

# AQA English Literature GCSE

## Macbeth: Themes

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## Abuse of Power and Kingship

With the unexpected ascension of James I to the throne, the question of **what makes a good king** was a popular topic in England. The country was very much **divided** about how it should be run. There was the **ongoing religious conflict** between Protestants and Catholics. Some were pleased for James to be king but others were not. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare compares different characters and their approaches to their reigns. Some are successful and others aren't, which could be Shakespeare's way of demonstrating which qualities he felt were the most important in a good monarch.

Kingship and power are **intrinsically linked** within the play. The possibility of **ascending the throne** is the driving force behind the motivations of many of the characters (much like in *Game of Thrones*).

Shakespeare **contrasts** the way the characters behave towards this possibility of power, and also how characters act once they gain power. He contrasts the behaviour of a righteous and just king (Duncan) with one who is violent and abuses his power (Macbeth). When studying the play it's important to consider why Shakespeare does this.

### Duncan

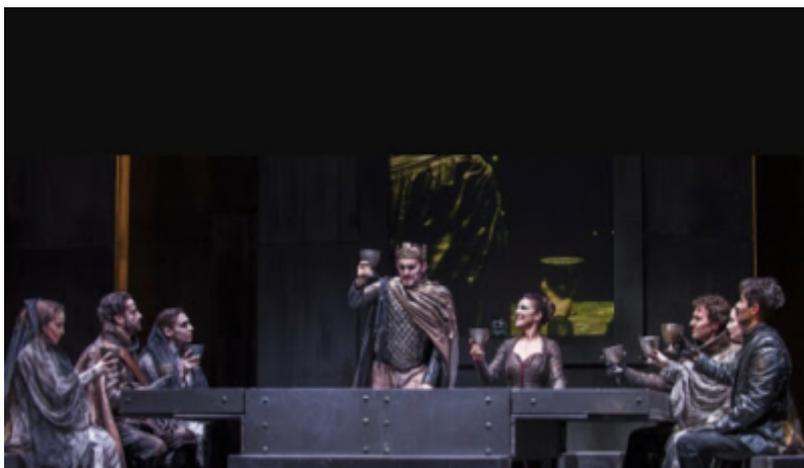
Duncan possesses all the qualities of a great king: he is **noble, nurturing, responsible**, and **a strong leader**. His successful reign emphasises how **disastrous** Macbeth is as a king.

#### Benevolent ruler

Duncan is shown to be a **just** and **benevolent**

(kind) ruler, demonstrating important aspects of kingship by telling his court, ***"Signs of nobleness like stars shall shine / On all deservers," (1.4)***, meaning he is willing to **reward** all those who do good. It can be interpreted that he is saying that **virtue** and **nobility** are **visible** traits in a person, distinguishing them from others. The **simile** ***"like stars shall shine"*** connotes **divine power**, implying they will be rewarded in the afterlife as well as now. It aligns ***"deservers"*** with God.

Duncan is portrayed as someone who is **invested** in his followers, as he says, ***"I have begun to plant thee and will labour / To make thee full of growing,"*** to which Banquo replies, ***"There if I grow, / The harvest is your own," (1.4)***. He is dedicated to



<http://www.margutte.com/?p=21507>



**self-improvement** and the **success of others**. The **semantic field of agriculture** connotes new life and nourishment, presenting Duncan as **nurturing** and **considerate**.

Duncan is such a successful monarch that even those who seek to kill him admire the way he rules. Macbeth outlines Duncan's **honourable qualities**: he ***"Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been / So clear in his great office, that his virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off," (1.7)***. Thereby acknowledging that Duncan is a **good king**.

### Fair

Shakespeare shows how Duncan governs **fairly** to do what is best for his country.

- He rewards those who do good, telling Macbeth, ***"More is thy due than more than all can pay," (1.4)***.
- At the same time, he **punishes traitors**, ordering the execution of the Thane of Cawdor for his acts of **treason**: ***"Go pronounce his present death / And with his former title greet Macbeth," (1.2)***.

This exchange of **"title[s]"** at the beginning of the play presents the audience with a country that is **stable and balanced**. Duncan's court appears to be the **pinnacle** of **justice**. However, this scene also foreshadows Macbeth's betrayal.

### Produces an Heir

The Jacobean audience would have known the trouble that a monarch dying without an heir would have created. Elizabeth I died **without an heir** which resulted in a big change to the



<https://www.needpix.com/photo/download/752060/shakespeare-king-lear-ancient-classic-romeo-magnifier-english-hamlet-history>

way Britain was ruled by her successor. By providing the country with an heir, Duncan was ensuring **political stability and security**. He announces that his son Malcolm will be his heir-apparent: ***"We will establish our estate upon / Our eldest, Malcolm," (1.4)***.

Shakespeare thus establishes Duncan as a **trustworthy king** and provides a vision of the safe future. Obviously this is ruined by Macbeth.

### Too trusting?

It seems that Duncan is too **trusting** and **dependent** on others to be a perfect king. Rather than leading his men into battle he trusts others to do so for him, and he relies heavily on his Thanes to help **maintain order**.

When he reflects on the previous Thane of Cawdor's death, he says, ***"There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face. / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust," (1.4)***. He had placed his confidence in a man who betrayed him to foreign armies, suggesting he has a **poor judge of character**. There is some **dramatic irony** in this statement, for Macbeth is plotting to murder him.



### Doesn't learn from his mistakes

Macbeth is another one of Duncan's trusted Thanes and is called his **“valiant cousin, worthy gentleman” (1.2)**. This means **the betrayal repeats itself** and Duncan doesn't learn from his mistakes.

However, the line **“There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face”** implies it is **impossible to see through someone's deception**. Shakespeare suggests **the evil and treachery of others** makes it impossible for a king to be wholly good. Kindness and respect are **vulnerable to deceit**. In theory, Duncan would be the perfect king, but in reality **he cannot contend with the wickedness of his peers**.

### **Macbeth**

At the start of the play Macbeth has the ideal qualities of a noble king. The Captain calls him **“brave Macbeth”, “Bellona's bridegroom”, and “Valour's minion” (1.2)**, proving how admired and impressive Macbeth is. **“Brave”** and **“valour”** both imply that he has a **strength of character** beyond being good in battle which would be **ideal** as a leader. This makes it ironic that he later commits the **cowardly** act of murdering Duncan in his sleep.

### Ascension to the throne

But these **noble traits** seem to disappear. As Macbeth becomes closer to the throne he becomes more **corrupt**. By the time he kills Duncan and takes the throne his transformation is so complete it is too late for him to go back to being the noble Macbeth we were introduced to at the start of the play.

From this point on, the audience are able to see the **direct contrast** between the way Duncan and Macbeth rule Britain. Macbeth is the **least successful king** in the play.

Even his ascension to the throne is **unrighteous**, as he gets there on the back of murder, lies, and betrayal. He is not the rightful heir. He doesn't care for Scotland, only for himself. Through his time on the throne, Shakespeare explores how **power corrupts the minds of men**, and how **impactful** a king's reign is on his whole country. He studies what it would truly be like to have a tyrant on the throne and how power draws out people's **violent natures**.

Macbeth is the **complete opposite** of Duncan, both in the way he came to be king but also in the way he rules. Shakespeare uses this play to explore the impact of a King's reign on his country.



[https://www.whatsonstage.com/york-theatre/reviews/macbeth-shakespeares-rose-theatre\\_47036.html](https://www.whatsonstage.com/york-theatre/reviews/macbeth-shakespeares-rose-theatre_47036.html)



### Callous leadership

The audience is not given much insight into other peoples' opinions of Macbeth's leadership. However, as the soldiers prepare for battle, we hear reports of how ***“those he commands, move only in command, / Nothing in love” (5.2)***, and ***“none serve him but constrained things / Whose hearts are absent too” (5.4)***. This shows how unsuccessful he has been at maintaining order and trust in his people. His country has no ***“love”*** or ***“heart”*** which is representative of his own callous nature.

Macbeth acknowledges his ability to control others using violent means by saying that ***“I could with my barefaced power sweep him from my sight, / And bid my will avouch it, yet I must not,” (3.1)*** when pondering what to do about Banquo. ***“Barefaced”*** implies he could be **shameless** and **outright** in his murderous ways, while ***“sweep him from my sight”*** connotes a **godlike control** over reality.

