor on the Early Modern stage would allow the apparitions to ascend and descend. (See the “Introduction to Early Modern England” for a discussion of this theatrical device.)

The apparitions speak

The first apparition that Macbeth sees is an “armed Head.” By armed, Shakespeare indicates that the head is probably wearing a helmet. The apparition warns Macbeth to “beware Macduff” (71), confirming Macbeth’s fear that Macduff will be his downfall.

Notice how quickly Macbeth dismisses the first prophecy upon hearing the second. A bloody child appears and tells him that no man “of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (80–81). Macbeth instantly feels that he has no reason to fear Macduff, saying “[t]hen, live” (82). But Macbeth quickly changes his mind again, saying that he will “make assurance double sure” by eliminating Macduff anyway (83).

Macbeth’s responses to the prophecies he receives have been very curious throughout the play. On the one hand, he believes the prophecies are true, but on the other, he thinks that he can change or ignore them to suit his ambitions and alleviate his fears. This dual reaction continues here.

The third apparition is a child with a crown who holds a tree. The child declares that “Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him” (92–94). Macbeth again takes comfort in the seeming impossibility of a moving forest. He interprets this vision as an indication that he is invincible.

Despite all of the disorder that his actions cause — disorder that he embraces (consider his initial lines in this scene) — Macbeth returns to the natural order of the world when he craves security. He cannot imagine a man who is not born of a woman. He also cannot imagine a forest that can move. Notice how equivocation, which Macbeth previously used for his own advantage, is being used here to dupe him. As we shall see, the statements made by the apparitions are true — from a certain perspective.

A final vision

Despite being thrilled by the “[s]weet bodements” or predictions offered by the first three apparitions, Macbeth is still concerned about Banquo’s descendants becoming kings (96). Against the weird sisters’ warnings, he demands to know if Banquo’s prophecy will hold true.

A final apparition — a procession of eight kings — appears. The glass that the eighth king holds is not a drinking cup but rather a looking glass or a mirror that, Macbeth tells us, reflects the future kings descending from Banquo’s line. The eight kings represent the entire history of Scottish kings up through Shakespeare’s day. The only omission is Mary, Queen of Scots. Scholars speculate that Shakespeare may have omitted her because of her gender or her Catholic religion. The eighth king is, of course, James VI and I, King of Scotland and England. The multiple insignia and scepters that Macbeth sees some of them carrying refer to multiple realms. For example, James ruled England and Scotland but also had France in his title (though not really under his control). This procession is clearly meant to be a tribute to James and the entire Stuart dynasty.

This final apparition carries no prophetic statement; it merely confirms the earlier prophecy that the weird sisters gave to Banquo. Macbeth can interpret this vision himself. Because Fleance survived Macbeth’s plot to murder him, Banquo’s line lives on, and Macbeth’s fears are justified.

Damned by trust

When the apparitions disappear, Macbeth denounces them by crying, “Infected be the air wheron they ride, / And damn’d all those that trust them!” (138–139). The irony is that Macbeth trusts the prophecies he has received. Shakespeare may be indicating that Macbeth is extremely self-aware; he may know instinctively that his trust of the witches has damned him. The effect of this is to help the audience divide the blame for his actions between Macbeth, who acts out of free will, and the witches, who manipulate and deceive him.

Macbeth learns from Lennox that Macduff has traveled to England. At this point, Macbeth falls headlong into his actions. He resolves to execute these actions before contemplating their consequences. He then orders the murder of Macduff’s entire family, even though he earlier assumed (because of the second apparition) that Macduff cannot hurt him. Clearly, he is not certain which apparition to trust, so he determines to defy the first apparition by eliminating the threat of Macduff.

ACT IV, SCENE II

Despite being cut from most modern productions in order to save time, this scene is very important. The action could have occurred offstage, so it is significant that Shakespeare stages it — particularly the violence that occurs at the end.

