Macbeth

Common Misconceptions Study Booklet



The play is Elizabethan

Lady Macbeth is a man

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Banquo does not care about the prophecies

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The play is Elizabethan

Macbeth was first performed in 1606, when James I was King of England – so the play is Jacobean. It's worth keeping in mind James I was deeply worried about witches and witchcraft and held a genuine belief that groups of witches were trying to kill him. He published 'Daemonologie' in 1597.

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ACT 1, SCENE 3

FIRST WITCH A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap

And munch'd, and munch'd, and munch'd. 'Give me,'

quoth I.

'Aroint thee, witch' the rump-fed runnion cries.

Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o'th'Tiger:

But in a sieve I'll thither sail, And, like a rat without a tail, I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

SECOND WITCH I'll give thee a wind.

FIRST WITCH Thou'rt kind
THIRD WITCH And I another.

FIRST WITCH I myself have all the other,

And the very ports they blow,

All the quarters that they know 15

 $I'th's hipman's\ card.$

I"ll drain him dry as hay:

Sleep shall neither night nor day Hang upon his pent-house lid;

He shall live a man forbid. 20

Weary sennights nine times nine, Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine. Though his bark cannot be lost, Yet it shall be tempest-toss'd.

Look what I have. 25

SECOND WITCH Show me, show me.

FIRST WITCH Here I have a pilot's thumb,

Wreck'd as homeward he did come.

Read: An introduction to Shakespearean Tragedy

Lady Macbeth is a man

More delicate phrasing is required here: Lady Macbeth is not a submissive character and she subverts the gender hierarchy of the time. She has a desire to transcend her role as a woman ('unsex me here') and refuses to conform to limiting social expectations.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

LADY MACBETH	The raven himself is hoarse	
	That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan	
	Under my battlements. Come, you spirits	
	That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here	40
	And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull	
	Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood;	
	Stop up the access and passage to remorse	
	That no compunctious visitings of nature	
	Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between	45
	Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,	
	And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,	
	Wherever in your sightless substances	
	You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,	
	And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,	50
	That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,	
	Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,	
	To cry 'Hold, hold.'	
	Enter MACBETH	
	Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor,	

Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter,
Thy letters have transported me beyond

This ignorant present, and I feel now

The future in the instant.

Read: Character analysis: Lady Macbeth

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Macbeth is a coward

Lady Macbeth accuses Macbeth of being cowardly and says, 'screw your courage to the sticking-place' – but that doesn't necessarily mean he's actually a coward. It's up for debate. A better way forward is to describe him as a conflicted and indecisive character.

ACT 1, SCENE 7

MACBETH Prithee, peace.

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.

LADY MACBETH 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 50

Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.

They have made themselves, and that their fitness now

Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: 55

I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,

And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn

As you have done to this.

MACBETH If we should fail?

LADY MACBETH We fail?

But screw your courage to the sticking-place, 60

And we'll not fail.

Read: An Introduction to Macbeth

Banquo does not care about the prophecies

Banquo is initially sceptical about the prophecies, but that doesn't mean he's not intrigued by them. He reflects alone on stage in A3S1 that Macbeth 'has it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all' and wonders 'May they not be my oracle as well'.

ACT 3, SCENE 1

BANQUO Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all,

As the weird women promis'd, and I fear

Thou play'dst most foully for't; yet it was said

It should not stand in thy posterity,

But that myself should be the root and father 5

Of many kings. If there come truth from them – As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine –

Why, by the verities on thee made good,

May they not be my oracles as well

And set me up in hope? But hush, no more. 10

Read: Conjuring darkness in Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is just a villain

Lady Macbeth is manipulative and ruthless, but she's also vulnerable. She concedes that she doesn't have it in her to kill Duncan herself because he resembles her 'father as he slept' and, later on, she becomes increasingly concerned by Macbeth's tyranny. And then there's A5S1: 'Out, damned spot!'

ACT 5, SCENE 1

LADY MACBETH Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One, two. Why then 'tis,

time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would

have thought the old man to have had so much blood in 35

him?

DOCTOR Do you mark that?

LADY MACBETH The thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What,

will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o'that, my

lord, no more o'that. You mar all with this starting. 40

DOCTOR Go to, go to; you have known what you should not.

GENTLEWOMAN She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that.

Heaven knows what she has known.

LADY MACBETH Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of

Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O. 45

Read: Lady Macbeth's 'Hell Broth'

Macbeth goes mad

There are clear points in the play where Macbeth behaves irrationally. However, to say he just goes mad is an over-simplification. For example, when he is alone at Dunsinane, he speaks calmly and coherently about his age and increasing isolation: 'My way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf'.

ACT 5, SCENE 3

MACBETH

Seyton! – I am sick at heart,

When I behold – Seyton, I say! – this push

20

Will cheer me ever or disseat me now.

I have liv'd long enough. My way of life

Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,

And that which should accompany old age,

As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,

25

I must not look to have; but, in their stead,

Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,

Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

Seyton!

Read: The Witches in Macbeth

The play ends happily

The play does end happily in the sense that Malcolm is rightly restored to the throne – 'Hail, King of Scotland' exclaims Maduff in A5S9. However, those words reflect the cries of 'Hail' from the three Witches in A1S3. This subtle mirroring casts a degree of uncertainty on the longevity of Malcom's reign. A happy, but ambiguous, ending.

ACT 5, SCENE 9

MACDUFF Hail, king! for so thou art. Behold where stands

Th'usurper's cursed head. The time is free:

I see thee compass'd with thy kingdom's pearl,

That speak my salutation in their minds;

Whose voices I desire aloud with mine. 25

Hail, King of Scotland.

ALL Hail, King of Scotland.

Read: Malcolm in Macbeth