



The Plays of William Shakespeare



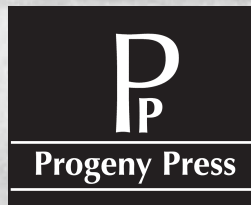
Macbeth

Study Guide

by Michael S. Gilleland



CD Version



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Macbeth Study Guide

A Progeny Press Study Guide

by Michael S. Gilleland

with Andrew Clausen, Calvin Roso, Rebecca Gilleland

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Synopsis

A day of storm and battle is coming to a close, and Duncan, king of Scotland awaits news of the conflict. A bloody man appears and tells him that against all odds, the rebel Macdonwald, the traitor Thane of Cawdor, and the king of Norway have been defeated by Duncan's captains, Macbeth and Banquo. Duncan orders the Thane of Cawdor executed and tells his men to go bestow the title on Macbeth.

Macbeth and Banquo, returning from the battle, come upon three witches who greet Macbeth as thane of Glamis, thane of Cawdor, and king to be. Banquo asks whether they have such complimentary greetings for him. They call him "Lesser than Macbeth and greater," and tell him that he will father kings. Then the witches vanish.

Not certain what to make of this, Macbeth and Banquo are soon joined by Ross, who greets them in the king's name and names Macbeth Thane of Cawdor. This news, in fulfillment of the witches' statement seems to awaken within Macbeth a long-dead desire for the throne. Hardly daring to admit his own thoughts to himself, he writes to tell his wife of these events.

Lady Macbeth has fewer qualms than her husband and goes into near-ecstasy at the thought of taking the throne. When she learns the king is coming to their castle for a night, she and Macbeth plot Duncan's death.

In the dead of night Macbeth and his wife stab the king and leave the bloody daggers with his attendants. When the king is discovered the next morning, Macbeth kills the attendants in a "fit of rage." Realizing that they no longer know who to trust, and that whoever killed their father may well be after them next, Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain flee to England and Ireland. Immediately, the lords assume they were behind the king's death and name Macbeth king.

Not all are convinced of the wisdom of this, however. Banquo is keenly aware that the king has died in Macbeth's home shortly after Macbeth heard a prediction that he will be king. Macduff also doubts the innocence of Macbeth and, though he does not voice his thoughts, he refuses to attend Macbeth's coronation.

Now that Macbeth is king, however, he remembers the prediction of the witches: Banquo's son will reign, not his. He hires men to kill Banquo and his son

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Fleance, but they achieve only partial success—Fleance escapes. At the banquet held in his honor that evening, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo, and in shouting at it perhaps reveals more than he intends to the gathered lords. He also begins to fear Macduff and determines to visit the witches again.

The witches call forth three apparitions, who tell Macbeth that he must beware Macduff, but “no one of woman born” can harm him, and he will never be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Heartened by these predictions, Macbeth demands to know whether Banquo’s descendants will, indeed, rule after him. The witches show him a seemingly endless line of kings descending from Banquo. Angry, Macbeth decides to remove his last available irritant by killing Macduff. As he departs, however, he is told Macduff has fled to Malcolm in England. Now enraged, Macbeth vows from this point forward to immediately follow his first impulses, and he vents his fury by slaughtering everyone he can find in Macduff’s castle—Macduff’s wife, children, and servants.

In England, Macduff has found Malcolm, but Malcolm is distrustful of him. As they form a tentative alliance, word arrives of the slaughter of Macduff’s family. Macduff vows vengeance on Macbeth. Heartened by reports of rebellion against Macbeth and the offer of support and troops from England, Malcolm and Macduff make plans to return to Scotland and reclaim the throne.

Things have not been going well for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The rebellions are taking their toll, and Lady Macbeth is restless in her mind. Her gentlewoman and a doctor observe her sleepwalking, speaking of the murders and clearly disturbed. Macbeth appears manic, thrown this way and that by his whims, alternating between supreme self-confidence in the predictions of the witches and fury that things are not as he wishes them. The death of Lady Macbeth seems to affect him little beyond a morose discussion about the meaning of life.

Things really begin to fall apart as Malcolm’s troops advance to Dunsinane and are joined by the lords of Scotland. When the troops pause at Birnam Wood, Malcolm orders his men to cut down and carry branches of the wood to confuse reports of their numbers. As this movement of the Wood pours toward Dunsinane, Macbeth realizes that the predictions he relied on have become a two-edged sword. Maddened by the desertion of his subjects and faced with an apparent trap, he clings to, almost revels in, the prediction that no one born of woman can harm him. But in the end, even this fails Macbeth.

Act I

Vocabulary:

Write the letter of the definition on the right in the blank next the the word it defines.