Traitorous fear

Lady Macduff’s first comments indicate the paranoia that grips Scotland. She notes that her husband is not a traitor in action, but his fear (which caused him to run) makes him one. Her statement is ironic, because Macbeth’s fears of Macduff have convinced him that Macduff is a traitor.

Notice that Lady Macduff, like Lady Macbeth, questions her husband's masculinity by accusing him of being a coward for abandoning his wife and children. At the same time Macduff is developing into the "hero" who will save Scotland from Macbeth, he is accused by his wife of being unnatural or out of order because he lacks "the natural touch" to defend his children (9).

The owl that Lady Macduff refers to in line 11 symbolically represents Macbeth. (Recall the frequent references to the owl that surround Duncan's murder in Act II, Scene 2.) The owl also foreshadows the horror at the end of this scene.

Ross provides another picture of the current state of affairs in Scotland. He invokes the cliché that things can get only better because they are currently at their worst.

Ross claims that if he stays, he will weep and disgrace his manhood, as well as make Lady Macduff uncomfortable. Thus, he abandons the Macduff family in the name of masculinity. The effect of this action seems to be a piercing criticism of masculinity, in addition to being another sign of the extent of the disorder in Scotland.

A fatherless son

In line 27, Lady Macduff refers to her son when she says, "Father'd he is, and yet he's fatherless." Consider why Lady Macduff tells her son that his father is dead (in line 30). What purpose does this serve? The audience knows that Macduff is safe in England. The bitter irony, of course, is that Lady Macduff and her family are not safe in Scotland.

Note also Lady Macduff's cynical view of husbands and their widespread availability. When her son asks how she'll get another husband, her response is "I can buy me twenty at any market" (40). She seems to criticize masculinity harshly.

The cynicism that dominates this scene extends even to the small boy. He believes that there is such a disparity between honest men and liars that the liars could easily overrun the honest men. Because equivocation was usually associated with Catholics in Shakespeare's time, this statement may possibly allude to a widespread Catholic underground in England. Subjects under James were required to swear an oath to the English church and king. Equivocation was often presented as a way of taking the oath and remaining Catholic.

"Whither should I fly?"

A messenger arrives to instruct Lady Macduff to flee from imminent danger. She refuses to do so, because she knows that she has done nothing to deserve punishment. But recognizing that innocence does not guarantee her safety, Lady Macduff laments the world in which good and evil have been reversed. Her words echo the witches' sentiment in the first act that "Fair is foul and foul is fair."

It is interesting that the murderer asks Lady Macduff the whereabouts of her husband, even though from the previous scene we know that Macbeth is aware of his location and absence from the castle.

The dramatic presentation of the violence in this scene is significant. Except for Duncan's murder, all of Macbeth's tyrannical violence has been staged. The effect may be to distance the sympathy of the audience from Macbeth or to use that sympathy to implicate the audience in his actions. Either way, it causes us some discomfort. The first violent incident in the play depicted the murder of an innocent man (Banquo). This scene depicts the murder of a child. Notice that he is referred to as "egg" and "[y]oung fry" (79). Earlier, Lady Macbeth claimed that she could kill a child, but Macbeth, through his commands, actually does.

Macbeth's violent actions become steadily more evil and senseless. Duncan's murder, though clearly wrong, provided Macbeth with real and immediate political benefits. Banquo's murder was also committed in the name of political gain, even though he posed no current threat and was innocent. By the time we arrive at the murder of Macduff's family, Macbeth's violence seems to lack any real purpose or goal.

Shakespeare also creates a great deal of suspense by having Lady Macduff flee, pursued by the murderers. It is unclear to the first-time audience member or reader whether or not she escapes. The scene ends without that resolution.

ACT IV, SCENE III

In addition to being the longest in the play, this scene is the most static. It consists of discussion of past events and future plans. Through this discussion, it lays the foundation for the climatic Act V, where the representatives of good and evil will meet.

This is also the only scene not set in Scotland. Its placement in England helps create a dichotomy between the two countries that will be illustrated more fully as the scene unfolds.

