

## ***Macbeth*: A Guide for the USNA Instructor**

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Good Commanders in the Warres, must be taken, be they never so *Ambitious* . . . . And to take a Soldier without *Ambition*, is to pull off his Spurres.

--Sir Francis Bacon

Macbeth is essentially the practical man, the man of action, of the highest experience, power, and energy in military and political command, accustomed to the closest connection between willing and doing. He is one who in another age would have worked out the problem of free trade, or unified Germany, or engineered the Suez Canal. On the other hand, he has concerned himself little with things transcendental; he is poorly disciplined in thought and goodness; prepared for any emergency in which there is anything to be *done*, yet a mental crisis or a moral problem afflicts him with the shock of an unfamiliar situation.

--Richard G. Moulton

While the challenges that Macbeth presents to the reader are not unique to Shakespeare, nor even for the most part unique within Shakespeare's body of work, the play does pose perhaps the largest number of potentially insoluble questions of any work in the history of the English-speaking theatre. Is its anti-hero, for instance, a purely evil man who succumbs to the power of darkness, or is he a figure deserving of some degree of sympathy, a good man who is tempted and corrupted, but who in his defiant fall recovers some shred of dignity? Is his wife a bloodthirsty amazon mad for power, or a strong woman perfectly suited for marriage to a powerful warrior? How do we explain the witches and their charms? Does Macbeth have free will? Who is the third murderer? Is Banquo's ghost real? Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, just what are Shakespeare's characters talking about as they discuss the moral dilemmas of seizing and holding power in some of Shakespeare's gaudiest language?

This project will attempt to answer, or at least shed some light upon, some of the questions above, as well as some very different ones. In addition to displaying a powerful moral and poetic imagination, however, Macbeth also raises historical and political questions, though

its history and politics are unlikely to be familiar to the novice reader. I will begin with this problem by offering the reader a brief discussion of the historical events treated in the play and the political environment in which the play was first staged. In the longer second section I will attempt, through a series of scene readings, to chart the unfolding of one of the play's key themes, the conflict between ambition and obligation, in the language and stagecraft of the play.

The particular moral problem that I have chosen to explore in Macbeth is one no less applicable to our own time than it was to Shakespeare's, and it seems to me an especially apt subject for consideration by those of us who train leaders and warriors for a living. Macbeth, fearless and decisive on the battlefield, is for at least part of the play an almost perfect warrior. Yet as the quote from Shakespeare's contemporary Francis Bacon reminds us, great warriors must possess ambition, a quality that can be dangerous to the social order the warrior is sworn to protect. Macbeth, whose imagination frequently overcomes him and leaves him effectively paralyzed, offers a powerful example of the tensions created by the uneasy coexistence within one man of leadership, ambition, and duty. Making sense of the play's treatment of this theme in a contemporary classroom, however, should begin with a consideration of the play within the context of its original production.

## **I. History and "The Scottish Play"**

The world of Macbeth is medieval, and the Middle Ages were familiar turf for Shakespeare by the years 1605-6, when the play seems to have been written. He had already written eight plays based on medieval English history earlier in his career (including Henry V, perhaps the best-known of these works). The world of the English history plays, however, is a world that is more conventionally "medieval" as we understand the word. English society in

these plays is based on feudalism, a pyramidal form of social organization in which the king sits at the top of the pyramid as the sole proprietor of the kingdom; loyalty up and down the pyramid is based on mutual obligations and solemn vows. Family, religion, and class interests, to say nothing of self-interest, all operated in medieval society and feudal politics could be treacherous, but the pyramidal organization of the social structure was meant to contain these forces.

In the eleventh century, during which the events of Macbeth originally took place, however, Scotland had not yet even reached the stage of feudal organization. The historical Macbeth assassinated Duncan and became king in 1040 CE (Dickinson 54). The country's organization into a centralized kingdom had only begun in earnest in 843, when the Scot Kenneth MacAlpin crushed the tribe of the Picts, who also occupied the territory of Scotland (37). Nor had the country been entirely unified by Duncan's time: the northern region of Moray, from which Macbeth originally came, still retained a considerable degree of independence (54). The organization of royal rule, moreover, was not based on primogeniture, the dominant means of transferring power in feudal society, through which all property passed to the eldest son. Rather, the Scots traditionally practiced tanistry, in which the kingship rotated among cousins from different branches of the governing family alliance that ruled the kingdom. Tanistry amounted, in effect, to a power-sharing agreement among the branches of the ruling clan, and helped to maintain unity in a fragmented society that was constantly threatened from the outside by the English and the Norse. It also, however, produced chaos because of the temptation to seize power that it produced. Regicide was a political nightmare in Shakespeare's day, but it was relatively common in early medieval Scotland (Mitchison 13).

Duncan's reign, however, proved to be a period of transition in the Scottish monarchy. Duncan, whose father was dead, inherited the throne from his grandfather, King Malcolm II,

which at the time was highly unusual (14). His ascent to the throne came at the expense of his cousin Macbeth, who had a good claim to the throne and was, in fact, significantly older than Duncan, who is typically played as an old man in staged productions of Macbeth. Macbeth, in history as in the theatre, was a man of action. According to Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles, the popular history from which Shakespeare lifted much of his plot, Macbeth was "a valiant gentleman, and one that if he had not been somewhat cruell [*sic*] of nature, might have been thought most woorthie the government of a realme," while Duncan "was so soft and gentle of nature, that the people wished the inclinations and maners of these two cousins to have beene ... tempered and interchangeablie bestowed betwixt them" (265). Eager for power and concerned by his younger cousin's weakness as a king, as well as his attempt to designate his own son Malcolm as heir apparent, Macbeth and a group of his supporters murdered Duncan. According to Holinshed, Macbeth ruled justly for ten years before he began to show signs of the tyranny that opened the opportunity for Duncan's son Malcolm, backed by the English, to return to Scotland and take the throne, a move that restored the order of primogeniture. While primogeniture would not become standard practice in Scotland for another two hundred years, Malcolm's claiming of the throne was a turning point<sup>1</sup>

Primogeniture had been firmly established in Scotland for three centuries by the time of the 1566 birth of King James VI of Scotland, who would also become James I of England in 1603, the year when his predecessor, Queen Elizabeth I, died. James, however, was not much more secure in his throne as an infant king than many of his medieval predecessors. The child of

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<sup>1</sup> Holinshed and Shakespeare edit out other significant parts of this history. Banquo, whose very historical existence is doubtful, was reportedly one of the thanes who supported Macbeth in his assassination of Duncan (Holinshed 269). Also, Shakespeare edits out the existence of Lulach, Lady Macbeth's son by a previous marriage to another member of the royal kin, who ruled briefly but was, like Macbeth, slain by Malcolm (Barrell 13). The murder of Duncan in Macbeth's castle and the subsequent blotting out of the sun is drawn from another story in Holinshed, that of Donwald's murder of King Duff.

the Earl of Darnley, an English nobleman descended from the House of Tudor that also sired Queen Elizabeth, and Mary Queen of Scots, who was herself a Tudor by birth, James had a clear claim on both the English and Scottish thrones since Elizabeth was unmarried and childless. Yet political violence seems to have surrounded James even before his birth. (Much of this violence, was, of course, centered on the wars of religion that lasted in Europe into the seventeenth century. Born of Roman Catholic parents and baptized by a priest but raised as a Protestant, James was not wholly trusted by either side in the religious conflicts of the seventeenth century.)