### No heir

Macbeth's poor kingship is solidified by his **lack of lineage and heirs**. It is evident he feels **emasculated** by his inability to produce an heir, this is represented through his jealousy of Banquo and resentment of the Witches.

Remembering the Witches' prophecy for Banquo, he complains, ***“They hailed him father to a line of kings. / Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown / And put a barren sceptre in my gripe, / Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand, / No son of mine succeeding,” (3.1)***. He **resents** Banquo because his sons will be kings, and he resents the Witches for 'making' him king without **successors**.



<https://theconversation.com/hugo-weaving-reveals-macbeths-weakness-and-his-unhappiness-28158>

## The Death of a King

The reaction to Duncan's death compared to Macbeth's death is **reflective of how both kings ruled**, and how they were viewed by their country. The impact each death has on the environment expresses Shakespeare's views on kingship and tyranny. He believed a good monarch was needed to provide **stability, security, and progress**.

### Duncan

Duncan's death seems to bring about a sort of **apocalyptic chaos**, showing how atrocious and distressing his murder is. The way the **atmosphere** is described even before Duncan's death has been discovered implies that even the nature is affected by his murder. Lennox reports, ***“The night has been unruly [...] Lamentings heard i'th'air, strange screams of death / And prophesying with accents terrible / Of dire combustion and confused***



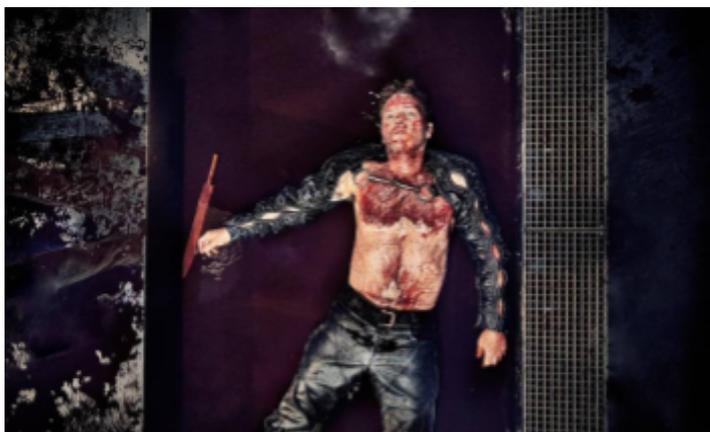
*events, / New hatched to th'woeful time. The obscure bird / Clamoured the livelong night. Some say, the earth / Was feverous and did shake," (2.3).*

- Lexis from the **semantic field of chaos and destruction**, such as **"dire combustion"**, **"clamoured"**, and **"shake"**, reflects how Duncan's murder has **gone against nature**. It may also symbolise **God's anger and wrath** at being defied by Macbeth.
- Moreover, **"feverous"** connotes **disease**, suggesting Macbeth's deed has **brought sickness to the land**.
- **"Lamentings"**, **"strange screams of death"**, and **"prophesying"** are references to the murder and the Witches, echoing the grief and **"tears"** Macbeth predicted in **1.7**.

Once the king's body is discovered, Ross observes, **"By th'clock 'tis day / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp. / Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame, / That darkness does the face of earth entomb / When living light should kiss it?" (2.4).**

Duncan's death has had a **permanent effect** on the weather and the daylight.

- The **"dark night"** symbolises the **wickedness** that now dominates the world.
- The reference to **"th'clock"**, **"day"** and **"night"** implies **time itself has stopped**.
- The **semantic field of death and murder**, **"strangles"**, **"entomb"**, **"living"**, proves Duncan's death has impacted the whole world, so that everything is **murderous or tainted by decay**.



<https://jyllands-posten.dk/kultur/anmeldelser/teater/ECE9869010/en-delig-en-fremragende-dansk-macbeth/>

Shakespeare suggests that Duncan's death **disrupts the whole natural order**. The Old Man remarks to Ross, **"'Tis unnatural, / Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last, / A falcon tow'ring in her pride of place / Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed," (2.4).** **"Like the deed that's done"** implies the state of the world has altered to **mirror** the murder. Just as a good monarch improves the health of his whole country, the death of a good monarch takes the whole country into **decay and disrepair**.

- The **"falcon"** is a mighty bird of prey, symbolising Duncan, while a **"mousing owl"** is a less impressive predator who would normally be inferior to the falcon. The incident is therefore an **omen** of what was to come, with Macbeth wrongfully killing the king, who is above him in the natural **Divine Order**.

Duncan's corpse is described with **allusions to piety and royalty**, reflecting how the death of a king is the death of **God's chosen representative on earth**. Macduff describes the crime scene, **"Confusion now hath made his masterpiece: / Most sacrilegious murder**



*hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence / The life o'th'building,"* (2.3).

- The adjective **“sacrilegious”** alludes to the **Divine Right of Kings**. Duncan's body is described as **“The Lord's anointed temple”**, conveying his **sanctity and importance**.
- By presenting Duncan's corpse as a **“temple”** made of **“silver”** and **“gold”**, Shakespeare implies he wasn't human. This means the qualities of a good king go beyond his mind. **A good king can be identified from his very form and essence**.

### Macbeth

In contrast, Macbeth's death is **celebrated** by his subjects, and presented as a moment of **liberation** for Scotland. While Duncan is portrayed with **angelic** and **godlike** descriptions, Macbeth is referred to as a **“hell-hound”** (5.8) and a **“dead butcher and his fiend-like queen”** (5.9). These all connote the **Devil**.

- **“Hound”** **dehumanises** him, suggesting he is savage and brutish. Alternatively, it implies he was a **slave** to violence or to his master, the Devil.

Macbeth has lost his noble titles and is universally hated - a stark contrast from his reputation at the beginning of the play.

### Macduff

As a **loyal statesman** and the only one who can kill Macbeth, Macduff is able to speak out about **how the country should be run**. He is **unapologetic** in his criticism of Macbeth and only wants the best for his country. Though he kills Macbeth, he doesn't take the crown for himself, instead **respecting God's will** and giving it back to the heir-apparent.



[https://digitaledition.chicagotribune.com/tribune/article\\_popover.aspx?guid=db8c8520-d413-43ce-ae64-0ec6e41ccb5](https://digitaledition.chicagotribune.com/tribune/article_popover.aspx?guid=db8c8520-d413-43ce-ae64-0ec6e41ccb5)

#### Patriotic

Throughout Act 4 Scene 3, Macduff expresses what it is to be a good king, and mourns for his country's loss. He weeps, **“Bleed, bleed, poor country. / Great tyranny, lay thou thy basis sure, / For goodness dare not check thee,”** showing how **patriotic** he is.

- The phrase **“bleed, bleed”** **personifies** Scotland, portraying it as a wounded body. This reinforces the idea that the way a monarch rules a country impacts the whole land to its

core. The image of blood **contrasts** with the living, nurtured **“harvest”** Duncan created.

- Furthermore, the phrase **“For goodness dare not check thee”** shows how **“tyranny”** is allowed to **thrive unchallenged** because of the **power** that comes with it and the fear it **instills** in others.



When he hears Malcolm lie about his flaws, he cries out, ***“Fit to govern? / No, not to live. - O nation miserable! / With an untitled tyrant, bloody-sceptred, / When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again? (4.3)”***. Macduff is **dismayed** by the fate of his country because of the king who rules it. He suggests the country is **“miserable”** because it is governed by a **usurper** who went against the will of God.



<https://www.edp24.co.uk/going-out/national-theatre-macbeth-norwich-theatre-royal-1-5623105>

Moreover, the **rhetorical question** and answer he supplies, ***“Fit to govern? / No, not to live,”*** implies being an **inadequate, corrupt king is a crime worthy of death**.

Macduff presents **greed** and **unchecked ambition** as **bad qualities in a monarch**, saying, ***“Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny; it hath been / Th’untimely emptying of the happy throne / And fall of many kings,” (4.3)***. Though he is discussing Malcolm’s supposed greed, this wise statement can also be applied to Macbeth, and predicts his death.

- Saying it is a **“tyranny”** acknowledges how people **will go to any lengths possible to satisfy their desires if they lack restraint**.
- ***“Th’untimely emptying of the happy throne”*** may imply that **even good kings can be corrupted by power**, so that they lose their noble qualities and the throne is no longer **“happy”**. It may also express how **treason** and **regicide** (killing the king) are the results of other men’s **greed**, as was the case with Macbeth and Duncan.