Pay close attention to the increased references to God and Christianity in this scene and throughout the rest of the play. Remember, the play began with the supernatural weird sisters and with Macbeth invoking darkness and evil. In contrast, the characters here invoke goodness and light. Thus, this scene sets up the two sides in opposition religiously as well as politically. Macbeth himself is labeled "black" and "devilish" in this scene (52, 117).

Sidney Lamb logically subdivides this scene into three separate sections: 1) the reconciliation of Malcolm and Macduff; 2) the representation of England and its king, Edward; and 3) a report of recent events in Scotland. The following discussion of the scene will use those divisions.

The reconciliation of Malcolm and Macduff

Though they are on the same "side" against Macbeth, notice the immediate disagreement between Malcolm and Macduff. Malcolm wants to discuss and weep over the past. In contrast to Malcolm's desire for words, Macduff calls for action, asserting that there is no time to waste. Keep this disagreement in mind as the scene closes; consider whether the two men still hold their respective positions at the end of the scene.

For the next 100 or so lines, Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty. Malcolm is understandably suspicious of anyone from Scotland. Specifically, he fears that Macduff will use him as a tool to win Macbeth's favor.

Duncan's son is concerned about the imperial influence on Macduff. Because the king is considered God's appointed deputy on Earth, any treason (even against a tyrannical king) is a violation of God's will as well as politically unlawful. Notice that Macduff circumvents this by repeatedly noting that Malcolm, not Macbeth, is the rightful king.

Malcolm also echoes his father (I.4.11–14) in his recognition that the face does not always accurately represent the heart. Notice that he adopts a more pessimistic stance and extends it by asserting that all foul things look like grace. The clothing metaphor reappears in Macduff's speech as he speaks of "wear[ing]" wrong (33).

Around line 47, Malcolm starts to test Macduff by pretending to be capable of much worse tyranny than Macbeth. Many scholars and critics are dissatisfied with this interchange and argue that it is out of character for Malcolm and does not make logical sense. It is also quite extensive, consisting of about 70 lines and ending on line 113. This dialogue is taken very closely from Holinshed's Chronicles with only minor changes.

Those dissatisfied by this section of the scene seem to be especially bothered by Macduff's unconvincing arguments. Such critics assert that it is not clear why Malcolm's suspicions would be alleviated by Macduff's statements that Scotland has enough willing "dames" and "foisons" (abundant supplies) to satisfy Malcolm's supposed tyranny (73, 88).

Remember that Malcolm, under the divine right theory of kingship, is the true king. For this reason, whatever tyranny he might inflict would not contradict this because God cannot be wrong. A rightful tyrant would restore the order that a usurping or, in Macduff's terms, an "untitled" tyrant disrupts (104).

Starting in line 114, Malcolm indicates that he is finally convinced of Macduff's loyalty and informs him of the plans to invade Scotland with the help of Old Siward, the Earl of Northumberland and Commander of the English Army. Incidentally, King James was also a descendant of Old Siward, so this plot move deepens the play's tribute to him.

In this speech to Macduff, Malcolm relates his virtues, one of which is his inexperience with women. Chastity was considered a great virtue in men and women.

A representation of England and Edward the Confessor

This section of the scene helps to establish the dichotomy of good versus evil through the contrasting pairs of England versus Scotland and Edward versus Macbeth.

The entrance of the doctor marks the transition to this second section. It is significant that the doctor portrays Edward as a healer. Macbeth, of course, is the exact opposite — a killer.

The tradition of a king's touch being able to heal scrofula, also known as the "king's evil," began with Edward the Confessor (who reigned from 1042 to 1066) and lasted until 1719. Scrofula is an enlargement of the neck glands that is also accompanied by a discharge of pus and scarring. Edward had white hair and an extremely fair complexion, and Lamb even suggests that he may have been an albino. Early Modern audiences may have been aware of his light complexion. Thus, visually, Edward is associated with whiteness, holiness, and purity, and Macbeth, as we have seen, is associated with blackness and unholiness.