Rumors circulated at Mary's court that the unborn James was the son David Riccio, an Italian ambassador much favored by the queen. Riccio was assassinated by a group of Scottish nobles, who also confronted the pregnant queen in what may have been an attempt to assassinate her or to force her to miscarry (Stewart 11). James's father was assassinated in 1567 by parties unknown when the wing of the royal house where he slept was bombed (Scott 37). Queen Elizabeth had her cousin and fellow monarch Mary arrested, imprisoned for twenty years, and eventually executed in 1587 on dubious charges of attempting to undermine Elizabeth's reign in England, resulting in James being named king as an infant. James's grandfather, the earl of Lennox, who had been named regent for his grandson, was killed in 1571 in a civil war, dying of his wounds in front of his grandson (67). James then faced possible abduction or assassination in 1582, 1591, 1592, and 1603, the last a plot to kidnap him as he traveled to England to claim the throne (Stewart 65-6, 125-6, 130-2).

In an atmosphere of such violence, then, it is perhaps no wonder that James sought to use all of his power to make not just his own rule, but the very idea of monarchy itself, more secure. James, raised in large part by tutors, was a surprisingly learned man for a monarch, and he became known as one of the leading proponents of the "divine right" theory of kingship, an

extension of the feudal ideal intended to encompass the evolution of modern nation-states. Under divine right, kings are the appointed agents of God on earth, and while obliged to care for their people they must be obeyed with unyielding devotion, no matter how tyrannical their actions. In his 1598 book The Trewe Law of Free Monarchies, James explained his political vision: “By the Law of Nature the King becomes a naturall Father to all his Lieges at his Coronation: And as the Father of his fatherly duty is bound to care for the nourishing, education, and virtuous government of his children; even so is the king bound to care for all his subjects” (King James VI and I 262). The familial metaphor used by James echoes throughout Macbeth, not only in the image of the fatherly Duncan, but also in the play’s nearly obsessive interest in children, a symbol of both the stable continuance of a monarchy and of the unswerving duty owed by subjects to their father/king under James’s idealized absolutist monarchy. James’s advisors also worked hard to cultivate the ideal of a “sacral,” or sacred and ceremonial, monarchy. Like the saintly English King Edward the Confessor in Macbeth, for instance, James attempted to cure his subjects of scrofula, a skin disease known as “the King’s evil.” James would not lay hands on his subjects, but he did place amulets around the necks of sufferers in an attempt to hedge his royal image around with a sense of sacred ritual (Garber 718).<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most critical moment of James’s reign, however, occurred in 1605 at a moment that both imperiled and secured his authority as king of both England and Scotland. On 5 November 1605, Guy Fawkes and a group of co-conspirators were arrested at a rented house abutting the House of Parliament in possession of a large quantity of gunpowder. Fawkes and his fellows were preparing to blow up Parliament during a speech by the king to the assembled houses, thus decapitating the English government. Fawkes and the others were Roman Catholic,

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<sup>2</sup> As Garber notes, James’s grandson Charles II had no such qualms about touching his subjects. The charismatic king is said to have laid hands on as many as ninety-two thousand of his subjects.

and their arrest, trial, and execution set off a wave of hysteria that allowed James to strengthen his hold on the throne. The king's influence also grew because the conspiracy had been uncovered through a cryptic letter intercepted by the government, which James (or so he claimed) had interpreted, thereby uncovering the plot (Stewart 296). The Gunpowder Plot against the king, and his ongoing solidification of power in its wake, provide the most contemporary historical and political backdrop against which Macbeth plays out.<sup>3</sup>

## II. Ambition and Duty in Conflict

King James also attempted to gain cultural influence by patronizing major artists of his era, including Shakespeare and his theatrical company. Evidence suggests that Macbeth was first performed at the royal court before James in 1606, and that it may not have been performed in a public theatre until 1611 (Barnet lxiii). (The first public audiences for the play, in other words, may have been roughly as far removed from James's coronation and the Gunpowder Plot as we are from the contested election of 2000 and the September 11 attacks.) The play certainly shows the influence of James: his interest in the intellectually fashionable subject of witchcraft, as well as his preferred metaphors for kingship, echo in the script (Stallybrass 190-1). But what can this play offer to a contemporary reader, someone who is unlikely to know (or care) about court politics or the Gunpowder Plot?

I would argue that for the general reader, Macbeth offers a critical study of questions of ambition and duty within a close-knit, hierarchical society, and a careful consideration of the proper use of authority that touches, along the way, on such important questions as the relationship of truth to power. At the core of this tragedy, however, is the question of ambition.

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<sup>3</sup> Anyone familiar with Alan Moore's graphic novel V for Vendetta or the film made from it—a group almost certainly including most of the Brigade—may note the connections between the novel, the Gunpowder Plot, and the play. Moore's antihero V wears a Guy Fawkes mask and quotes Macbeth 1.2 during his first appearance.

Shakespeare's earliest influence was the playwright Christopher Marlowe, whose tragic heroes like Doctor Faustus and Tamburlaine push the limits of human desire, at least as it can be represented onstage. Shakespeare's own earlier anti-heroic figure, King Richard III, kills his way to the throne, stepping over the corpses he creates with a smile on his face. Macbeth, partly because conscience plays a stronger role in the script and partly because of the presence of the saintly Duncan, presents a much different study of the desire for power and its consequences.