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| ___ 1. plight | a. relating to the body |
| ___ 2. vantage | b. pay out, spread around |
| ___ 3. curb | c. matchless, unequaled |
| ___ 4. disburse | d. predicament, situation |
| ___ 5. inhabitant | e. deposit, pledge, downpayment |
| ___ 6. corporal | f. triviality |
| ___ 7. earnest | g. reward, compensation |
| ___ 8. trifle | h. superior position |
| ___ 9. recompense | i. restrain, repress |
| ___ 10. peerless | j. resident, dweller |

Scrambled Quotation:

The following words are a quotation from Act I. See if you can unscramble the quotation. Next to the quotation, write the name of the person speaking and the act and scene in which it is found.

in no face art There's the construction to find the mind's.

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General Questions:

1. Who turns the tide of the battle for King Duncan?
2. Who delivers some prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo, and what are the prophecies?
3. To whom is Macbeth referring in scene iv, when he says “The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step/ On which I must fall down or else o’erleap”? What does his statement mean?
4. At the end of Act I, what have Macbeth and his Lady planned? Explain their plans.

Analysis:

5. The opening scene in *Macbeth* is possibly the strangest opening in all of Shakespeare’s plays. What tone does it set for play? How does the first scene affect your expectations for the play?

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6. In scene iv, Duncan says of the former Thane of Cawdor, “There’s no art/ To find the mind’s construction in the face./ He was a gentleman on whom I built/ An absolute trust.” Immediately after this statement, Macbeth enters. What is ironic about Macbeth appearing after Duncan says this?
7. This play makes much of contrasting what is natural with what is unnatural. Banquo calls attention to this in the case of the three Weird Sisters:

Banquo What are these,
So withered, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ earth
And yet are on ’t?—Live you? Or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.
(scene iii, lines 40–49)

The witches are not quite human, not quite spirit; they are female, but not really women—they are distinctly unnatural. Find another instance of someone acting unnaturally in Act I and describe it. Does the unnaturalness appear good or bad?

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Character Study:

- Pick one or two of the following characters from the play and describe their qualities, using examples from Act I. What kind of people are they? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

Macbeth	Lady Macbeth
Duncan	Banquo

- An *aside* is when a sentence or two is spoken in an undertone by one character to the audience or to another character. It is understood that the other characters on stage do not hear the aside. Asides help the audience know a character better by allowing that character to privately express feelings, opinions, and reactions. In all of Act I, who is the only character to speak in asides or to instigate aside exchanges between two characters? Act I, scene iii, has more asides than the rest of the play combined. Considering that asides are, in essence, secrets or whispers kept from the rest of the characters, and considering who is speaking the asides, what does this imply about that character?

Foreshadowing:

- Foreshadowing* is a literary device by which the author hints at events to come later in the play. At the end of scene i, the three witches chant together “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” As you look at Act I, what are the witches foreshadowing? What do you think this foreshadows for the rest of the play?

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11. The pacing of *Macbeth* is rapid-fire—there are many drastic scene changes, and events move very quickly. How do you think this rapid change of circumstances affects Macbeth’s ability to sort through events and come to decisions? Consider Proverbs 19:2.

12. A *soliloquy* is a speech a character makes when alone on stage, generally to provide background information or express what she is thinking. In Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy at the start of scene v, from what “weaknesses” does she say Macbeth suffers? To what “illness” do you think Lady Macbeth refers when she says Macbeth is “not without ambition, but without/ The illness should attend it”?

13. When does Macbeth first consider murdering the king? What does this tell us about Macbeth?

14. *Contrast* is a stylistic device in which different things are held up in opposition to each other. For example, a rural setting may be contrasted with, or held up as an opposing image to, an urban setting. An author may also create stylistic contrast by using long and short sentences or short-worded, staccato passages next to longer, more fluid passages.

Explain the contrast in scene vi between Duncan’s and Banquo’s description of the castle and the plans being laid within the castle, or the contrast between Duncan’s statements to Lady Macbeth and her plans for him.

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Dig Deeper:

15. Read 1 Samuel 26. What is Abishai's reaction to David's opportunity in the camp? Does David see it the same way as Abishai? How do their reactions compare to Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's ideas about Duncan visiting their castle?

16. To how many people does Macbeth confide his thoughts, desires, and plans? From how many people does he seek advice? Do you think this affects his plans at the end of Act I? Read Proverbs 11:14, 12:15, 19:20, 20:18. How might these verses have affected Macbeth's actions? How can you use these verses in your life?

17. Toward the end of scene vii, Lady Macbeth accuses Macbeth of unmanliness. Compare Lady Macbeth's definition of manliness with the definition found in Proverbs 3 and 4.

18. In his soliloquy at the beginning of scene vii, Macbeth reviews his reasons against murdering Duncan. Summarize this soliloquy. What does this reveal about Macbeth?