Sidney Lamb points out that while Queen Elizabeth I embraced this tradition of healing, James initially perceived it as superstitious and refused to perform it. Lamb suggests that this mention of the king's touch could be a public recognition of James's willingness to please the desires of his people. Furthermore, there is a symbolic connotation to this portrayal as well, because Edward will literally help cure Scotland of its evil — Macbeth.

Malcolm's description of his time in England and his personal testimony of Edward's healing powers demonstrates the order and peace of England, which stands in contrast to the disorder and mayhem of Scotland. With the help of ordered and peaceful England, Macduff and Malcolm will save their country.

It is significant that these two men are unable to stop Macbeth without the help of the English. James's arrival in England, three years before the composition of Macbeth, was accompanied by an anti-Scottish sentiment due to the influx of Scottish nobility into the English court and the different ways in which the affairs of court and state were conducted. It seems unlikely that the portrayal of England as superior to Scotland is coincidental. This portrayal may be part of the implicit criticism of James and kingship that some critics have located in the play.

Recent events in Scotland

The distinction between England and Scotland is brought into sharp view with the arrival of Ross and his account of recent events in Scotland.

Ross's first lines describe Scotland as "poor" and "afraid to know itself" (164–165). Compare the country's lack of self-knowledge to Macbeth's "To know my deed 'twere best not to know myself" (II.2.73) and Ross's "we are traitors / and do not know ourselves" (IV.1.19). What are the implications of fearing to know oneself?

Ross brings the dreadful news of the events at Macduff's castle. Shakespeare draws out the suspense of Act IV, Scene 2 through Ross's reluctance to relate the full events. Though we may initially be consoled by Ross's indication that Macduff's wife is well, his next line claims that Macduff's children are also well. The audience is aware that the latter is not true but cannot be sure of the former.

Ross also equivocates when he tells Macduff that his family was "well at peace when I did leave 'em" (179). This statement is true but misleading. It merely draws out the suspense. Notice that the suspense in the audience is greater than Macduff's, because we know that his son was killed but do not know whether or not the rest of his family escaped. This is a good example of how Shakespeare draws the audience's emotions into the play.

Furthermore, compare Ross's words that equate death with peace to Macbeth's acknowledgment that Duncan can no longer be hurt (III.2.22–26) and Lady Macbeth's assertion that "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy" (III.2.6–7).

This suspense lasts for approximately 30 lines. We finally learn that Macduff's entire household was killed. In Early Modern England, servants were considered part of the family and, therefore, their deaths would have been difficult to hear of as well.

Ross claims that this act was committed as a way of killing Macduff through grief. Imagine how powerful that grief must be and listen for it in the rest of Macduff's lines.

Ross puns on the word "deer" in line 206. Literally, this word refers to the game animal and metaphorically fits with Ross's use of "quarry." The pun is, of course, on "dear" — all that were "dear" to Macduff were killed.

Once again, grief is associated with being unmanly. Malcolm tells Macduff to "[d]ispute" or resist his grief "like a man" (219). But there seems to be a double meaning in this line; Malcolm could be saying to dispute the murder of his family like a man — that is, by helping to conquer Macbeth.

Macduff's response is interesting in that he acknowledges the need to grieve; he says that he "must also feel it as a man" (221). A few lines later, however, he equates tears with being womanly by saying one of his options is to become a woman with his eyes. The other option is to destroy Macbeth.

Macduff chooses to seek revenge, which Malcolm describes as a "manly" tune (235). This implies that grief is best felt through violence in this definition of masculinity. The need for violence and the inability to cry may be an implicit criticism of that masculinity.

The lengthy discussion of this scene draws to a close with the call to action that will consume the fifth act.

ACT V, SCENE I

This famous scene depicting Lady Macbeth sleepwalking is original to Shakespeare. It marks a significant change from Holinshed's portrayal of Macbeth's wife.

The doctor's comments at the opening of the scene alert us that this sleepwalking is a recent occurrence. The doctor indicates that this is the third night he has kept watch, at the gentlewoman's request, to witness Lady Macbeth's odd behavior.