Shakespeare uses a number of techniques to represent the interplay between ambition and duty in the course of the play. Macbeth is perhaps best known for its catalogue of imagery. References to children, birds, clothing, blood, water, and light and dark all play critical roles in the text. (Indeed, these image patterns have been fodder for essays in English classes time out of mind.) Characterization, certainly, is crucial as Shakespeare chronicles the gradual isolation and disintegration of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Equally important, however, is Shakespeare's use of doubling among his characters, creating parallels among the people in the play that establish points of comparison as we study the play's theme. In some cases, Shakespeare creates foils, characters whose traits offset a specific point of Macbeth's personality. Banquo's steadfastness in the face of political temptation, for instance, highlights Macbeth's corresponding weakness, while Macduff's profound sense of duty to his country in the later acts reminds the audience of what Macbeth once was. Just as often, however, Shakespeare creates a space in the text—the rebel, the equivocator (liar), the treacherous thane of Cawdor, the good prince—and invites the audience to consider who occupies these spaces, for how long, and how well. The result of these techniques is a story of political purgation: the play shows the grave threat posed to a close-knit warrior society held together by vows of fraternity and loyalty when the necessary virtues of ambition and valor overpower the necessary virtue of duty, while also offering a happy ending in

which the ambitious villain-hero and his ethically unmoored use of power are replaced by the restoration of a social order that acknowledges the interdependence of the ruler and the ruled.

Because the play is so dense with references to this theme, I will not attempt to produce a monolithic essay that encompasses the entire thematic arc mentioned above. Instead, I will offer a series of short guides to important features of scenes that relate to this theme, effectively offering a “gouge sheet” for the instructor. This format will, I hope, be useful to instructors as a tool for enriching their classroom discussions. I will also, where possible, avoid tasks such as vocabulary clarification that should be addressed by the footnotes in any classroom edition of the play.

**1.1.** The witches’ injunction in the opening scene that “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” sets the tone for the entire course of the play by demonstrating the play’s signature mixture of good and evil (11). The entire script focuses on how good can become evil. Also, this balance between good and evil suggests the rhetorical tactic of equivocation, or of speaking on both sides of an issue. Fair and foul are indistinguishable in this atmosphere of moral crisis, though the statement also suggests that fair and foul must necessarily coexist and are meaningless without each other. Equivocation is also a form of lying in which one makes a statement that is superficially true, but also false in its content. The witches’ later prophecies to Macbeth are the play’s chief examples: they are both true and false, just as they are both a blessing and a curse.

**1.2.** This scene is perhaps most famous for the so-called “bloody captain” speech, which is a tremendous depiction of battlefield courage and one of the most famous set speeches in Shakespeare, but the scene serves a number of functions. First, it illustrates the grave dangers

that assail Duncan's kingdom both from within and without. Second, it initiates a number of key patterns in the play's imagery. Third, it establishes the characters of Duncan and Macbeth.

Duncan is clearly not a front-line commander on the order of the rebel Macdonwald or the Norwegian king Sweno. His absence from battle, in fact, has been a significant source of critical debate and might be useful as a topic in the classroom. Duncan's absence from the melee, moreover, establishes Macbeth (who may be doubled in the figure of the bloody captain) as the play's chief example of martial valor. Macbeth has tremendous physical courage: danger to him (or to Banquo) is like a sparrow to an eagle, according to the bloody captain, who initiates the play's bird imagery. Yet in the captain's comparison of Macbeth and Banquo to overcharged cannons, there seems to be something unwholesome. His imputation that perhaps Duncan's captains meant to bathe in blood, or to create a new Golgotha ("Place of the skulls," the execution ground where the crucifixion took place), while surely not defending Duncan's enemies, raises questions about an excess of valor that Macbeth himself will echo.<sup>4</sup>

The descriptions of Macbeth, in particular, are ambiguous. The Thane of Ross refers to him as "Bellona's bridegroom," a mortal man metaphorically married to the Roman goddess of war (54). The image suggests that Macbeth is nearly superhuman, while also perhaps foreshadowing the formidable power possessed by his real wife, Lady Macbeth. This image also both distinguishes Macbeth from the rebel Macdonwald, whose quarrel had been favored by the supernatural female Fortune (often figured as a prostitute in literature), and establishes an uncanny similarity between the two. It is also worth considering the ambiguity of Ross's description of Macbeth's second episode of single combat. Shakespeare's syntax leaves it somewhat unclear whether Macbeth conquers Norway or Cawdor. If the foe that Macbeth

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<sup>4</sup> Michael Hawkins argues that the play generally applauds levels of violence that seem to go beyond the ethical pale, reflecting "the acceptance and integration of the dark side of the military code" not only in Macbeth's Scotland, but also in Duncan's (167).

conquers in a duel that feels strangely like a bout of shadowboxing is Norway, then Macbeth has fought like a king and overcome a king, suggesting a certain regal quality. If it is Cawdor, then Macbeth has defeated the man whose place he will take, and whose treason he will ironically replicate. The sentence must refer to Norway, however, since Macbeth's surprise in 1.3 at being named Thane of Cawdor clearly indicates that he does not know Cawdor was part of the forces he was fighting in the battle.

It is also worth considering that Duncan establishes himself early in the play as a figure concerned with the well-being of his subordinates. He calls for surgeons for the captain's wounds and praises him for a good report, and he quickly rewards Macbeth for his service by granting him Cawdor. Throughout the play he will be associated with such images of bounty. Feudal kings, at least in theory, held all of the wealth and honors of their kingdom in trust, but in order to maintain power had to know how to share them. Duncan's liberality will contrast sharply with Macbeth's monopolization of power once he assumes the throne.

**1.3.** Macbeth's first line of the play, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" not only connects him to the witches, but also to the admixture of good and evil that will quickly come to define his character (38). This first encounter with the witches also establishes another crucial opposition for the play's understanding of the conflict between duty and ambition: the dichotomy between the present and the future. The witches promise future glory to both men, though ultimately a greater glory to Banquo, Macbeth's double, as figured in the image of Banquo's descendants taking the crown. Macbeth's future glory will ultimately be fleeting, lacking in posterity. Children become the play's main symbol of the future, and as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's ambitions grow in the play, they will seem at times to be at war with this symbol.

Macbeth's lapses into a trancelike state during this scene are of interest both because they suggest that his moral sense is not quite capable of defeating temptation and because they suggest that his ambition to be king may antedate the witches' prophecy. A.C. Bradley, the most prominent Shakespearean of the early-twentieth century, argued that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth must have first plotted the murder of Duncan at some point before the play began, based partly on Macbeth's soliloquy from lines 127-42, with Macbeth's "fantastical" hypothetical murder of Duncan (139). Duncan has not yet named Malcolm his heir, but Macbeth has already spoken the word "murder," a thought that once voiced cannot be called back again. It is also worth noting that the very prospect of killing the king, while tempting to Macbeth, has powerful physical effects on him. By killing Duncan, he commits an unthinkable act, as suggested by the apocalyptic language Macduff will use in 2.3 when he discovers Duncan's corpse.

