

## Making Meanings, Act I

### First Thoughts

1. What are your impressions of Lady Macbeth at the end of Act I? What is her relationship with Macbeth (beyond being his wife)?

### Shaping Interpretations

2. In the very first scene of a play, a dramatist must tell the audience what kind of play they are about to see. What does the brief opening scene of *Macbeth* reveal about the rest of the play? How does the weather reflect the human passions revealed in the rest of the act?
3. How does the witches' prophecy of Macbeth's coming greatness act as a temptation for him?
4. Explain the **paradox**, or the apparently contradictory nature, of the witches' greeting to Banquo in Scene 3: "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater." How is this paradox true?
5. How does Banquo's reaction to the witches differ from Macbeth's? What do you think Macbeth's reaction suggests about his **character**?
6. One of the most interesting parts of any serious play is what goes on in the characters' minds. What **conflict** rages in Macbeth after he hears the witches' prophecy? What **resolution** to this conflict does Macbeth express in his aside, in Scene 4, lines 48–53?
7. Describe the temperamental differences between Macbeth and his wife. Who is more single-minded and logical? Who is more argumentative and sensitive? Which one wins the argument?
8. What **irony** would the audience feel as they watch Duncan enter the castle and hear him praise its peacefulness?

### Extending the Text

9. One critic has said that the witches are "in some sense representative of potentialities within" Macbeth. How could that statement be explained? Is there any evidence that Macbeth wanted to be king before? Explain your answer.

### Reviewing the Text

- a. In Scene 1, where do the witches plan to meet again, and why?
- b. What news about Macbeth does the bloodstained captain bring to the king in Scene 2?
- c. What does the king determine to do for Macbeth? Why?
- d. What do the witches tell Macbeth and Banquo in Scene 3?
- e. In what lines do you discover Lady Macbeth's plans for Duncan when he visits the castle?

## Making Meanings, Act II

### First Thoughts

1. What was your reaction to the murder of Duncan? Why do you think Shakespeare has the murder committed offstage?

### Shaping Interpretations

2. Though Macbeth encounters no opposition until long after Duncan is murdered, Shakespeare **foreshadows** trouble. For there to be **suspense**, one character must start to suspect Macbeth. Who is this, and what hints does he give?
3. In Act I, Lady Macbeth seems to be planning to murder Duncan herself. But in Act II, at the last moment, she is unable to. Consider her reason, and decide what her actions and explanations reveal about her **character**.
4. In Scene 3, Macbeth utters a hypocritical lament beginning "Had I but died." Is it really hypocritical? A critic argued that although the speech is meant to be a lie, it contains "Macbeth's profoundest feelings." Explain this apparent contradiction. How does Macbeth feel about having murdered Duncan? What clues tell you how he feels?
5. Lady Macbeth's fainting spell, like everything else she has done so far, has a purpose. What message do you think she wants her fainting spell to convey?
6. Macduff becomes an important character in the three remaining acts. Describe how Shakespeare **characterizes** him in Scenes 3 and 4.
7. What would you say is the **mood** of Act II? What **images** and actions help to create this mood? What do these images **symbolize**?

### Extending the Text

8. How do various characters respond to the violence? How would people today react to the news that a ruler has been assassinated and a nation is in political chaos?

### Challenging the Text

9. In some productions of *Macbeth*, Scene 4 is cut. Why would this be done? Is there any dramatic purpose for keeping it? Why do you think the Old Man is included in the scene?
10. Do you agree with Thomas De Quincey's theories on the knocking at the gate (see the HRW Classics edition of *Macbeth*, pages 132–134)? Why or why not?