## Malcolm

### Ascension to the throne

Malcolm finally takes his **rightful place on the throne** at the end of the play, with a speech that shows he possesses the same **wisdom** and **compassion** as his father did. Though he is pure and youthful, a **symbol of hope**, he is not as naive or gullible as his father. However, we must remember that he chose to run away after his father’s murder which could be seen as a **sign of cowardice**. Is Malcolm the best example of kingship we see in the play?

### Traits of a noble king

Malcolm’s **wisdom** and **shrewd perception** are demonstrated when he checks that Macduff isn’t a spy sent by Macbeth. He suspects Macduff of ***“offer[ing] up a weak, poor, innocent lamb / T’appease an angry god,” (4.3)***. The **metaphor** of **ritual sacrifice** conveys Macbeth’s **bloodthirst**, **unruly power**, and **warped sense of his own importance**.



- The **juxtaposition** between Malcolm as an **“innocent lamb”** and Macbeth as an **“angry god”** reveals the **advantage** Macbeth has as king, leading to a **severe power imbalance**.
- It also makes the **moral differences** between them clear, with Malcolm **condemning** Macbeth for being a **violent, vengeful ruler**.

He notes, **“A good and virtuous nature may recoil / In an imperial charge,”** proving he is aware of power’s ability to **corrupt** even the **most moral of men**. Shakespeare suggests it is important to be **mindful** and **suspicious** of those in power, ensuring they are not taking advantage of their position to punish those below them.

### Patriotic

Shakespeare portrays Malcolm as the **epitome of a pure, honest, and dedicated king**. Like Macduff, he worries for Scotland’s future, saying, **“I think our country sinks beneath the yoke; / It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds,”** (4.3). The **personification** of Scotland again **emphasises** its **importance** to Malcolm, treating it as a **loved one** or vulnerable person, and reflects how a country can suffer in the same way a person can.

### Development of the Theme

The idea of **kingship** and what it takes to be king is introduced as soon as the Witches give their prophecy to Macbeth. Kingship can be seen as the **destination** or goal of all the action in the play.



<https://entertainment.time.com/2010/08/13/top-10-movie-duels/slide/macbeth-vs-macduff-macbeth/>

The political action surrounding the monarchy is an allegory for Britain’s own history and current climate. Kingship is associated with violence and chaos, but also order and justice. **It all depends on who is in charge**. It could be argued that who is king isn’t relevant to the main purpose of the play’s plot. It is the **push and pull for power** between opposing sides that drives the plot forward.

In the play, Shakespeare presents us with **four examples of kings**: Duncan, Macbeth, Malcolm, and Edward of England. We never see Edward in person, but we hear of his **virtues** and how he heals the sick in his own country. He also kindly offers an army to help overthrow Macbeth.

The chaos and unrest of Scotland therefore unfolds in the **foreground** of England’s **stable peace**. To a certain degree, each king is an **archetype** of a certain kind of ruler. Shakespeare’s messages about kingship are as evident in the **differences** between them as



they are in the actions of the kings themselves. For example, Malcolm's **wariness** has more successful results than his father's gullibility, while Macbeth's "**butcher**" persona breeds a different **atmosphere** to Edward's merciful healing.



## Appearance vs. Reality

The **difference between appearance and reality**, and the **deception** that is possible because of this, is at the heart of the tragedy of Macbeth. The **outward appearance** of the Macbeths as trustworthy and innocent enables them to get away with their plot to murder Duncan and ascend the throne. Loyalty and trust are juxtaposed by the ultimate betrayal.

The ways in which reality and appearance can be **manipulated** and **altered** is facilitated by Shakespeare's use of the **supernatural**. From Witches and spells to hallucinations of knives, blood and ghosts, the **chaotic atmosphere** and **mental instability** of the main characters is central to the play.



<https://www.haikudeck.com/macbeth-education-presentation-AscTS2jywx>

## The Witches

The Witches are the first **exposure** we get as an audience to the **chaotic** and **inverted** world of Macbeth. The opening of the play creates a **paradox**, the contradictory statements are reflective of appearance versus reality.

- One witch says, **“When the battle’s lost, and won,” (1.1)** which suggests there are **two sides** to every story. One side loses, but one side wins.
- One of the most famous lines is, **“Fair is foul, and foul is fair,” (1.1)**, the use of the **conjunction “and”** shows both good and bad can exist at the same time. Even the **weather** is reflective of this, as Macbeth declares **“So foul and fair a day I have not seen”**.



<https://theatrius.com/2019/09/24/macbeth-addresses-the-question-of-the-day-at-cal-shakes-orinda/>

Here Shakespeare warns his audience that **no one and nothing can be trusted**. In a wider sense, he suggests that there are **no certainties when it comes to morality**. What appears to be good on the surface may not be.

Despite the grotesque outer appearance of the Witches - Banquo describes them as looking **“not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ Earth” (A1S3)** - what is interesting to note is the



Witches aren't **overtly violent or cruel** within the context of the plot. They don't tell Macbeth to kill Duncan. Instead, it is the **chaos and confusion** they create that is so frightening.

Shakespeare uses the Witches to show how **human greed makes us vulnerable to deception and betrayal**. Early after their meeting with the Witches, Banquo reminds Macbeth, *“Oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths; / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequences,”* (1.3). This shows that humans can be **easily fooled by lies** if they are given with small truths. These contradictions confuse us and lead us **astray**.

## Lady Macbeth

Besides the Witches, Lady Macbeth is one of the most significant examples of the difference between appearance and reality, and the **conflict** between the two. Her **ambition** fuels her deception of others and she ensures she **disguises** her true intentions in order to **gain power**.

### Feminine vs Masculine

Initially it is likely that her **outward appearance** as a **woman** would mean the audience would assume her to be weak and therefore superfluous to the story line. However, as the play progresses we see the inner workings of her mind and realise **internally she is stereotypically masculine**. As she becomes more powerful and masculine she is ultimately destroyed by her weak mind.



<https://www.bfi.org.uk/news-opinion/sight-sound-magazine/reviews-recommendations/lady-macbeth-william-oldroyd-period-film-bones>

The audience can see Lady Macbeth is aware of the importance of outward appearance and how it can be **manipulated** when she teaches Macbeth how he should act.

- She tells him, *“To beguile the time, / Look like the time, bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue,”* (1.5). Her use of **physical features**, such as **“eye”**, and **“hand”** emphasise the importance of outward appearance. The verb **“look”**, shows how he doesn't have to **be “like the time”**, only **imitate** it.
- A similar idea is expressed later when she instructs him to *“Sleek o'er your rugged looks, be bright and jovial / Among your guests tonight,”* (3.2).
- She finishes, *“Look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't,”* (1.5). Again she is stressing the important difference between **looking** like something and **being** something else. The juxtaposition of **“flower”**, which **connotes femininity**, with **“serpent”**, which **connotes masculinity and trickery**, shows how there can be a **dangerous divide** between a person's **outward appearance and inward nature**.
  - ◆ **“Serpent”** is an **allusion** to the **Biblical story** of Adam and Eve, where it is a **symbol of the devil**.



Shakespeare demonstrates how appearances cannot be trusted because they are  **moldable** , meaning they offer no  **insight**  into the reality of a person.

Shakespeare shows how appearances can be used for acts of  **self-denial**  as well as deception,  **keeping the conscience clear**  even though a crime has been committed. After asking the spirits to take away her inner femininity, Lady Macbeth says,  **“Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, / Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,” (1.5)** . This shows how she wants to use appearances to her advantage by  **blinding**  others to her actions.



<https://annanetrebko.com/2019/09/25/macbeth-at-the-metropolitan-opera/>

→ The  **personification**  in  **“my keen knife see not the wound it makes”**  implies there is a level of self-deception to her plan, where her  **“knife”**  appears to be a  **symbol for herself** .

→ The  **semantic field of darkness** , furthermore, implies our  **reliance**  on what we  **can see**  makes us ignorant and gullible. Shakespeare could be  **criticising**  his society’s focus on  **obvious, black and white truths** .

Ultimately, though, her deceit is met with fitting consequences, as she is  **caught between reality and imagination** . Her hallucinations are symbolic of her losing control of herself, which is ironic as she has tried so hard within the play to control everyone else. By the end she cannot control her mind and is ultimately destroyed by it.

## Macbeth

Macbeth  **benefits**  greatly from the conflict between appearance and reality, managing to be viewed as an  **honorable warrior and king**  despite the awful crimes he has committed. He is a  **symbol for deception and facade** , but also for the way people  **lose sight of themselves**  when they are constantly deceiving others. It becomes hard to tell  **who**  is the real Macbeth.