As a final note, Banquo stands out in this scene as better equipped to deal with moral dilemmas than Macbeth. Macbeth, despite his hesitations, seems to believe the witches' promises of glory from the moment he is named Thane of Cawdor. Banquo, less willing to accept prophecy as truth, attempts to act as Macbeth's conscience by warning him about the relative truth and falsity of the "instruments of darkness" (124). Macbeth and Banquo both introduce the key metaphor of power as clothing in this scene, but it seems that only Banquo truly understands the impermanence of glory suggested by comparing honors to garments, which fade with time and can be worn by others.

**1.4.** Three major issues emerge in this scene, beginning with Duncan's lesson to Malcolm and Donalbain about the inscrutability of the human face. Malcolm seems to be taken in by the Thane of Cawdor's apologetic gallows speech, but a knowledgeable observer like Duncan would

recognize the possibility for falsehood here. Confessional speeches were part of the ritual of public executions; they did not necessarily indicate genuine contrition (Lemon 29-35). Duncan's declaration that we simply cannot know what other men think raises what could be a fruitful question for discussion, and one that the play continues to explore: given that humans can feign emotions, how can we establish trust? Readers should also note the irony of Macbeth's entry immediately after Duncan's dismissal of the previous Thane of Cawdor as "a gentleman upon whom I built / an absolute trust" (13-14). Occasionally, among an audience familiar with Shakespeare, this line draws a laugh.

Also of interest in this scene are the metaphors of growth and bounty associated with Duncan in this scene, and Macbeth's declaration of the subject's child-like duty to his sovereign. Macbeth's declaration clearly reinforces King James's belief that a king becomes a father to his people, for Macbeth here all but declares his kinsman to be his father, even in the presence of Duncan's real sons. Duncan's description of Banquo as a crop that he hopes will grow is even more telling. Duncan and Banquo here establish Duncan as a sacral king, one whose virtues guarantee the bounty of his subjects and kingdom. Just as the cursed fate of Oedipus calls down a plague on Thebes, Duncan's virtuous life maintains order and growth in his kingdom, including the development of his subordinate nobles.

Duncan establishes himself here as a canny politician adept at maintaining the loyalty of a class of ambitious noblemen. Too often the casual reader is distracted by the king's tears of joy and fails to notice the balanced manner in which he hands out praise and honor. After praising Macbeth, he singles out Banquo. After making the controversial move of naming Malcolm as his heir, he quickly promises to hand out "signs of nobleness" to all of his subordinates, a canny and useful move (41). The fact that Macbeth's ambition cannot be contained does not make Duncan

any less capable a leader in this scene. Even Macbeth understands that his “black and deep desires” are so starkly opposed to the code that governs his world that he hopes even his own murdering hand will not know what it has done (51).

**1.5.** Lady Macbeth’s first appearance in the play sets off fireworks for most audiences. Banquo seems to serve as Macbeth’s personified conscience; Lady Macbeth seems to be his free-floating ambition. Put together, the three characters echo the motif of the *psychomachia*, or war within the soul, often figured as a man with an angel and a devil sitting on each shoulder.

For some readers, it will be no accident that the “devil” in this image is the woman who calls on the spirits of darkness to “unsex” her and chastises her husband as being too full of “milk” (42, 18). “Lady Macbeth” has been code for “overbearing woman” since at least the eighteenth century. (The American Revolutionary John Adams compared his “mother country” of Britain to Lady Macbeth once, and not as a compliment.) Ironically, Shakespeare rewrites the history of medieval Scotland in this play, rhetorically rendering women as weak and helpless except for the morally dubious Lady Macbeth and the witches. Holinshed, however, records that in Macbeth’s time Scottish women fought alongside men in battle (Asp 382). It is not, perhaps, surprising that feminist critics have taken up Lady Macbeth’s cause, describing her as a rare Shakespearean woman tough enough to compete in a patriarchal world. If Macbeth is an eagle, a bird of prey, then she is a raven, a bird of bad omen traditionally associated with death and violent revenge (1.5.39).<sup>5</sup>

Whatever else Lady Macbeth is, she certainly is ambitious, and probably more so than her husband. Whenever his will waivers in the face of his conscience, she chastises him as

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<sup>5</sup> Lady Macbeth also associates herself with serpents in this scene, a symbolic reference that calls to mind Eve, who until well after the seventeenth century was still regularly blamed for wickedly corrupting Adam (1.5.67).

effeminate or childish, so effectively that by the time Banquo's ghost appears in the banquet scene he will do the same thing to himself. Her belief that ambition requires "illness," a willingness to commit evil, is the exact opposite of Banquo's wish to depend on the good will of providence to bring him his promised reward, but also neatly singles out the problem for her husband (21). She is, like Macbeth, easily seduced by the possibility of future glory: his letters transport her beyond "this ignorant present" to the very edge of their future greatness (58). Yet even Lady Macbeth is incapable of encompassing regicide within her imagination: she would have this deed done in the dark, so that not even the knife she uses to commit this murder (which could be a real knife or a metaphorical reference to her husband) will see what it does.

**1.6.** Duncan's arrival at Macbeth's castle continues the play's use of bird imagery to underscore mood. The King's dialogue with Duncan about the fortunate sign presented by the presence of martlets at the Macbeth home creates a false sense of cheer and repeats the play's pervasive contrast of interiors and exteriors. The house's falsely cheerful exterior echoes Lady Macbeth's endorsement of pretended loyalty at the end of 1.5 and sets up her entry into this scene.

Shakespeare here uses dramatic irony, since the audience knows Lady Macbeth is planning to kill Duncan, undercutting her pleasing use of the language of feudal loyalty to Duncan when she declares that her entire fortune is merely held in trust for Duncan.

**1.7.** Macbeth's debates with himself and with his wife in this scene raise major ethical questions, but the arguments are dressed in some of the gaudiest of Shakespeare's poetic language. The image of pity as a naked baby somehow bestriding the winds like an angel in Macbeth's soliloquy is a famously complicated figure (21-25). Cleanth Brooks offers an extended reading

of this image, concluding: “Pity is like the naked babe, the most sensitive and helpless thing; yet, almost as soon as the comparison is announced, the symbol of weakness begins to turn into a symbol of strength. . . . [Pity] is strong because of its very weakness” (Brooks 52). The naked infant, a symbol of both weakness and innocence, suddenly transforms into the symbol of righteous strength, which will undo Macbeth by exposing his evil deed. This same fusion of pity (or duty) and strength will overcome Macbeth in Act 5, when Macbeth will be left essentially alone to fight his last battle, cast off by an army that goes over to Malcolm, the “rightful” king.