The gentlewoman's response not only informs the audience that Macbeth has left to do battle with the English forces but also reconnects Lady Macbeth with writing and, specifically, letters. Recall that when Shakespeare introduced Lady Macbeth in Act I, Scene 5, she was reading a letter from Macbeth. She also uses diction connected to reading and writing in many of her lines.

Because literacy rates were low in Early Modern England, lower in medieval Scotland, and even lower for women during both periods, Shakespeare seems to be stressing Lady Macbeth's learning. How does perceiving Lady Macbeth as literate change our perception of her? Also, consider how this sleepwalking scene changes our perception of her.

Lady Macbeth's transformation

The first sense that a major change has occurred in Lady Macbeth comes when the gentlewoman informs the doctor that Lady Macbeth requires light at all times. Contrast this to her earlier lines, "Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife see not the wound it makes" (I.5.48–50). Earlier, she requested darkness. Now she demands light.

The theme of sleep returns in this scene. Recall that in Act II, Scene 2, Macbeth told his wife of the voices that claimed he would no longer be able to sleep because he had murdered sleep. Lady Macbeth can sleep, but not peacefully; she is haunted by dreams of the evil deeds she and Macbeth have committed.

Lady Macbeth dreams that there is a spot of blood on her hands that she is unable to clean. She seems to have reversed roles with her husband. In Act II, Scene 2, immediately after the king's murder, Macbeth believed that he would never be able to wash the blood from his hands. At that time, Lady Macbeth asserted that a "little water" could wash away the blood as well as the guilt. Now, while Macbeth seems to have rid himself of all remorse for his actions, Lady Macbeth realizes that "all the perfumes of Arabia" could not cover the scent of blood on her hands (44).

"What's done is done"

Lady Macbeth's lines recount many of the deeds she and her husband have committed; she seems haunted by memories of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff's wife. In line 59, she states that "What's done cannot be undone." Compared to her line in Act III, Scene 2 — "What's done is done" — her words here indicate what a complete change has occurred in her conscience. Notice how closely these two lines mirror each other but how significant the slight change in wording is to the meaning of each. Shakespeare often plays upon the subtleties of language to demonstrate how easily meaning can change.

The doctor rightly connects Lady Macbeth's inner turmoil to her actions. He describes both the turmoil and the deeds as "[u]nnatural" (62). This parallels Lady Macbeth's request in Act I, Scene 5 for spirits to make her unnatural by "unsexing" her, or removing her feminine qualities.

The doctor also fears that Lady Macbeth may try to commit suicide, and he orders that "the means of all annoyance" — anything she might use to hurt herself — be removed from her possession (67). His words foreshadow her death.

The doctor and the gentlewoman make frequent references to God and heaven in this scene. But we realize that Lady Macbeth, like her husband, has forsaken God and cannot seek divine aid for her troubled mind. While Macbeth moves from inner turmoil to remorseless determination during the course of the play, Lady Macbeth moves in the opposite direction, which will soon prove fatal.

ACT V, SCENE II

This short scene begins a segment of six scenes that are all related to the final battle. Here, a number of Scottish noblemen discuss Macbeth (absent from the play since Act IV, Scene 1) and his actions. Pay particular attention to the references to man and manhood that implicitly place the violence of this battle in the realm of the masculine.

Lennox's reference to Old Siward's son and the "first of manhood," those men who are proving their masculinity in battle for the first time, foreshadows Macbeth's deadly encounter with Young Siward in the last scene (11).

The reference to Birnam Wood in line 5 should raise a signal. Recall that this is the forest that has to move to Dunsinane hill (on top of which stands Dunsinane castle where Macbeth is fortified) in order for Macbeth to be vanquished. Keep in mind that Malcolm and his army know nothing about the witches or the prophecy.

Angus's description of Macbeth defines a significant contrast between this new king and King Duncan. Macbeth's troops follow him because he commands them to; they do not follow him out of love. Recall the love and devotion that Duncan gave and received in the opening scenes of the play.