### Descriptions of Macbeth

One of the first descriptions of Macbeth we get is from Duncan, who calls him  **“O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman,” (1.2)** . Macbeth appears to be the  **perfect subject and kinsman** .  **“Valiant”**  and  **“worthy”**  are  **adjectives associated with honour and nobility** , particularly in the context of the  **royal court**  and the  **Code of Chivalry** , which the Renaissance admired. This is  **situational irony**  because we soon see that Macbeth is neither  **“valiant”**  nor  **“worthy”** , demonstrating that the way someone appears through their words and actions  **reveals nothing**  about what lays underneath the surface.



Macbeth's **first line** in the play is, ***"So foul and fair a day I have not seen,"*** (1.3), signaling how his **fate** is tied to the **confusion of contradiction**. Shakespeare **foreshadows** his indecision and **moral ambiguity**. Furthermore, the use of **"foul"** and **"fair"** echoes back to the Witches' opening chorus, **associating his character with the supernatural**. We can guess that Macbeth might be an example of someone who seems fair but **"is foul"**.

### Outward appearance

Macbeth, too, sees appearance as something that can be **managed** to meet his **intentions**. He tells Lady Macbeth, ***"Away, and mock the time with fairest show, / False face must hide what the false heart doth know,"*** (1.7), with the **rhyming couplet** suggesting he finds **contentment** in this plan.

Shakespeare implies **deception** is a form of **playing God** because people believe they can defy **"time"** and truth, the **most powerful forces humanity is subjected to**. The juxtaposition between **"false face"** and **"false heart"** highlights the **divide** between someone's **outward looks and true nature**.



<https://bardonthebeach.org/news/2018/macbeth-the-story-in-photos/>

A similar sentiment is given later, when Macbeth says, ***"We / Must lave our honours in these flattering streams / And make our faces vizards to our hearts, / Disguising what they are,"*** (3.2). These **metaphors** about **"honour"** and **"fairest show"** suggest compassion is a **performance or scientific process** that can be **reproduced** without **meaning** behind it. The **verbs "disguise"** and **"hide"** imply the Macbeths' lies **shield** them. This shows how they are **scared of being discovered and losing their good reputations**. Shakespeare suggests people use their appearances to **protect themselves from judgement**, accusing society of being **afraid** of intimacy.

### Overcome by reality

Like his wife, Macbeth **suffers** from his **exploitation** of appearances, as he starts to be unable to tell what his reality is anymore. The appearances of the **"dagger"** (2.1) and the **"Ghost of Banquo"** (3.4) both convey his **crumbling sense of reality**. The evil, corrupt parts of himself he tries to repress and **"disguise"** start to **express themselves** in the form of morbid hallucinations and spirits, suggesting your true nature can never be changed no matter how much you alter your appearance. He can't **trust his own mind** as a result of his deceit. The biggest conflict as a result of appearance vs. reality is within **Macbeth's own head**.



## Secondary Characters

The other, secondary characters in the play get their fair share of confusion and chaos when it comes to appearances. Shakespeare shows that it's not just the Macbeths and the Witches who experience a **distorted, deceitful reality**. The whole world is **upside down**, and we're all just living in it.

### Duncan

Though Duncan is a good king, Shakespeare implies he is **vulnerable** because he isn't **wary** of the difference between appearance and reality. He is too **gullible**.

He tells his subjects, ***“Signs of nobleness like stars shall shine / On all deservers,”*** (1.4), suggesting he believes a person's good nature is **reflected** in their face. The **imagery** of ***“stars”*** shining like a spotlight implies good people stand out in a crowd, almost as if **illuminated by God**. The ***“stars”*** are an **allusion to Heaven and God**, suggesting there is a link or connection between God and His people because the ***“stars”*** can reach down to earth.

Macbeth, in contrast, wants to be in darkness to do his crimes, asking for ***“seeling night”*** (3.2) suggesting it would be obvious to Duncan that he's not a ***“deserver”***, but Duncan is unaware of Macbeth's plots. He remarks that the Macbeths' ***“castle hath a pleasant seat,”*** (1.6), calls Macbeth a ***“worthy gentleman”*** (1.2), and Lady Macbeth an ***“honoured hostess,”*** (1.6). He is **taken in** by their ***“pleasant”*** appearances. It is almost humiliating how drastically wrong his impressions of the Macbeths are, challenging these **ideologies**. Shakespeare suggests true evil is so **dangerous** because it arrives with the face of goodness. The most vulnerable people are those who don't **understand** that the world is an evil place.



<https://ruthmillington.co.uk/national-theatre-macbeth-review/>

### Symbolism of darkness

The **distress** Duncan's murder welcomes into the world is **symbolised** by Shakespeare's use of **darkness and nightfall**. The **pathetic fallacy**, with furious thunderstorms and thick layers of fog and darkness that the sun can't get through, creates an **atmosphere of obscurity and fear**. Before the murder takes place, Banquo observes, ***“There's husbandry in heaven, / Their candles are all out,”*** (2.1). The night is dark and starless, an **omen** for the hopeless, devastating future to come. He suggests that even heaven is acting suspicious and secretive, so that **the whole world is against him**. Furthermore, it seems Macbeth's wish has come true: the ***“stars”*** have extinguished their ***“fires”***. This is **significant** because it suggests Macbeth has a **supernatural ability to control his environment** and **reality, provoking fear** from the audience.



### Analysis Tip

It's important to note small changes in the **atmosphere** of the play, these can be influenced by factors such as the **weather** and **changes from light and dark**. Often these things are easily overlooked if you've not bothered reading the play properly. For example, In the paragraph above a character mentions that "**candles are all out**" which could be easily missed. Analysing the effects of small things like this will stand you out from other candidates and will make your analysis seem unique and original.

### Development of the Theme

Macbeth is **introduced** to us through the words of the Witches. The **opening scene foreshadows the use of trickery and witchcraft** in the play because of the Witches' presence, but it also **establishes Macbeth as an untrustworthy, corrupt character**. Equally, his first words **recall** the Witches' opening chants. The two are **tied together**, and their roles in the play complement each other.

- The Witches use appearance to deceive Macbeth, who in turn betrays his own kinsmen and friends.
- Macbeth's motive for his deception is his lust to be king, as Shakespeare suggests **power is behind all evil and manipulation in the world**.

The **hierarchy of power** in the world means there is a **chain of influence**: the citizens of Scotland obey their king, Macbeth, who obeys the prophecies of the supernatural Witches.

### Structure

An interesting **structural** point to consider is how Shakespeare **organises** the **slow breakdown of order** in Scotland as the **plot** progresses. In the play, the idea of appearance vs. reality is closely linked to the idea of **order vs. disorder**, or chaos.

- If appearance is a trustworthy, accurate reflection of reality, then order is kept. If not, chaos breaks loose.



<https://www.pikrepo.com/search?q=stratford-upon-avon>

The play opens with **thunder and lightning while a battle rages**, but this is just a **glimpse** of the chaos that is to come.

For the most part, Scotland seems to be **controlled and organised**. We see that Duncan is a thoughtful king who is good at **maintaining order** and **honouring the hierarchy**. This all **changes** once Macbeth becomes king. The sky is permanently dark, more and more people die, and horses try to eat each other.

As reality breaks down the Macbeths are haunted by more and more hallucinations. Ghosts and hallucinations are a **symbol for the divide between appearance and reality**, as no



one can tell what exactly they are: imaginary, or real? Also note how, in their final scenes, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth stop talking in **perfect blank verse**. Their switch to **prose** indicates their **mental instability**. **Reality falls apart**, slowly exposing the villains in the story.

### The final message

Overall, Shakespeare places his characters in **a world full of chaos and confusion**, but the resounding message seems to be that **their world isn't too different from our own**.

Anyone is capable of putting on a **mask** and mocking the time. Anyone could look like an innocent flower while being the snake under it. But all of this goes **against** the **natural order**, and more importantly, **against God**. It is only **rewarded with death and suffering**.

By the end of the play, the Macbeths' moods swing so violently, their decisions change so quickly, that it seems **their masks have tricked even them**. They no longer know **who** they are, their sense of self has been **destroyed**, because **they have driven their appearances away from their reality**.