But for now, Macbeth cannot even muster the will to act, and Lady Macbeth questions his very humanity. If he is a human, he is a man dressed in a drunken hope (1.7.35), another famously difficult image. Again, Cleanth Brooks comes to the rescue, aligning this image with the clothing imagery prevalent throughout the play and used by Macbeth to describe his new honors in this scene. Brooks says, “A man dressed in a drunken hope is garbed in strange attire indeed—a ridiculous dress which accords thoroughly with the contemptuous picture that Lady Macbeth wishes to evoke. Macbeth’s earlier dream of glory has been a drunken fantasy merely, if he flinches from action now” (Brooks 43).

If Macbeth is not a man, then what is he? Lady Macbeth has the answer: he is the poor cat from the adage, which wants fish, but does not want to wet his paws. The Elizabethans loved adages, and this bit of pithy folk wisdom is especially insulting to the warrior Macbeth, who bathes in blood on the battlefield. The image of a cat afraid to wet its paws in search of prey also sets up a linkage between water and blood that will echo throughout the play. Macbeth imagines the blood on his hands after the murder to be strong enough to change the color of the ocean. Lady Macbeth believes that water can wash off the blood (symbolizing guilt) from their hands, though her later sleepwalking scene, with its obsessive hand washing, casts doubt on that

conclusion. And ironically, invoking the image of the fastidious cat will ironically reflect on her later as she washes the blood off of her own hands in Act 2, mingling blood and water in a way rather similar to a fish-loving cat seizing its underwater prey.

For any reader who insists that the assassination is the fault of “unwomanly” Lady Macbeth, it is worth considering that in this scene she both reinforces and rejects her place as a woman. Her famous hypothetical infanticide in this scene can (and probably should) be read as an example of what a great sacrifice she, as a woman, would be willing to make to realize their shared dream of glory, not a repetition of her rejection of femininity in 1.5. Macbeth, however, seems to draw inspiration from his wife’s “mettle,” effectively making her an honorary male warrior by declaring that she should not bear any female children (1.7.73). As we know, of course, she will not bear any more children at all: this marriage, like the rest of Macbeth’s future, is barren.

**2.1.** The scene’s opening dialogue between Macbeth and Banquo once again illustrates Macbeth and Banquo’s differences when it comes to temptation. Macbeth’s wild pre-assassination soliloquy, complete with hallucination, contrasts sharply with Banquo’s careful, politic language in their discussion. It is unclear just what sort of allegiance Macbeth asks of Banquo in this scene: he could be hinting at a political challenge to Malcolm’s coronation when Duncan dies of natural causes, or at something more sinister. The delivery of the diamond from Duncan to Macbeth serves as a reminder of the bounty associated with the King, recalling one of those virtues that Macbeth earlier felt would cry out and expose Duncan’s murderer. The diamond and Macbeth’s imaginary dagger establish once again the dichotomy between the social codes that hold Scotland together and Macbeth’s vaulting ambition, and also between the past and the

future. The diamond suggests present honors, while the dagger suggests a speculative future as full of violence as it might be of glory. Macbeth lives by the sword, or in this case, the assassin's dagger, and he will die by it.

The bell that calls Macbeth to his task also suggests a summons to the future that Lady Macbeth felt in the instant. These offstage noises create a pattern of intrusions from the outside world, which also includes the voices that Macbeth believes he hears in 2.2 and the knocking at the gate that begins 2.3. While the noises mark the stages of the assassination's completion, they also complete a process of sealing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth off from the world outside of their shared guilt. No one else sees or hears what they have seen and heard.

**2.2.** The actual scene of the assassination revisits many of the issues brought up in 1.5 and 1.7. Instructors might find it useful, for instance, to consider whether Lady Macbeth changes when confronted with the actual event of the assassination itself. Also worth consideration might be how the play defines courage at such moments as this. Macbeth loses his composure during the assassination, despite his lack of fear on the battlefield. Lady Macbeth, who chastises him once again for his infirmity, is left to clean up the mess. The murderers once again must confront the fact that they are doing an apparently unthinkable deed. Lady Macbeth, after all, cannot bring herself to murder the sleeping Duncan. While she, however, is able to reason away the blood on their hands by the simple application of water, her husband's divided loyalty begins to eat away at him in this scene, as witnessed by his obsession with the blood on his hands. The symbolic contrast between water and blood is nowhere sharper in the play than in this scene.

It is also worth considering that Lady Macbeth in this scene's opening seems an ironic parallel to Macbeth in Act 1. If Macbeth at some point dressed himself in a drunken hope, as

Lady Macbeth claims, she herself is currently dwelling in a drunken hope of her own, intoxicated not only by the drinks with which she has plied Duncan's guards, but also with the prospect of imminent power. The reader should also note that Duncan's murder did not take place in Macbeth's castle. Shakespeare here, as he does in 2.4, incorporates material from a different story in Holinshed, that of the killing of King Duff by the vengeful thane Donwald and his ambitious wife. (The Macbeths' feigned shock at Duncan's murder in 2.3 and the blocking out of the sun during the day after the king's murder in 2.4 are also drawn from the account of Donwald and Duff.)

**2.3.** The scene-stealer of act 2, the Porter, is one of the more complicated bit parts in all of Shakespeare. He actually disappeared for over one-hundred years during the eighteenth century because contemporary critics could not stomach naughty jokes in the middle of high tragedy. Yet the Porter and his playing at being the doorman of Hell are powerful symbolic devices. The house, and all of Scotland, will shortly descend into a hell on earth, so he is in this sense prophetic. Like Macbeth, he has been up all night and is much the worse for wear, making him something of a low comic double for the Thane of Cawdor. The crimes his hypothetical sinners are admitted for, moreover, seem appropriate to Macbeth: speculative ambition (the farmer), equivocating, and theft (the tailor, in another instance of clothing imagery throughout the play).