Notice the reference to robes and clothing again in lines 21 and 22. Angus says that Macbeth now "feel[s] his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief." Macbeth's new title does not fit his character.

Interestingly, there is a note of sympathy in the voices of many of these noblemen for Macbeth's torment and, in particular, his descent into madness. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that despite Macbeth's tyranny, these thanes all seemed to be close friends at the beginning of play.

ACT V, SCENE III

This scene marks Macbeth's reemergence onstage and provides the audience with a glimpse of his state of mind. The audience views a pitiful picture of the once admirable and once tyrannical Macbeth. As Sidney Lamb notes, the presence of the doctor with Macbeth implies his mental illness.

Notice that in accordance with Hecate's wishes, Macbeth suffers from overconfidence as a result of the prophecies. It is apparent, however, that he is torn between this overconfidence and the knowledge that the English army is approaching.

In contrast to his wife, Macbeth now cannot stand anything light or white. He yells at the servant who is, of course, white with fear, wishing that the devil would blacken him.

After the servant departs, Macbeth's behavior changes. Rather than being overly aggressive and confident, he becomes more melancholic. He admits that he is "sick at heart" (19).

Macbeth now realizes that the disjunction between a man's face and his heart that he previously used to his advantage is being used against him. Like Angus's remarks in the previous scene, Macbeth knows that he commands no "honour, love, [or] obedience" and that he is hated instead (25). This realization makes it difficult to hate Macbeth. Shakespeare evokes pity for the fallen man.

Throughout the rest of the scene, Macbeth oscillates between being overly aggressive and confident and being melancholic.

Macbeth's premature calls for his armor indicate his need for action; being static seems only to make him more melancholy. While on one hand Macbeth seems to believe that he cannot be harmed, he also hints that he may actually be looking for death. His frequent declarations that he has nothing to fear begin to ring hollow, especially in light of his sentiment that he has "liv'd long enough" (22).

Here, Macbeth himself makes the connection between Lady Macbeth and writing, describing her insanity as "written troubles" (42). He questions the doctor in lines 40 through 45 about the possibility of curing Lady Macbeth's ills. But the questions he asks apply equally to Macbeth himself.

Notice that in the doctor's response, he does not specify which of the Macbeths he means but does indicate that the patient must treat "himself" (46). Macbeth responds angrily to this answer, repudiating medicine entirely. He realizes that at this point nothing can save him from his guilt.

Macbeth's inquiry to the doctor about whether or not he can cure Scotland and "return it to sound and pristine health" rings ironic, because Macbeth himself is the cause of the destruction of his country (52). This line, however, also creates a bit of sympathy for Macbeth; for the first time, he seems to display a love for his country and a sense of regret for its struggles.

The final lines of the scene illustrate how truly alone and abandoned Macbeth is, because even his doctor indicates a desire to be away from the mad tyrant.

One of the implications of Macbeth's loneliness may be that we understand the important role noblemen play in the happiness of a king. Clearly, Macbeth's ambition to be king has been filled. But, unlike Duncan, Macbeth has no followers. The throne brought Macbeth power and control, but it did not bring him happiness and fulfillment. Wearing the crown merely spurred his descent into tyranny and evil.

ACT V, SCENE IV

In this scene, the Scottish nobles unite forces with Malcolm and the English army. The presence of these nobles dramatically depicts Macbeth's solitude. They also create a spectacular scene on stage, showing the military might of these forces. The "drums" and "colours" referred to in the stage directions provide us with a glimpse of the visual and auditory power of this scene.

The theme of sleep reappears with Malcolm's hope that their chambers or bedrooms will be safe after Macbeth is defeated. In addition to serving as a reminder of the manner in which his father died, this line also refers to the sleeplessness that has gripped Scotland (III.5.34).

The audience discovers how the first prophecy will come true: Malcolm's forces will use tree branches to disguise their numbers as they approach the castle. (Ironically, as we learned in the previous scene, Macbeth already knows their numbers.) This pragmatic use of camouflage stands in stark contrast to the supernatural elements in the play. Here, the audience can also see the equivocation in the witches' prophecies. The woods will not actually move, but then again, they will.