## Gender

The concept of gender, and the roles the characters are confined to because of it, come up throughout the play. Masculinity is seen as the **desired trait** and the male characters are often offended if someone questions their manhood. Lady Macbeth, for example, asks if Macbeth is a **“man” (3.4)** and Macduff explains he must feel his grief **“as a man” (4.3)**. Characters, particularly the Macbeths, feel **restrained** by the expectations of their gender.

### Gender in context

In the Jacobean era, gender was a very **strict and rigid construction** and for the most part determined male and female roles within society. Gender was also an **establishment** upon which the **hierarchy of society was built**.



<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/03/25/follow-lady-macbeths-advice-good-nights-sleep/>

Women were expected to be **loyal and respectful daughters, wives, and mothers**. Angering the men in their lives could result in being kicked out or killed, and it was near impossible for women to **support themselves financially**. They received little to no education, and were very **restricted** in their movements and decisions in life.

Men had a significantly easier time than women. They were **householders, politicians, landlords**. They were encouraged to be **aggressive**, particularly in their sexuality - male sexuality was **celebrated**. However, there were still expectations of how men should act. They were the bread-winners, and needed to be financially independent. Being a **warrior** was viewed as one of the most **honourable** things a man could be, and dying in battle was the **idealised way to die**, especially in the Medieval Era, when the play is set.

## The Men

Within the play Shakespeare presents the audience with many **different types of masculinity**. You should consider **why** his male characters are so different and what message he is trying to give his audience.

### Macbeth

Many times throughout the play Lady Macbeth **taunts** her husband about his masculinity. It is evident that Macbeth does not like his manhood being questioned which **highlights his insecurity**.



When Lady Macbeth accuses him of being a **“coward”**, he replies, **“Prithee, peace. / I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none,” (1.7)**. The **plea “Prithee, peace”** suggests that he **cannot withstand the attack on his masculinity**, as Shakespeare conveys how **sensitive and fragile he is**. It seems as if a man’s sense of manhood is **dependent** on the women in his life.

Lady Macbeth is implying Macbeth is not **“a man”** because he refuses to murder Duncan, suggesting that masculinity is proven with **violence**, but Macbeth disagrees. The line **“I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none”** suggests manhood is tied to **honour**. He argues those who go against the natural order or pursue more power aren’t men, either because they aren’t human or because they aren’t noble. Shakespeare implies there are two ‘types’ of man that people can choose from: one is **violent**, the other is **chivalrous**.

Eventually Macbeth gives into his wife’s insults and accusations. Indeed, he becomes obsessed with **proving** his masculinity and changing into the man she wants him to be.



<https://operaballet.be/en/programme/2019-2020/macbeth>

When Lady Macbeth asks, **“Are you a man?”**, he replies, **“Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that / Which might appal the devil,” (3.4)**. The words **“bold”** and **“dare”** emphasise his **manly bravery**. The phrase **“might appal the devil”** serves to prove he is stronger than the ultimate source of evil, providing an **exaggerated** perspective of his manhood.

It is important to consider the different **types** of masculinity Shakespeare portrays within the play and which characters represent those characteristics. It’s also interesting to note what happens to them. Both Duncan, the noble and virtuous king, and Macbeth, the dishonest and violent king, end up dead. Does this mean that Shakespeare didn’t agree with either type?

### Fear and masculinity

Fear and paranoia are deemed to be **incompatible** with the **Jacobean view of masculinity**. Within the play the male figures do everything they can to **repress** or **reject** these feelings and thereby retain their masculinity.

Shakespeare presents Macbeth as a **conflicted character** who struggles to keep his fear at bay. In giving into his fear, Macbeth becomes **feminised** and these **contradicting forces** add to his fear. After Duncan’s murder he is both scared of the man he has become but also of the masculinity he is losing.



### Fleance's escape

When he hears that Fleance escaped, Macbeth admits he is scared again, adding, ***“I had else been perfect; / Whole as the marble, founded as the rock, / As broad and general as the casing air: / But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears,”*** (3.4).

- The use of the adjective **“perfect”** implies fear somehow **pollutes or taints manhood**. Macbeth is a **flawed man** because of his **“doubts and fears”**.
- The **similes** referring to **“marble”**, **“rock”**, and **“air”** portray men as powerful, strong, and dominant, like nature itself. **“Marble”** connotes sculptures or luxury, suggesting masculinity is **flawlessly constructed by God**.
- His **“doubts and fears”** overwhelm and surround him, and Shakespeare argues this is why Macbeth continues murdering others and being a tyrant - as a means of escape.

### Final battle

Yet Macbeth's attitudes towards masculinity almost do a full circle. In his final battle he decides he will fight to the death rather than surrendering or committing suicide. He knows he is going to lose but he fights anyway, suggesting that some of his **courage and honour have been restored to him**. He says, ***“I'll fight till from my flesh be hacked,”*** (5.3), and later, ***“Why should I play the Roman fool and die / On mine own sword? Whiles I see lives, the gashes / Do better upon them,”*** (5.5). In the army, it was considered more **honourable** to die in battle than to surrender.

Shakespeare's audience would recognise this decision as the sign of a noble hero and a real man.

However, it is possible that this scene shows Macbeth can only thrive in **battle**, thus masculinity is associated once more with violence.



<https://www.lesalonmusical.it/cremona-macbeth-quando-una-mano-lava-laltra/>

### **Malcolm and Macduff**

Though most of the play explores masculinity through the **definition of violence and bravery**, Shakespeare offers an alternative, deeper, more **emotional** form of manhood through Malcolm and Macduff. This form of masculinity seems to triumph overall, as Malcolm becomes king. He **restores** order to his kingdom even though his **understanding of manhood differs from the norm**.



### Controlling emotions

Malcolm's attempts to test Macduff's morals and loyalties are interesting in their presentation of the **ideal man**. He warns Macduff of **"the cistern of [his] lust"**, his **"desire"**, his **"stanchless avarice"**, and his **"voluptuousness"** (4.3), associating masculinity with **unstoppable sexual desire**. His fabricated personality is the **epitome** of the **aggressive lust** society encourages in men.

Macduff admits, **"Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny,"** a line that is a perfect summary for the whole play, but also serves to suggest **men are encouraged to be tyrants**. Patriarchy grants men **unconditional power**, allowing them to indulge every need.

A **revelatory moment** in the presentation of masculinity in Macbeth is when Macduff learns of the slaughter of his children and wife. He cries, **"All my pretty ones? / Did you say all? O hell-kite! All? / What, all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop?"** (4.3). The **repetitive questions, exclamations, and broken speech** convey his extreme emotional distress, making him appear unmasculine in the **traditional** sense. The phrase **"my pretty ones"** expresses **deep paternal love**, suggesting masculinity can be **tender and loving**.

### Masculine response

Malcolm tells Macduff, **"Dispute it like a man,"** (4.3), planning to **"make us med'cines of our great revenge / To cure this deadly grief,"** (4.3) suggesting the appropriate **manly** response would be to wage war on his enemy. At this point, Malcolm's idea of masculinity seems to be **close-minded**, in line with his society's. Macduff's reply, **"I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man; / I cannot but remember such things were / That were most precious to me,"** marks a moment of **learning** both for Malcolm and Shakespeare's audience. Macduff implies that **repressing his grief would be a denial of his love**, and would be unfair to his family's memory. Shakespeare suggests the stone heart of masculinity is unnatural.



<https://ardentheatre.org/event/macbeth/>

### **The Women**

The female characters **transcend** gender boundaries within the play and are given **agency** by Shakespeare. Their **words** and the consequences they have are the driving force behind the plot. Yet they have **rejected their femininity** in order to have this power.



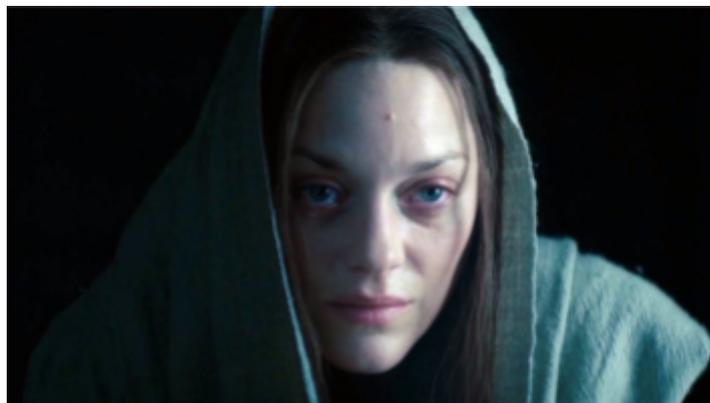
## Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth's character is highly **significant** in Shakespeare's **presentation** of gender. The traditional subservient wife figure has been entirely rejected by Shakespeare, instead she is **manipulative** and **domineering** in her marriage. Her **lust for power** drives the plot forward and she attacks Macbeth's manhood to get what she wants. Yet it's important to note that her power is purely mental, while she orchestrates their plan she doesn't commit any acts of violence herself.