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19. Read Galatians 5:7–8 and Colossians 2:6–8. How do these verses relate to what Macbeth is doing in this Act? Why do you think it is so easy for people to discard what they know is right? How can you avoid this?

Extra Activities:

- In Act I, scene iii, Banquo warns 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 consequence.” Write a one-page essay discussing the meaning of these statements and how they explain and warn against temptation.
- Research King James I of England and write a one- or two-page paper summarizing James’ life. Examine whether Shakespeare wrote actions or events into Act I of *Macbeth* to particularly appeal to the king or to reflect events in his life.
- Paint a watercolor or draw a colored pencil rendition of Macbeth’s castle at Inverness, drawing inspiration from the descriptions of Duncan and Banquo from Act I, scene vi.
- Have one person act out a portion or all of the dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Act I, scene vii. Note how voice, tone, and pacing must change to depict the character and communicate him or her to the audience. If possible, have several students do this exercise. Other scenes may be chosen.
- Have two students act out the above dialogue or another, each taking the part of a character. Then have the students act out the same scene but exchange characters.

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with mankind,” and “eat each other.” Answers will vary. In each case, a “lesser” thing has risen over a “greater” thing. For example darkness has conquered the sun, a small owl has killed a great falcon, and well-trained horses now fight against people. These could all be metaphors for the lesser Macbeth killing King Duncan. The horses eating each other could also refer to the later events of Macbeth killing fellow thanes and the general distrust that grows between the thanes of Scotland.

20. Answers will vary. Regret can occur for a number of reasons: believing an action is wrong, finding events do not turn out as planned, wishing circumstances were different. Repentance recognizes that something was wrong and that correction has to take place. The original meaning of the word was to turn around and go the other direction.

Act III

Vocabulary:

1. indestructible; 2. supreme; 3. numerous; 4. correction; 5. evil; 6. honor; 7. mix; 8. merriment; 9. nature; 10. holy

Scrambled Quotation:

Naught’s had, all’s spent, where our desire is got without content.—Lady Macbeth, Act III, scene ii.

General Questions:

1. Answers will vary. It appears that the two will be polite to each other, but neither trusts the other anymore. Note that Macbeth keeps asking one more question about what Banquo will be doing that day and Banquo is careful to answer without any detail.

2. Macbeth hires some desperate peasants to kill Banquo and Fleance.

3. He tells the peasant men that he could not openly deal with Banquo himself because it would destroy the loyalty of mutual friends and subjects. If his cause was just, this would not be so.

4. Fleance’s escape is significant because Fleance is alive to fulfill the witches’ prophecy to Banquo.

5. Macbeth sees the dead Banquo sitting in his chair.

Analysis:

6. Macbeth murdered Duncan and gained the crown because of the prophecy of the three witches. Now, however, he is angry that all that he “sacrificed” for will be given over to Banquo’s descendants—again, as prophesied by the witches’—and he determines to challenge and fight “fate” to the death. He is willing to “accept” fate when it is in his favor, but he challenges fate when it seems against him.

7. The quotation from Act III could be paraphrased: “Only for Banquo’s sons have I sold my eternal soul to the devil.” The quotation from Act I could be paraphrased: “If there could be no consequences to the assassination in this life, I wouldn’t care about my soul in the next life.” Macbeth seems to be more concerned about his legacy than he was in Act I, and he seems to regret “selling” his soul, committing such great evil, for the temporary crown of king. He now wishes that he could at least pass it on to his descendants. He seems to be valuing his soul more highly, but already counting it as lost.

8. The men initially believed that Macbeth was the cause of their loss and degradation, but Macbeth convinces them Banquo was at fault. The men’s earlier conviction that Macbeth was behind their downfall, if correct (and Macbeth certainly has reason to lie about Banquo), could mean that Macbeth was not the pinnacle of virtue he seemed before the witches’ prophecy. It implies that he was always willing to take what he could when he was able to get away with it. For an example of this type of behavior, see 1 Kings 21:1–15.

9. First he tells them that Banquo was the cause of all their hardships. Then he taunts them about their patience, “Do you find/ Your patience so predominant in your nature/ That you can let this go? Are you so gospeled/ To pray for this good man and for his issue,/ Whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave/ And beggared you forever?” In essence, Macbeth calls them “goody-two-shoes” and questions their willingness to act. When they respond, “We are men, my liege,” Macbeth challenges their manhood: “Ay, in the catalogue you go for men,/ As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,/ Shoughs, water-rugs, and demi-wolves are clept/ All by the name of dogs. . . . And so of men./ Now, if you have a station in the file,/ Not i’ th’ worst of rank of manhood, say ’t,/ And I will put that business in your bosoms.” In other words, “You are men like all breeds of dog are dog, but if you’re not of the weakest, lowest form of man say so and I’ll give you this job to do.” This seems to be the same sort of argument that Lady Macbeth used on him, and it works on these peasants also.