ACT V, SCENE V

Paralleling the last scene, this scene begins with drums and colors in its representation of Macbeth's forces. Notice that Macbeth is the only person of nobility in his procession. The only other named character is one of his officers, Seyton.

The final segment of Act V consists of short scenes with rapid shifts in perspective, moving from one side of the battle to the other. This strategy is typical of Shakespeare's battle scenes and serves to increase the drama of the last scenes as the play pulls closer and closer to the actual battle.

Preparing for a siege

Rather than meet Malcolm's army on the battlefield, Macbeth, whose army has been significantly reduced by deserters, has to resort to forcing his enemies to siege the castle. A siege could occur in two ways: First, the army could try to scale the walls of the castle or force its way through the gates while the army inside could attack from above. This tactic was very costly to the attacking army. The other possibility was to surround the castle and not allow food or water to enter. Depending on the provisions of the castle, this was a slow but effective method. Macbeth's resolve to stay put and let Malcolm attack the castle seems to contradict his earlier urgency to don his armor and begin the battle.

Macbeth claims that a siege would be unsuccessful because his castle is too strong to attack and he has enough provisions to last until the "famine" and "ague" (or fever) consume the opposing army (4).

Lady Macbeth's demise

Macbeth and Seyton hear a woman's cry, and Macbeth's response reveals his deadening emotion — quite a departure from when he was originally consumed by the horror of his deeds. Now he has "almost forgot the taste of fears" (9).

Seyton leaves to investigate the source of the cry and returns to report the queen's death. Macbeth's response to the news about his wife contains one of his most famous passages, in which we can see his desire for death reaching its peak. Modern scholars are particularly interested in these lines because he metaphorically expresses his pessimism about life in terms of the theatre. This metaphor linking theatre to life is not unique to Macbeth; compare this speech to the lines "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players," which appear in *As You Like It* (II.7.138–139).

Upon learning that the woods are moving toward the hill, Macbeth seems to realize that the weird sisters have duped him. Doubting their "equivocation," he now understands that the "fiend" (most likely a reference to Hecate or the devil) "lies like truth" (43–44).

Despite beginning the scene content to let Malcolm and his forces lay siege to his castle, Macbeth's desire for death prompts his attack. He still seems to be concerned with his masculinity, indicating that it would be best to die in armor.

ACT V, SCENE VI

Continuing the scene shifts between alternating perspectives, this scene is visually, more than textually, rich and marks the beginning of the actual battle between Macbeth and his enemies.

The theme of disguise appears in Malcolm's order for the army to discard its "screens" and "show like those you are" (1–2). In contrast to the many previous references to characters disguising their inner nature, appearances match reality here — the soldiers show their true selves when facing Macbeth's troops.

Macduff's lines at the end of this scene dramatically represent his grief transformed into anger, recalling Malcolm's advice to Macduff in Act IV, Scene 3.

ACT V, SCENE VII

This scene marks the actual start of the battle onstage. Here, Macbeth displays a fierce determination to fight.

In the opening lines, Macbeth refers to bear-baiting, which was a popular sport in Early Modern England. In bear-baiting, dogs attacked a bear that was staked in the middle of an arena. The contest ended with either the bear's death or the death of the dogs. There was a bear-baiting pit extremely close to the Globe theatre (the theatre in which this play originally would have been staged).

Previously, the perspective of each short scene in Act V shifted between one army and another. Here, the perspectives rapidly shift within the scene. Because Shakespeare did not designate scene divisions in this text (such divisions were a development of the Folio), some editors break each shift into a different scene.

In the opening moments of the scene, Macbeth encounters and fights Young Siward. Macbeth wins, of course, because Young Siward was born of a woman. In addition to depicting the death of one of the promising youths participating in the battle (see the commentary for Act V, Scene 2), this struggle increases

the suspense in the audience. Because Birnam wood has, in a way, come to Dunsinane, the audience suspects that somehow, there may be a man not born of a woman who will defeat Macbeth. But we do not know yet how that is possible.