Also important in this scene is the emergence of Macduff as the main foil to Macbeth. Banquo's days are numbered, but Macduff takes over the role of the loyal, patriotic servant to the king. The apocalyptic language of his speech indicates not only his own personal revulsion at the assassination, but also voices the play's much larger sense of what this violation of the social order threatens for the kingdom. Macduff's unswerving honesty and loyalty stand out all the

more clearly since both Macbeths engaging in play-acting during this scene, with Macbeth killing the grooms and pretending his motive was righteous anger, and Lady Macbeth faking a fainting fit to save her husband from his own bad acting. (Macbeth's dishonor now encompasses lying as well as violating his duties to his guest and king through murder.) It is also intriguing to note that Malcolm and Donalbain are left alone at the end of the act, not only marking the suspicion that falls on them but also rendering them as a sort of chorus of children (and thus symbols of the future) invoking the bloodshed that is to come.

**2.4.** The discussion with the Old Man in 2.4, with its catalogue of imagery of disorder, reestablishes the destructive force of Macbeth's ambition. Of particular interest is Ross's condemnation of "thriftless ambition" as it relates to Malcolm and Donalbain (40), an ironic reference since of course the guilt rightfully belongs to Macbeth. ("Thriftless" suggests not being mindful of the future, an apt term for Macbeth, whose reign will have no posterity.) Of particular interest in this scene is the question of whether or not Macduff and Ross both secretly suspect Macbeth already. If not, then the scene is ironic, but if so, then their temporizing comments are in fact openly sarcastic. (Such a conversation happens in 3.6 among a group of thanes.) Ross, along with Lennox, is an ambiguous figure in this play, a man who can be seen as being willing to "play along" politically with Macbeth's illegitimate rule until it becomes more prudent to join Malcolm's party. Macduff, of course, plays no such games. The questions of what it means to live in the truth, and whether it is morally acceptable to disregard truth in order to survive in a corrupt society, are undercurrents in this scene that will echo throughout the later acts.

**3.1-2.** The openings scene of the play's second half distinguish the loyal subordinate Macbeth from the king he has become—a man who rules only based on his overweening ambition and his private fears. 3.1 establishes a series of distinctions between Macbeth and other characters. It opens with Banquo's concern over what Macbeth may have done to encompass the crown, a concern that is interesting not only for the temptation that the witches' prophecy offers to Banquo, but also for the clear division that appears between the two men in this scene. With Macbeth's assumption of the throne, Banquo must now speak to Macbeth with the air of a cautious politician rather than a comrade, and the fear of discovery that held Macbeth's ambition in check has been replaced with a fear that Banquo might threaten him and the realization that Macbeth has utterly ruined himself to crown his friend's descendants in his posterity. Macbeth responds, as he so often does in the play, by in effect declaring war on the future in plotting Banquo's assassination.

Macbeth's debasement in the service of his ambition is made clear in his encounter with the two murderers. Macbeth's speech about dogs (3.1.103-20), confusing as it may be, reestablishes some sense of order in the play. Macbeth depicts for these men a hierarchical world in which everything occupies its place. Ironically, he lowers himself at this moment by offering these men a chance to upset this order by killing the nobleman Banquo, just as he himself threw Scotland into disorder by murdering Duncan. How different, the instructor might fruitfully ask a class, is Macbeth as a soldier or as a king from these hired assassins? Where do we draw the distinctions between them, if there are such distinctions to draw?

In addition to debasing himself, in this scene Macbeth begins the process of slowly isolating himself from others that will conclude in his nearly solitary death at the play's end. Dismissing the entire court, including his wife, suggests that Macbeth is withdrawing. He is not

the convivial and honest king that his predecessor was, but a solitary and dissembling man. Again, he seems to have taken on the traits of an assassin or a spy rather than those of a warrior or a king. As Brian Morris observes, “Macbeth knows nothing of the glory of kingship” (37). When Lady Macbeth, whose opening speech in 3.2 echoes her husband’s lament in 3.1, chastises him for keeping too much alone, Macbeth’s response keeps her at arm’s length about his true intentions toward Banquo. His line, “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck” (3.2.51), while affectionate, is also a dismissal from responsibility of the woman he first addresses as his “dearest partner of greatness” and without whom he would like have had his head chopped off as a traitor (1.5.11).

**3.4.** The banquet scene is the scene upon which a production of Macbeth often must base its success or failure. Done well, it is a challenge; done poorly, it is a disaster. For Macbeth, the symbolism of bringing the nobles of the nation together to break bread with him is obvious. This is his attempt to rule, like Duncan, through sharing material bounty and solemn oaths. The state dinner often proves a temptation too strong for the equally bad instincts of directors. When I did this show as an undergraduate, the director cut a hole in the center of the table from which Banquo’s ghost emerged periodically in order to illustrate the flawed and incomplete nature of Macbeth’s rule. The result looked like something out of the science fiction movie Aliens or an arcade game of Whack-a-Mole, and invariably provoked laughter in the house.

The banquet scene contains relatively little that is new, but it repeats much of what has gone before it in the play. Lady Macbeth’s question, “Are you a man” hearkens back to 1.7, as does the marital squabble about the ghost (3.4.70). Once again forced to clean up the mess that her husband has made, Lady Macbeth finds herself “stage managing” this disastrous

performance of royal hospitality, much as she had to run the daggers back into the bedchamber in 2.2. Moreover, she finds herself once again as the agent of reason taming what she perceives to be Macbeth's wild imagination. (We are never sure whether Banquo's ghost is real, or a hallucination like the dagger, though presumably the ghost is real.) "When all's done, / You look but on a stool," Lady Macbeth's dismissal of Macbeth's hysteria follows precisely the same materialist logic as her earlier statement, "A little water clears us of this deed" (3.4.79-80, 2.2.86).

For Macbeth, of course, the scene replays the dagger that drew him to Duncan's chamber—as Lady Macbeth also notes in 3.4.74-5—and his bewildered reaction to the ghost echoes his and his wife's self-recriminations from 3.1 and 3.2. If his victims will not even stay in the grave, then how can he live without going mad? The ghost's literally taking Macbeth's seat at the table, moreover, must be a dreadful reminder of his fated displacement from power and the promised coronation of the descendants of the friend he has betrayed. For the assembled guests, moreover, this moment must also be profoundly disturbing. Since no one else at the banquet, not even Lady Macbeth, knows that Banquo is dead, the ghost Macbeth is most likely to be seeing in their imagination must surely be Duncan's—the ghost of the man whom Macbeth himself has replaced at the royal table. Small wonder, perhaps, that when Lady Macbeth dismisses them the nobles of Scotland leave on the double; the king has all but confessed to regicide.

Any discussion of the banquet scene would do well to conclude with the observation that Macbeth responds to this disastrous chain of events not with repentance, but with a rededication of his will to his ambition and his instinct for self-preservation. At this moment he reveals himself not only as a usurper, but also as a man who carries within him the seed of tyranny.