### Religion and the supernatural

Lady Macbeth's manipulation of Macbeth **associates femininity with the fall of man**. Her bullying leads to Macbeth's tragic downfall in the same way **Eve convinced Adam to eat the Forbidden Fruit**. She can be viewed as a **femme fatale**, an **archetype** of femininity where a woman charms and seduces her lover, to his detriment.

She hopes Macbeth will return home quickly so she **"may pour [her] spirits in [his] ear"** (1.5), showing how she wants to **persuade him to do her bidding**. The reference to



<https://anotherbookonashelf.wordpress.com/2017/03/14/lady-macbeth-the-literary-devil-on-a-shoulder/>

**"spirits"** connotes the **occult**, as if she wants to **possess** Macbeth. Shakespeare links **witchcraft** with a woman's dominance over her husband, implying that it is **unnatural** for women to have power over men.

An alternative interpretation is that Shakespeare is **criticising** how society denies women their own **freedom** and **autonomy**. Lady Macbeth only has to manipulate and possess Macbeth because her

power and status are **directly tied to his**. **"Pour[ing]"** her **"spirits"** into his **"ear"** may be a metaphor for how her desires can only be fulfilled by a male form. Macbeth is her **puppet** because she cannot do it herself, instead she has to **rely on her husband for everything**. Shakespeare could be showing that men bring their downfalls **on themselves** by denying women power.

### Lady Macbeth's Soliloquy

It is important to note that Lady Macbeth **rejects her femininity** within the play, and it is implied that this act is what enables her to pursue her ambition. Her most famous **soliloquy** is in **Act 1, Scene 5**, when she calls upon **"spirits"** to **"unsex"** her.

She asks to be filled **"from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty"**, for her **"blood"** to be made **"thick"**, for **"the access and passage to remorse"** to be stopped up, and for **"no compunctious visitings of nature [to] / Shake [her] fell purpose"**. This first set of demands deal with the **emotional or hormonal aspects of womanhood**. **Early medicine** believed people's emotional states were determined by different fluids in their



bodies, the humors. Thick blood meant someone had a cold heart. Thick blood would also stop her menstruating, a sign of her femininity and therefore weakness preventing her from killing the king.

She goes on, ***“Come to my woman’s breasts, / And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,” (1.5)***. This addresses the **physical and visible proof** of her femininity more directly than before. She wants all proof of it gone, as all signs are obstacles to her plan. Her **“breasts”** and **“milk”** are significant for **motherhood**, so Lady Macbeth is rejecting her duty to be a mother. This has historically been seen as one of the most threatening things a woman can do, and is often associated with **femmes fatales**. Refusing to be a mother meant **denying a man the ability to immortalise himself** through his children.

It should also be noted that in the Jacobean era, witches were believed to have **“thick blood”**. Most ‘witches’ were **old women**, meaning they were menopausal, and could no longer produce **“milk”** to feed their children. Lady Macbeth therefore is not only calling upon **“spirits”** to help her: **she wants her body to become like that of a witches.**

This soliloquy is important when considering Shakespeare’s presentation of femininity because of what Lady Macbeth is asking for. Firstly, she is summoning evil **“spirits”**. This **aligns her with witchcraft**, which in Shakespeare’s time was associated with women who **challenged the status quo or the superiority of men**. Witchcraft was a serious crime that went against God, and here, Lady Macbeth is shamelessly and explicitly calling upon **“spirits”** to help her. This suggests all her actions in the play are evil, maybe even suggesting **all powerful women are in league with the Devil**.

Secondly, she relies on being **“unsex[ed]”** to be able **to do all the cruel and violent things she plans**. Therefore, while as a female character she serves to present femininity



<https://thirdcoastreview.com/2018/05/09/chicago-shakespeare-brings-proper-prestidigitation-macbeth/>

as powerful and violent, her language suggests the opposite. If she is successful in **“unsex[ing]”** herself, then her murderous behaviour is the **opposite of femininity**. Shakespeare either associates it with being **genderless** or being **masculine**. By linking being **“unsex[ed]”** with **“spirits”**, Shakespeare suggests **you lose your humanity if you defy your gender roles**.

#### Manipulation

The play centralises around Lady Macbeth’s manipulation of her

husband. She frequently **questions his masculinity** and uses this as leverage to get him to do what she wants.. When she sees him afraid, she asks, **“Are you a man?” (3.4)** and



**“What, quite unmanned in folly?” (3.4)** which **perpetuates** the idea that a man must always put on a brave face and not be **emotionally sensitive**. Although it is Lady Macbeth who convinces him, it is only possible for her to do so because Macbeth’s masculinity is so **fragile**.

Another way Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth is through their marriage. When she learns that he has gone against his promise she implies that she is breaking their wedding vows. She asks, **“What beast was’t then / That made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man. / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man,” (1.7)**. By accusing him of **“break[ing] this enterprise”** to her, she accuses him of being a **bad husband** and breaking the **Code of Chivalry**. She implies she will only deem him a **“man”** if he kills Duncan, linking the **validation of his manhood with the fulfillment of her own desires**. In contrast, she calls him a **“beast”** for betraying her, **dehumanising** him and calling him a **villain** for denying her what she wants.

### The Witches

A lot of the **conflict and tension surrounding gender** in the play is **concentrated** in the characters of the Witches. Typically, witches were known to be women, but in Macbeth, it is **unclear if the Witches are female or even human**. Though their characters are certainly linked to the presentation of femininity because of the **historical association between witchcraft and women**, it is debatable whether Shakespeare intends them to be female characters or **symbols of ambiguous gender**.

The Witches are an **archetype** of ‘ugly’ femininity. They represent the classic **old hag trope**, and they occupy the very **isolated edges of society**, meeting on heaths and in caves. Shakespeare supports the common notion that women who refused to meet the expectations of femininity would be rejected by society and punished for their actions.



<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/macbeth-on-tour>

There are three of them, perhaps symbolising an **anti-holy trinity**. Their ambiguous femininity contrasts with the masculinity of the Holy Trinity. Their prophecies are the **catalyst** (cause) for the murder of Duncan and the following chaos. Therefore, like Lady Macbeth, they seem to be ‘Eve’ figures, **temptresses** who lead men to their downfalls.

The Witches’ appearances are presented as **grotesque** and **revolting** because they aren’t **purely feminine**. Banquo provides a description of them, saying they are **“so withered and so wild in their attire”**, with **“choppy finger[s]”** and **“skinny lips” (1.3)**. They **personify** the typical **Jacobean perception of witches**.



## Development of the Theme

The presentation of gender **varies greatly** throughout the play. Different characters have their **own opinions** about what it means to be a man, to be a woman, or to be neither. What is obvious, though, is that **gender can't be avoided**. It comes up time and time again as characters try to **define themselves, define others, or understand what is happening to them**. Gender was viewed as a sign of **order and logic**, which is why **subverting** these gender norms was so disturbing to audiences.

'Macbeth' is arguably Shakespeare's most **misogynistic** play. All of the women, except for the supernatural witches, are dead by the end. The women are either **manipulative conspirers** who call upon spirits to **"unsex"** them, **hags** who talk directly to those spirits, or **helpless mothers** who are pointlessly slaughtered. Moreover, the main female characters all contribute to Macbeth's downfall, tempting him with power or persuading him to commit murder. If Macbeth is a retelling of the **Garden of Eden**, the Witches is the serpent and Lady Macbeth is Eve.

Furthermore, the death of Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff suggests **women suffer from the sinful deeds of men**. Lady Macbeth is driven to madness partly by Macbeth's murder spree. At the same time, her death (or suicide) seems to signify **her feminine kindness winning over her masculine or genderless wickedness**. Similarly, Macduff's sensitivity encourages the same compassion in Malcolm, and so **these feminine qualities take the throne**.



## Guilt, Innocence, & Paranoia

Though it is the Macbeths' **unchecked, amoral ambition** that causes their **fall from grace**, it is their **guilt and paranoia** that **breaks them**. Without guilt, they wouldn't be **driven insane** by their deeds. Without paranoia, their murder spree might have begun and ended with Duncan's death.