The scene's perspective next switches to Macduff, who is looking only for Macbeth. The discussion between Old Siward and Malcolm reveals that Macbeth's army is not resisting Malcolm's forces, thus increasing Macbeth's isolation even further. Even those soldiers who did not desert Macbeth's army purposely miss their targets. Malcolm relates this when he says, "We have met with foes / That strike beside us" (28–29). And the strong castle — the one supposedly able to withstand any siege — has already been surrendered.

ACT V, SCENE VIII

The beginning of this concluding scene shows Macbeth rejecting the idea of suicide. This rejection foreshadows the end of the scene, when we finally learn how Lady Macbeth died. Because this rejection comes in the form of a rhetorical question to himself, we can infer that Macbeth has been contemplating suicide prior to the scene's opening. If Macbeth truly believes that "none of woman born" can harm him, as the prophecy indicated, then the extent of Macbeth's torment and madness are even more evident here. What else but torment and madness would prompt him to commit suicide in the face of such a promising prophecy?

Macduff's entrance begins their final encounter. Immediately, Macbeth learns that Macduff was "[u]ntimely ripp'd" from his mother's womb, and the final piece of the prophecy puzzle falls into place (16). Macduff's birth was unnatural; instead of being born naturally, he was forcibly removed from his mother through caesarian delivery.

Macbeth responds to this information by refusing to fight. This refusal adds an interesting twist: If Macduff fulfills his rage by killing Macbeth, he will be killing a defenseless man and, to some extent, will dishonor himself.

In a move reminiscent of Lady Macbeth and her psychological manipulation, Macduff calls Macbeth a coward. He tells him that his army will turn Macbeth into a spectacle and put him on display if he refuses to fight.

Macduff's words provoke Macbeth to action; he once again decides to attempt to defy the prophecy. Calling for a fight to the death, Macbeth and Macduff battle their way offstage.

Malcolm and the other nobles enter. Old Siward informs us that the victory is "cheaply bought," meaning that their army has suffered only light casualties (37). Of course, the victory was not "cheaply bought" for Old Siward; he will soon learn that he lost his son to Macbeth. Shakespeare pulls Old Siward's reaction to the news of his son's death from Holinshed's account of Edward the Confessor. This reaction meshes nicely with the previous discussions of masculinity in the play. Young Siward, we learn, died "like a man" (43). Furthermore, Old Siward's form of grief recalls other expressions of grief in the play, particularly Macduff's in Act IV, Scene 3. Siward chooses not to grieve because his son "parted well" and is, therefore, with God (52).

Macduff's reentry with Macbeth's head in hand marks the culmination of Macbeth's fall, which not only resulted in his death but the desecration of his body.

Malcolm transforms his thanes (a title that connotes a warrior culture) into earls (a title that connotes increased nobility and, specifically, a connection to England). This change may signal Malcolm's civilizing effect on Scotland. Remember the dichotomy between the two countries that Shakespeare has established. Having lived in England and witnessed its level of civility, Malcolm is able to change Scotland for the better.

Here, Malcolm echoes his father, Duncan. He refers to the processes of restoring order to Scotland as being "planted newly" (65). This line recalls Duncan's statement to Macbeth in Act I, Scene 4 that he has "begun to plant" Macbeth. This suggests that Malcolm's ascension to the throne restores the order that was present during Duncan's reign.

We also finally learn that Lady Macbeth committed suicide. What is the effect of delaying this information until the final lines? How does her means of death alter our perception of Lady Macbeth?

Malcolm's sentiment that things will be performed in their "measure, time and place" is another indication that order has been restored (73).

The play ends with Malcolm's thanks and invitation for everyone to attend his coronation at Scone. These lines, in addition to being a proper ending for the plot, are a fitting end to the play and may have been directed at the audience. Order and happiness have been restored to the kingdom with the restoration of God's appointed deputy.