**3.5.** The song and dance number with Hecate and the witches is generally regarded as a later interpolation, not as Shakespeare's work. It probably came from a work by the playwright Thomas Middleton. My advice to instructors is to just ignore it and keep moving!

**3.6.** This scene illustrates the effects of Macbeth's failed performance of kingship. Having more or less revealed himself as Duncan's assassin, he creates not only general enmity but also two particular and dangerous enemies: Lennox, and, as we shall see later, Ross. Lennox here shows the tenor of the country under Macbeth's rule, dubbing the king a tyrant. So over the top has Macbeth's behavior been that the anonymous lord in this scene unquestioningly accepts primogeniture and Malcolm's right to rule Scotland, a topic that would still have been subject to debate otherwise. The anonymous lord's discussion of Macbeth's other crimes indicate that Macbeth is not only resented as Duncan's murderer. He has also failed in his duties to dispense with wealth and honor, and his ambitious rule has unnerved the aristocracy.

As a point of historical interest, Siward, the earl of Northumberland (which borders Scotland), was related by marriage to Duncan, giving him another reason to back Malcolm's bid to claim the throne of Scotland.

**4.1.** The witches' incantation in this scene, with its grisly catalog of ingredients for the "Double, double, toil and trouble" charm, is one of the finer examples of Shakespeare's use of sensory imagery to control the mood of a scene. While these nasty bits of offal do not directly reflect the play's themes, they match the darkness and violence into which Macbeth plunges Scotland.

The three visions that the witches show to Macbeth are more obviously symbolic. The armed head, which designates Macduff as a man Macbeth must beware, recalls Macbeth's

warrior past and foreshadows the coming duel between these two men. The bloody child who counsels Macbeth to be “bloody, bold, and resolute” not only echoes Macbeth’s attempts to murder Fleance and the play’s use of child imagery, but also prefigures the coming slaughter of Macduff’s family (90). (It is perhaps not too much to think that the bloody child’s injunction not to fear any man born of woman gestures toward the bloody condition of a newborn infant.) The bloody child also pairs nicely with the crowned child, whose promise about Birnam Wood will, like the bloody child’s prophecy, prove to be a duplicitous betrayal of Macbeth. Macbeth, the man fated to leave no child of his own on the throne, will be betrayed by these images of children, the play’s dominant symbol of a prosperous future. The irony is brutal.

The “show of kings” vision, with its line stretching on into infinity, reflects the House of Stuart’s claim to be descended from Banquo. Here the reader should remember that the play appears to have been staged for King James, who was fond of theatrical performances that flattered the monarchy. The presence of the king would make this spectacle powerfully meta-theatrical: the king’s presence in the theatre or the historical fact of his reign would “prove” the truth of this prophecy.

Macbeth’s response to the prophecies confirms his transformation into a tyrant with no control over his ambitious impulses. No social taboo, it seems, is unbreakable in Macbeth’s quest to secure his hold on power—not even a rule against killing women and children. Macbeth takes an uncanny step away from a medieval monarch and toward a modern totalitarian ruler at the end of this scene. At this moment, moreover, his ambition turns into hubris.

**4.2.** The slaughter of the Macduff family produces two particularly strong dramatic effects. The first one is to confirm Macbeth’s absolute tyranny and render him essentially unsupportable.

Shakespeare occasionally seals off one of his disarmingly charming, villainous characters from the possibility of further audience sympathy through the murder of a woman or a child. (Richard III and Iago come to mind.) A tyrannical ruler's violation of his subject's right to control his own family, moreover, in such circumstances makes it impossible for "right-minded" citizens to support Macbeth, as illustrated by the anonymous messenger who crashes the scene to warn Lady Macduff.

The second effect of the scene is to force a reconsideration of the play's moral program through two people outside the official realm of power: Lady Macduff and her son. Lady Macduff's observation that a wren will defend her children from the attack of an owl (an analogy in which she is clearly a wren) questions not only her husband's judgment in journeying to England to bring Malcolm home instead of defending his family, but also the very idea of martial courage that seems to be at the core of the play's moral program. Macduff has done what a patriot should do for his country by seeking to restore its rightful king and unseat a tyrant, but has he done the right thing for his family? Should not his family's safety be more important at such a moment, as Lady Macduff suggests? The young child's dialogue with his mother about treachery is also important, for through the vehicle of this wise child Shakespeare unmasks the falsehoods that have come to dominate Macbeth's Scotland, for even a small child can see that in this country the honest men are outnumbered—and governed—by those who "swear and lie" (54). When perhaps the most courageous act in the play is the young child's attempt to attack the murderers to defend his father's honor, however, one wonders whether this is not the sort of courage that Shakespeare has in mind as a moral ideal, rather than the battlefield valor displayed by Macbeth in act 1.

**4.3.** Since the dawn of Shakespeare instruction, it seems, teachers have trying to find ways to make 4.3 more interesting for students. As with the banquet scene, moreover, 4.3 has been the death of many an otherwise engaging theatrical production.

The long debate between Malcolm and Macduff, in which Malcolm describes himself as a more dangerous and ambitious tyrant than Macbeth, should be viewed as a discussion of the philosophy of leadership, and also as a test by the cautious Malcolm of Macduff's loyalty. Both of these dramatic functions of the scene would certainly have resonated during the reign of a king who had written two books of political theory on monarchy and had repeatedly escaped death or abduction at the hands of his treacherous subjects. One might also argue that Malcolm's false speaking against himself in this scene suggests that he has learned an important lesson about the use of misdirection as a leader. His father claimed to be unable to read the truth behind a man's expression, but Malcolm forces Macduff's true character out into the open by acting the part of a tyrant. (The importance or moral acceptability of such theatrical behavior to a leader might well be a topic worth consideration in a class discussion.)

The appearance of the English doctor and his discussion of King Edward, as noted earlier, suggests a contemporary reference to the British monarch's supposed capacity to cure the skin disease scrofula. The metaphor of a king as a physician for the ills of his country, of which James was fond (Muir 341), also seems to come into play here. It is interesting to note that while the English doctor speaks well of the English king, Macbeth in act 5 will dismiss medicine as worthless when the Scottish doctor proves unable to cure either Lady Macbeth or the "plague" of the English invasion.