<http://leavingcertenglish.net/2011/11/macbeth-questions/>

### Context

Killing a king was a **provocative** subject when 'Macbeth' was first being written and performed.

Elizabeth I had died without an heir, so James VI of Scotland was made the new king of England. This raised a lot of questions about whether he was the **rightful** monarch, and who should be allowed to be king.

This **political tension amounted in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605**, where a group tried to assassinate James and members of Parliament. As the king was the patron of Shakespeare's theatre group, it was important that he pleased him. By illustrating how violently and deeply guilt destroyed the Macbeths, Shakespeare is clearly **condemning** regicide.

### Religion

Jacobean Britain was a **very religious, Christian country**. People believed God was **all-seeing**, so would see every sin and crime someone committed. No one was **exempt** from His judgement. Shakespeare supports this idea by showing how the Macbeths are put through a sort of hell, despite their crime not being known by anyone else.

The Renaissance was also a period when people believed in the innate (natural) goodness of humanity. The Macbeths are destroyed by their own guilt, suggesting their **innate goodness rebelled against their deliberate immorality**.

Innocence, in contrast, is a **virtue** that Shakespeare, in keeping with Christianity, celebrates. The Macbeths pursue a **facade of innocence** while plotting their murders, and as they descend further into their web of violence, they long to **regain** their lost innocence. Malcolm, a posterboy of youthful innocence and virtue, is the rightful king of Scotland, showing how goodness is the correct way to be given power.



## Macbeth

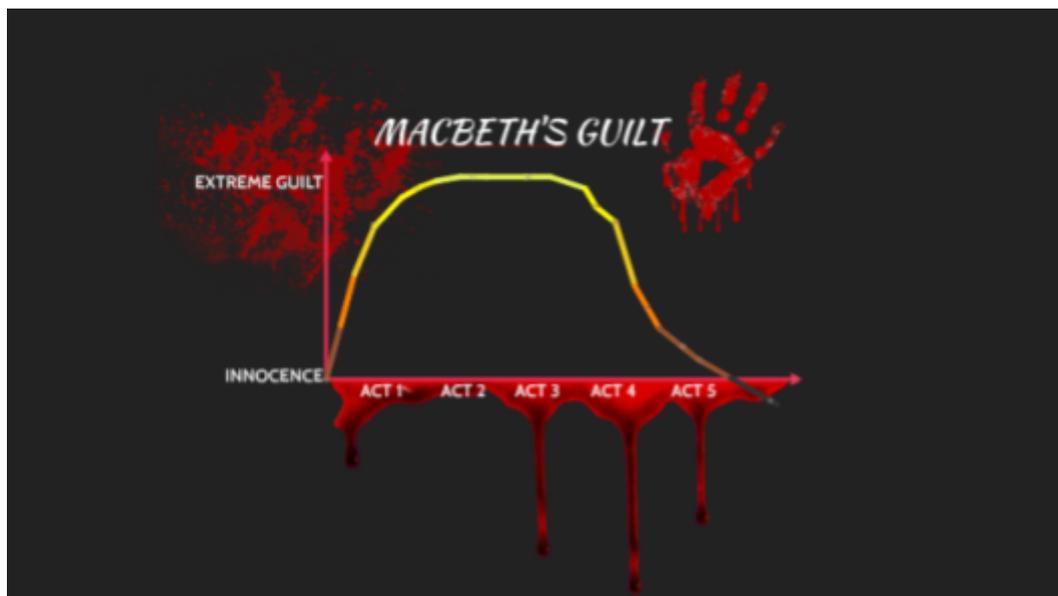
Though both are troubled deeply by their guilt, the Macbeths' experiences of it and reactions to it are very **different**, and reveal their differences in **character**.

Macbeth's guilt is focused on the murder, as he expresses his greatest remorse directly before and after he kills Duncan. After that, his guilt comes in the form of **paranoia**, and this sends him on a **frenzied murder spree**. Shakespeare suggests **guilt and conscience are more powerful than ambition**.

### Guilt and religion

Shakespeare associates **guilt with religion**. While wondering if he should really kill Duncan, Macbeth acknowledges, **"We'd jump the life to come," (1.7)**. This is a reference to the **afterlife**, which Christians believed would be granted to those who **honoured God**. Macbeth knows committing murder will **sacrifice his life in Heaven**, making him fully **mortal** and **abandoned by God**. The threat of this is enough to make Macbeth reconsider his plan, showing the power religion and belief had over people at the time. Shakespeare suggests Macbeth should have listened to his **conscience and faith** rather than to his wife. Shakespeare shows the **moral and religious consequences** of being guilty.

Macbeth continues, **"But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'? / I had most need of blessing and 'Amen' / Stuck in my throat," (2.2)**. He is deeply distressed and upset by this experience. It seems Macbeth is scared because he has been **denied God's forgiveness**, so knows he is **damned**. The phrase **"I had most need of blessing"** reveals his **regret**, for he is desperate to **reclaim his innocence**. The **metaphor "stuck in my throat"** evokes the image of a **barrier blocking Macbeth from God**.



<https://prezi.com/ckbmn8mldby9/macbeth-and-guilt/>

Guilt is presented as an intense fear of knowing yourself and facing what you have done. After killing Duncan, he claims, **"To know my deed, 'twere best not know my self," (2.2)**.



The perception of himself as an **honourable hero** has died along with Duncan. He would rather be **unconscious** or **forget who he is** than look at what he's done.

### Regret

Macbeth's regret is echoed later in the play, when Ross says of Scotland, "***Alas, poor country, / Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot / Be called our mother, but our grave,***" (4.3). Shakespeare shows how Macbeth's **guilt** has clouded the country in uncertainty and weakness. Ross suggests Scotland is "***almost afraid to know itself***" because **it cannot face what it has become**. The same is true of Macbeth himself, meaning the king and his country are **identical**.

### Paranoia

**Paranoia** is portrayed as a **poison** that is **relentless** and **inescapable**. Macbeth **loses** all his **heroic qualities** because of his fears, and he becomes murderous even as he descends into madness. He says, "***For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind; / For them, the gracious Duncan have I murdered, / Put rancours in the vessel of my peace / Only for them,***" (3.1). Shakespeare shows that Macbeth's ambition is punished, not rewarded. The **metaphor** "***put rancours in the vessel of my peace***" suggests his guilt and paranoia has **polluted** his soul. Similar **imagery of corruption** is used as the play continues: "***O, full of scorpions is my mind,***" (3.2), presenting his paranoia as **infinite, small stings**.

### **Lady Macbeth**

Unlike her husband, Lady Macbeth is initially **free from any feelings of guilt**. Her journey in the play takes her **from power and strength** to **weakness and insanity**. Whereas



<http://leavingcertenglish.net/2013/01/the-macbeths-marriage/>

Macbeth's guilt makes him more violent and brutal, Lady Macbeth's guilt makes her go into herself. She closes herself off to everyone else, cannot be in darkness, and sleep walks as she is trapped in her own guilty thoughts. The way her guilt **takes over is gradual but destructive**, showing how even the most **callous** (insensitive and cruel) and cold people aren't immune to God's judgement and their own human conscience.

### Rejecting femininity

Guilt and regret are presented as **obstacles to following ambition**. These two feelings are linked to femininity and thus Lady Macbeth tries to rid herself of her conscience when she calls upon "***spirits***" to "***unsex***" her. She demands that they: "***Stop up th'access and passage to remorse / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between / Th'effect and it,***" (1.5). This indicates that she is **capable** of feeling guilt, but wants to



**repress** these feelings because she views them as **weaknesses**. The only way to overcome guilt is to not feel it, as Shakespeare implies **guilt is too powerful to ignore**.

### Cost of guilt

The **cost** of Lady Macbeth's guilt is shown to be endless paranoia. She says to herself, **"Nought's had, all's spent / Where our desire is got without content. / 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy / Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy," (3.2)**, which suggests she **envies** the dead for their **peace of mind**. **"All's spent"** illustrates how there is a **cost** for being guilty of a crime, and may also allude to her mental exhaustion - she is **"spent"**. Lady Macbeth is becoming aware of the **infinite cycle of violence** they have got themselves into to **satisfy their paranoia**. Shakespeare shows that sins and crimes are never rewarded, so that the perpetrators are only left with their **remorse**.