10. Answers may vary. 1) Lady Macbeth: devises the plan to kill Duncan (Act I, scene vii); Macbeth: devises the plan to kill Banquo and Fleance (Act III, scene i). 2) Macbeth wanted to enjoy his new-found favor with the king, “He hath honored me of late, and I have bought/ Golden opinions from all sorts of people,/ Which would be worn now in their

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newest gloss” (Act I, scene vii); Lady Macbeth wishes to enjoy, as far as possible, their new position, “Things without all remedy should be without regard,” “Be bright and jovial/ Among your guests tonight” (Act III scene ii). 3) Lady Macbeth says she will take care of things and tells Macbeth not to worry: “you shall put/ This night’s great business into my dispatch. . . Leave all the rest to me” (Act I, scene v); Macbeth says he is taking care of things and she need not worry: “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,/ Till thou applaud the deed” (Act III, scene ii). 4) Lady Macbeth: “Look like th’ innocent flower,/ But be the serpent under ’t” (Act I, scene v); Macbeth: “And make our faces vizards to our hearts,/ Disguising what they are” (Act III, scene ii).

11. Answers will vary. It seems to bode ill for Macduff that Macbeth’s attention suddenly focuses on him at this point. Macbeth seems distracted and disturbed in his thoughts; they jump from blood and fantastic scenes to wondering about the time, then turn to Macduff. He also mentions that he has spies in everyone’s house, and that he is in blood so deep he might as well continue.

12. Answers will vary. Almost as soon as Macbeth sees the ghost and begins acting strangely, Lady Macbeth pulls him aside and demands, “Are you a man?” and then she repeats it again shortly, “What, quite unmanned in folly?” She seems to use this challenge when keeping Macbeth in line or chastising him. Macbeth does not act cowed, however, as he did in Act I, instead answering, “Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that/ Which might appall the devil.” Perhaps because of what they have been through, perhaps because he knows he is facing an enemy and he is a warrior, he does not back down or equivocate. He seems little affected by Lady Macbeth’s taunt. Perhaps her taunt sounds paltry next to what Macbeth has done and next to the image of the ghost. To the ghost, Macbeth challenges, “What man dare, I dare,” echoing his statement to Lady Macbeth in Act I, scene vii, “I dare do all that may become a man. Who dares [do] more is none.” He admits that he trembles before the ghost, but he also now seems to know what he is capable of.

13. Answers will vary. The scene does little for the play, adds no real information, and does not further the plot. The rhythm of the lines differs from most dialogue in *Macbeth*, and the entire scene is written in rhyme, the extent of which was unusual for Shakespeare.

14. Answers may vary. Though Lennox and the unnamed lord are not open or direct about their doubts and disdain for Macbeth, it is clear from their statements that they no longer believe that Malcolm, Donalbain, or Fleance killed their fathers or that they would live long if Macbeth found them. There are a number of examples. Lennox is sarcastic in a number of his statements, “Banquo walked too late,/ Whom you may say, if ’t please you, Fleance killed,/ For Fleance fled. Men must not walk too late.” The other lord makes clear people long for things as they had been before Macbeth, “That, by the help of these (with Him above/ To ratify the work), we may again/ Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights/ Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,/ Do faithful homage, and receive free honors,/ All which we pine for now.”

Dig Deeper:

15. Banquo and Macbeth are parallel characters because they hold similar positions in the kingdom, are the heroes of the opening battles, are both given prophecies, and both have to choose how to respond to the prophecies. By observing Banquo’s struggle against and rejection of evil, we see more clearly Macbeth’s unwillingness to restrain his ambition and his descent into evil.

16. These verses warn us about seeking revenge on our own terms and tell us to leave revenge to God. Instead we are to repay hate with love, persecution with blessing. We are to love and nurture each other and live at peace with everyone, as far as we are able.

17. Answers will vary. Though it is not right to react to injustice with anger, we should understand when other people do. We will be judged as we judge and treat other people. We cannot erase past injustice, but we can show them the love God has for us and for them, and we should treat them as compassionately as we would want to be treated.

18. Answers will vary. Macbeth is saying, “Everything I have is worthless unless I know I can’t lose it.” Lady Macbeth is saying, “We don’t have anything yet because none of it is solid or secure. It’s safer to be a victim than to be a destroyer who can’t hold onto what she gets.” Macbeth and his wife are not happy because they are afraid of losing everything. The verses from Proverbs reinforce what they are saying—ill-gotten gain consumes you and can disappear quickly.

19. Answers will vary.

Act IV

Vocabulary:

1. d; 2. i; 3. a; 4. k; 5. e; 6. b; 7. h; 8. j; 9. l; 10. g; 11. f; 12. c