Ross's revelation of the fate of Macduff's family in this scene is one of the great puzzles of the script. Why does Ross first tell Macduff that his family is well, only to reveal their

massacre afterward? It is perhaps best understood as a mistake in the script, though there are other explanations. Ross might be ashamed to reveal the news and thus equivocates with Macduff for a moment, noting that the family was “well at peace when I did leave them” (4.3.207). This statement is superficially true both because Macduff’s family was still safe when Ross left the castle in 4.2 and because the family, now dead, “rests in peace.” Ross may also hope to speak to Malcolm and encourage him to return home before delivering news that is sure to derail any conversation about politics. (As someone who has read the play repeatedly and performed in it, I find neither of these readings to be satisfying.) In any case, the end result of the revelation is to unveil Macduff as “a complete man: he is a valiant soldier, ready to perform ‘manly’ deeds, but [he] is neither ashamed of ‘humane’ feelings nor unaware of his moral responsibilities” (Mack 65). The progression of the plot erodes Macbeth’s character, reducing him to the “iron core” of his personality as a battlefield captain (Morris 39), but as he is diminished Macduff grows into an example of a more complete warrior, one with moral courage to match his physical bravery.

Such complex character development, unfortunately, does not move quickly. 4.3 can be difficult for the reader, the performer, and the audience member, but it is essential to the play’s meaning.

**5.1.** Lady Macbeth’s hand-washing scene remains one of the most famous stage moments in history. It represents the final psychological degeneration of a character who has heretofore dismissed as childish the very real moral qualms of her husband. Lady Macbeth did not disavow her sex in the first two acts so much as her very humanity. As her sleeping mind torments itself

with her past evil actions, the moral common sense she disavowed returns from its repression with a vengeance.

Ironically, as Macbeth embraces violence practically for its own sake as the play progresses, he and Lady Macbeth seem to switch places. The trances and hysterical fits that befell him earlier in the play seem to be transferred onto her as the play continues, and her single-minded concern with enacting her will seems to find a new home in his psyche. One can even ask if Lady Macbeth was informed of the planned attack on Macduff's castle in Fife based on her sleepwalking monologue. Her husband's ambition seems to have alienated them from each other, and perhaps her speculations on Lady Macduff's fate reflect a fear of what her husband has become now that she is no longer in his confidence.

The question naturally arises from this scene: can we, or should we, pity those who have no pity? The doctor and the waiting woman serve as our guides for the scene in their revulsion at Lady Macbeth's somnambulant revelations, but the scene almost without fail draws an empathetic reaction from audiences. The British actress Sarah Siddons made Lady Macbeth at least somewhat sympathetic in the eighteenth century, and that tradition has remained a viable interpretation of the character. This scene in large part determines the success or failure of such a reading in performance.

**5.2-5.3.** These two scenes describe the divergent character arcs that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are now following. If Lady Macbeth is coming apart, Macbeth is becoming a cartoon version of his old self from act 1. The "valiant fury" that Caithness says motivates Macbeth looks less like selfless courage at this stage, and more like madness (5.2.14). It is also worth noting that the warrior who would not be dressed in the "borrowed robes" of other men's titles in act 1 is now

reduced by the play's clothing imagery to a man ludicrously hemmed in by his own criminal desires: he is now a "dwarfish thief" being swallowed up by the royal robe of the "giant" Duncan, which he has stolen (22).

Two other key points from 5.2 underscore the play's image patterns. The youthfulness of much of Malcolm's army should remind the reader that throughout the play the future, as emblemized by children, has been Macbeth's enemy. Now an army full of boys barely grown to manhood has come to claim Macbeth's country back from him. Also, the fifth act's preoccupation with the idea of "purging" a country back to health indicates that Macbeth's rule has become a "plague" upon Scotland, even though in 5.3 he misdiagnoses the English invaders as the disease afflicting the kingdom.

Yet even Macbeth has a little charm left in him. His speech in 5.3.19-28, and many of his lines in the closing battle scenes, indicate a willingness to fight on in the face of certain defeat that some critics feel almost redeems his hubris. Macbeth knows at this point he has nothing left to fight for except the sake of fighting, but he resolves to do so anyway. Whether that stubborn attachment to violence qualifies as courage is a question well worth asking.

**5.4-5.8.** Macbeth's appearances in these scenes bring up similar questions about the quality of his courage, especially in his initial reaction to Macduff's appearance in his presence. At that moment, Macbeth seems to veer from something like contrition to yet another vow to pursue his chosen path to his destruction. It is worth noting, especially, that the prospect of death or performing more evil acts does not sway Macbeth; the deciding factor for him in this final showdown is the unpalatable idea of showing submission to "young" Malcolm (5.8.28). Once again the child imagery comes back to haunt him.

Another question worth considering from this scene is just what the script leaves to be believed in. Certainly the equivocating witches' prophecies suggest that easy temptations should be treated skeptically, but even the army's invasion could be construed as, in some sense, deceitful as they mask their numbers. Are there good and bad forms of deceit? If so, on what basis should those distinctions be drawn? In the case of the invading army, is mere tactical utility sufficient to justify misdirection? And if so, what forms of misdirection are acceptable? Does the play accept a certain amount of falsehood as part of carrying on with the administration of truth and justice in the world?

**5.8.** Macbeth's death wraps the entire play up, of course. Scarcely a loose end remains by the time Macduff enters with his head. Shakespeare's tyrants usually die onstage, but given King James's personal history one can understand why killing a Scottish king onstage might not have seemed like a wise career move for the house playwright of a company that received royal patronage. (Later adaptations of the play by Sir William Davenant in the Restoration and David Garrick in the eighteenth century kill Macbeth on stage and give him dying speeches that curse ambition.)

The scene is laced with doubles of Macbeth. Macduff establishes himself as a new version of Macbeth's old self from the first act's offstage battle, defeating a tyrant in single combat. Young Siward, as mourned by his father here, acts in death as a counterpoint to Macbeth both because his youth makes him Macbeth's symbolic antitype and because his father can think of him as "God's soldier," an appellation one could scarcely apply to the rather satanic Macbeth at this point (47). Lastly, there is Malcolm, who concludes the play with an act of generosity by creating a new class of noblemen for his allies—a move that strongly echoes his father's

promised dispensation of political largess in 1.4 as he named Malcolm as his heir. The world has been turned right-side-up again, with honors and loyalty flowing through the proper channels.

**Closing thought:** Perhaps nothing sums up the play's conclusion better than Samuel Johnson's observations from his 1765 edition of Shakespeare. Noting that, "The danger of ambition is well described" in the play, he declares that "though the courage of *Macbeth* preserves some esteem yet every reader rejoices at his fall" (Johnson 3).

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