Shakespeare demonstrates how guilt and regret can't be **escaped**. Lady Macbeth tells her worried husband, **"What's done, is done," (3.2)**, suggesting they **can't change their fate and will just have to live with the consequences**. Shakespeare suggests that greed and ambition can't predict the guilt that comes with making fantasies into reality. The line becomes a **refrain** for her, as later she mutters to herself in her sleep, **"What's done cannot be undone," (5.1)**. The **repetition** makes it appear like she is trying to **convince** herself to let go and get the courage to face reality. The change from **"is done"** to **"cannot be undone"** gives the impression that her guilt and desperation have **increased**.

### **Blood & Hallucinations**

**Blood** is a **symbol of guilt and death** in Macbeth. The Macbeths can't escape it no matter how much they try to wash it away.

**Hallucinations** and **ghosts** are also **symbols of guilt and death**, as they point to the **existence of an Afterlife** and the invisible world of the **supernatural**.



<http://stanleysclass.weebly.com/macbeth.html>

### Blood as a motif

Blood is a **motif** used throughout the play to show how the

Macbeths **react** to their guilt. They both react differently to the blood which reveals to the audience how differently their minds work.

Lady Macbeth believes that the simple act of washing their hands will rid them of both the physical blood but also the mental guilt of their deed. She orders her husband, **"Go get some water / And wash this filthy witness from your hand," (2.2)**, echoing this later, **"A little water clears us of this deed," (2.2)**. Here, **"water"** is a **symbol of purity and life**. She isn't focused on what the murder says about them or the mental impact it will have, only



the implications of if they get caught with blood on their hands. She worries that it will **implicate** them in the murder as a **“witness”**, so tells Macbeth to **“wash”** it away. At the same time, she only refers to blood with the **euphemisms “filthy witness”** and **“deed”**, suggesting she can’t **confront** the reality of her actions.

In contrast, Macbeth is **shocked** by the blood on his hands, asking, **“Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No: this my hand will rather /**



<http://jameskarasreviews.blogspot.com/2016/05/macbeth-review-of-2016-st-ratford.html>

**The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red,” (2.2).** He knows their guilt goes beyond the **literal “blood” on their “hand[s]”**, and that nothing can remove the **metaphorical “blood”** on their souls. The reference to **“Neptune”**, a **non-Christian god**, could reflect how he has turned his back on God.

#### Macbeth’s hallucinations

Macbeth is faced with the **reality** of his guilt in the form of **blood-soaked hallucinations**. A dagger dripping with blood leads the way to Duncan’s sleeping form, a **premonition** of the violence and guilt to come, while Banquo’s ghost points his bloodied finger at Macbeth in an **accusation** of responsibility. Macbeth’s famous **soliloquy** opens, **“Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand?” (2.1).** The question shows that Macbeth **cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is imagined**, suggesting his guilt has already taken hold.

Macbeth asks, **“Art thou but / A dagger of the mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?” (2.1)**, suggesting he is aware that he can’t **trust** everything he sees. At the same time, though, he isn’t sure if the dagger is from his **“mind”** or not, implying he doesn’t know what his mind is **capable** of. It seems his **inability to cope with guilt** makes him hallucinate. The **adjective “heat-oppressed”** refers to the **pressure** guilt places on you. It connotes a fever, portraying **guilt as a disease**.

Shakespeare presents guilt as an **intense psychological torture** that makes reality break down. Mental illnesses, such as the psychosis Macbeth is experiencing, weren’t understood in Shakespeare’s time. It was common to think the mentally ill were **possessed**.

At first, Lady Macbeth is **dismissive** of Macbeth’s hallucinations, telling him **“‘Tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil,” (2.2)** and his **“flaws and starts”** are merely **“impostors to true fear” (3.4)**. In her final scene however, she is **tormented** by her own visions. She cries, **“Out, damned spot!” (5.1)**, showing she is trying to wash her hands of an invisible spot of blood. Its invisibility reflects how **guilt doesn’t have to be visible or known by others for it to be real**: she knows her own guilt and cannot unlearn it.



## Sleep

Shakespeare uses **sleep** as a **symbol of innocence and peace**, it brings **comfort** and is an escape from the troubles of the real world. Sleep is also used to express and reveal **the subconscious and the conscience**. Thus, sleep is **denied** to the Macbeths after they murder Duncan. Instead, their nights are **plagued** by nightmares and **“restless ecstasy” (3.2)**, suggesting they **relive** their crimes every time they close their eyes.



<https://www.thoughtco.com/summary-of-macbeth-2985022>

When the Macbeths murder Duncan, Shakespeare shows they have **sacrificed** any chance of **serenity and well-being**. It is concluded, **“Macbeth shall sleep no more,” (2.2)**. As well as being the **villain**, Macbeth realises he has **damned himself**. He **“shall sleep no more”**, so **he has brought torment and torture on himself**. Shakespeare shows how those who are guilty of sins are **self-destructive**. Macbeth sleeping **“no more”** is a **symbol of his active, haunted conscience**. Sleep is **“innocent”**, a **“balm of hurt minds”**, so **it cannot be enjoyed by a murderer** bathed in blood, as Macbeth is.

### Insomnia

Macbeth’s **insomnia** takes its toll on him, so that he longs for some **semblance** of peace, even death. He says, **“Better be with the dead / Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, / Than on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave. / After life’s fitful fever, he sleeps well,” (3.2)**, suggesting his attempts to feel content have only brought him more pain. Here Macbeth envies the **“dead”** and clearly mistakes death for a form of **“sleep”**, which implies murder and death has taken over his mindset.

Lady Macbeth’s sleep is **disturbed** by sleep walking, suggesting her mind is always racing. The Doctor notes, **“A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching,” (5.1)**, suggesting Lady Macbeth is **doomed** to always **“watch”** the murder be **replayed**.



## Light vs. Dark

Shakespeare uses **imagery of light and darkness** to explore **guilt and innocence**. Light is a **symbol of innocence**, enlightenment, and often **holiness**, whereas **darkness** is associated with the **evil spirits that call for foul murder**. Often, light and darkness indicate which characters are guilty and which can be trusted.

### Darkness used to conceal

Both of the Macbeths call upon **darkness** to **mask** their crimes. The darkness could be reflective of them turning their back on God and goodness and instead siding with temptation and the devil.

When the idea of murdering Duncan first comes to Macbeth, he says in an **aside**, ***“Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires, / The eye wink at the hand. Yet let that be, / Which the eye fears when it is done to see,” (1.4)***. Duncan already established **“stars”** as **“signs of nobleness”**, so Macbeth is **using the darkness to protect his innocent reputation**.

- The phrase **“black and deep desires”** evokes an **images of decay**, and suggests Macbeth is **aware of his immorality while he nurtures it**. By asking the **“stars”** to **“hide [their] fires”**, it seems Macbeth is more concerned with **avoiding judgement** than embracing darkness.
- **“Let not light see”** and **“Yet let that be, / Which the eye fears”** suggests **the darkness is for his own benefit**. He can't **bear** to look at what he is going to do, even though he wants it to happen.



<https://jwa.org/blog/risingsvoices/women-of-influence-what-macbeth-taught-us-about-women-in-power>

Lady Macbeth has a similar request when she says, ***“Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes, / Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,” (1.5)***. She asks directly for **“thick night”** and **“the dunnest smoke of hell”**, meaning she is calling upon **forces of darkness** to help her be wicked, whereas Macbeth is more concerned with avoiding **“light”** to **preserve** his ‘pure’ soul. However, Lady Macbeth does reveal she is concerned about **discovery**, wanting to stop **“heaven peep[ing] through the blanket of the dark”**.

## Development of the Theme

For Macbeth, his guilt and paranoia are **constants** that **accompany** him throughout the play. As the play progresses, his guilt and paranoia **worsens**. This is reflected in how Macbeth’s language changes. He uses **more Hellish, grotesque, and supernatural**



**imagery**. His **obsession** with death and mortality increases, and he makes **repeated references** to his troubled mental state and lack of sleep. At the same time, he becomes **crueler and more brutal**.

For Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, her guilt and paranoia only **manifest** fully in her **final scenes**. At the start, she **orchestrates** the murder and **silences** all of Macbeth's fears and regrets. There are **subtle indications** that she isn't as confident and cold as she wants to seem, but her speech is **controlled and cutting**. Eventually, she is completely unaware of Macbeth's actions. This **division** that forms both physically and mentally between the couple portrays guilt as **isolating**.

