

CHARACTER SKETCHES

Macbeth

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most intense characters. While he is certainly no hero, he's not a typical villain, either. Macbeth is complex, and his guilt for his many bloody crimes is a central theme of the play. The presence of supernatural influences, another theme of "Macbeth," is another factor that affects the main character's choices. And like other Shakespeare characters who rely on ghosts and otherworldly portents, such as Hamlet and King Lear, Macbeth does not fare well in the end.

At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is celebrated as a loyal and exceptionally brave and strong soldier, and he is rewarded with a new title from the king: the Thane of Cawdor. This proves true the prediction of three witches, whose scheming ultimately helps drive Macbeth's ever-growing ambition and contributes to his transformation into a murderer and tyrant. How much of a push Macbeth needed to turn to murder is not clear. But the words of three mysterious women, together with his wife's

conniving pressure, appear to be enough to push his ambition to be king toward bloodshed.

Our initial perception of Macbeth as a brave soldier is further eroded when we see how easily he is manipulated by Lady Macbeth. For example, we watch how vulnerable this soldier is to Lady Macbeth's questioning of his masculinity. This is one place where we see that Macbeth is a mixed character—he has a seeming capacity for virtue at the start, but no strength of character to reign in his inner power lust or resist his wife's coercion.

As the play advances, Macbeth is overwhelmed with a combination of ambition, violence, self-doubt, and ever-increasing inner turmoil. But even as he questions his own actions, he is nevertheless compelled to commit further atrocities in order to cover up his previous wrongdoings.

Macbeth is introduced in the play as a warrior hero, whose fame on the battlefield wins him great honor from the king. Essentially, though, he is a human being whose private ambitions are made clear to the audience through his asides and soliloquies (solo speeches). These often conflict with the opinion others have of him, which he describes as "golden"

(I:7, 33). Despite his fearless character in battle, Macbeth is concerned by the prophecies of the Witches, and his thoughts remain confused, both before, during, and after his murder of King Duncan. When Duncan announces that he intends the kingdom to pass to his son Malcolm, Macbeth appears frustrated. When he is about to commit the murder, he undergoes terrible pangs of conscience. Macbeth is at his most human and sympathetic when his manliness is mocked and demeaned by his wife (see in particular Act I, Scene 7).

However, by Act III, Scene 2, Macbeth has resolved himself into a far more stereotypical villain and asserts his manliness over that of his wife. His ambition now begins to spur him toward further terrible deeds, and he starts to disregard and even to challenge Fate and Fortune. Each successive murder reduces his human characteristics still further, until he appears to be the more dominant partner in the marriage. Nevertheless, the new-found resolve, which causes Macbeth to "wade" onward into his self-created river of blood (Act III, Scene 4), is persistently alarmed by supernatural events. The

appearance of Banquo's ghost, in particular, causes him to swing from one state of mind to another until he is no longer sure of what is and "what is not" (I:3,142).

But Macbeth's hubris or excessive pride is now his dominant character trait. This feature of his personality is well presented in Act IV, Scene 1, when he revisits the Witches of his own accord. His boldness and impression of personal invincibility mark him out for a tragic fall.

Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most famous and frightening female characters. When we first see her, she is already plotting Duncan's murder, and she is stronger, more ruthless, and more ambitious than her husband. She seems fully aware of this and knows that she will have to push Macbeth into committing murder. At one point, she wishes that she were not a woman so that she could do it herself.

This theme of the relationship between gender and power is key to Lady Macbeth's character: her

husband implies that she is a masculine soul inhabiting a female body, which seems to link masculinity to ambition and violence. Shakespeare, however, seems to use her, and the witches, to undercut Macbeth's idea that "undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1.7.73–74). These crafty women use female methods of achieving power—that is, manipulation—to further their supposedly male ambitions. Women, the play implies, can be as ambitious and cruel as men, yet social constraints deny them the means to pursue these ambitions on their own.

Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband with remarkable effectiveness, overriding all his objections; when he hesitates to murder, she repeatedly questions his manhood until he feels that he must commit murder to prove himself. Lady Macbeth's remarkable strength of will persists through the murder of the king—it is she who steadies her husband's nerves immediately after the crime has been perpetrated.

Afterward, however, Lady Macbeth begins a slow slide into madness—just as ambition affects her more strongly than Macbeth before the crime, so

does guilt plague her more strongly afterward. By the close of the play, she has been reduced to sleepwalking through the castle, desperately trying to wash away an invisible bloodstain. Once the sense of guilt comes home to roost, Lady Macbeth's sensitivity becomes a weakness, and she is unable to cope. Significantly, she (apparently) kills herself, signaling her total inability to deal with the legacy of their crimes.

Banquo

Banquo is Macbeth's brave and noble best friend, as well as his second victim. Banquo enters the play with Macbeth after both have fought valiantly for Duncan's side in a recent battle. Duncan acknowledges Banquo as "no less deserved" of praise than Macbeth, but from the beginning of the play Banquo is overshadowed by Macbeth's accomplishments and ambition. However, Banquo is not entirely without ambition of his own. He asks for a prophecy from the Witches, too, and is pleased to learn that his children will rule Scotland. Similar to Macbeth, Banquo seems unable to understand the cost of the Witches' prophecy will be

his life. In Act III, murderers kill Banquo at Macbeth's command, and try to kill his young son, Fleance, who manages to get away. Soon after his death, Banquo appears in the form of a ghost at the banquet the Macbeths give at their castle. At play's end, Banquo's greatest import remains offstage: his son, Fleance, who could come back to avenge his father's death and take the throne of Scotland, fulfilling the Witches' prophecy that Banquo's sons will one day be king.