### Reviewing the Text

- a. In Scene 1, Macbeth asks Banquo to meet him later for "some words." What incentive does he offer Banquo? How does Banquo reply?
- b. Describe the vision that Macbeth has at the end of Scene 1. What details foreshadow the action to come?
- c. In Scene 2, as Macbeth kills Duncan, what does Lady Macbeth hear? What does Macbeth hear?
- d. Why, according to Lady Macbeth, was she unable to kill Duncan herself? Which tasks related to the murder does she perform?
- e. In Scene 2, how does Macbeth respond to Lady Macbeth's suggestion that he go wash the "filthy witness" from his hands?
- f. In Scene 3, what is the porter pretending as he goes to open the gate?
- g. Why has Macduff come?
- h. What reason does Macbeth give for killing Duncan's two guards?
- i. Where do Duncan's sons decide to go?
- j. In Scene 4, whom does Macduff suspect of Duncan's murder?

## Making Meanings, Act III

### First Thoughts

1. What title would you give to Act III?

### Shaping Interpretations

2. Why do you suppose Shakespeare did not have Macbeth kill Banquo with his own hands, as he killed Duncan and his two guards? What can you infer about Macbeth's changing **character** after seeing how he engages in this complex plan involving professional murderers?
3. The relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth has changed in several ways since they became rulers of Scotland. Describe some of these changes. What reasons can you suggest for these changes?
4. In Scene 2, Macbeth describes his surroundings by saying, "Light thickens, and the crow / Makes wing to th' rooky wood." How can these remarks also be seen as a **metaphorical** commentary on the events of the play? What other remarks by Macbeth function in this way?
5. How is Fleance's escape a **turning point** in the play?
6. How does the banquet scene blur the clear-cut and common-sense distinction that most of us make between the real and the imaginary? In what other scenes has this distinction also been blurred?
7. At the beginning of Scene 2, Lady Macbeth quietly tells herself, "Nought's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content. . . ." What does she mean? At this point, would her husband agree?
8. Nobody except Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost. In some productions of the play, the ghost does not appear onstage; in others it does. If you were the director, which would you choose? What effect is created by having Banquo appear at the banquet, made up as a ghost? What is gained by having it appear as though no person motivates Macbeth's terrifying behavior?

### Extending the Text

9. After his vision of Banquo's ghost in Scene 4, Macbeth finally accepts that "blood will have blood." What does this phrase mean? Is it relevant to today's world? How?

### Challenging the Text

10. Shakespeare never reveals the identity of the Third Murderer, introduced in Scene 3. Who do you think the murderer is? Do you think the introduction of this Third Murderer is a flaw in the play? Explain your response.

### Reviewing the Text

- a. In the short **soliloquy** that opens Scene 1, what does Banquo reveal about Macbeth? What does he decide to do?
- b. How and why does Macbeth arrange Banquo's murder? How is Lady Macbeth involved in the murder?
- c. In Scene 3, who escapes the murderers?
- d. Describe what happens in Scene 4 when Ross, Lennox, and the other lords invite Macbeth to share their table. What does Macbeth do? What does Lady Macbeth do?
- e. Macduff does not appear at all in Act III. Where is he, and why?
- f. By Scene 6, what opinion do Lennox and the other lords hold of Macbeth?

## Making Meanings, Act IV

### First Thoughts

1. What effect did the brutal murders of Lady Macduff and her son have on you? Have your feelings for Macbeth changed from the opening of the play until now? How do you account for your reactions?

### Shaping Interpretations

2. In this act, Macbeth seeks out the witches, whereas they initiated the encounter in Act I. How has his situation changed since he last talked with them? How has his moral **character** deteriorated?
3. Do you think the witches have caused any of these changes, directly or indirectly? Explain your reasons for thinking as you do.
4. In Scene 1, the eight kings appear in what was called in Shakespeare's day a **dumb show**—an interpolated brief scene in which nothing is said. What is the point of this particular dumb show?
5. In Scene 2, the lines spoken by Macduff's wife and son illustrate Shakespeare's great skill at **characterization**. Using only a few words, he brings the woman and the child to life. How would you describe Lady Macduff? How would you describe the boy?
6. Both the murderer and Lady Macduff herself call Macduff a traitor. In what sense does each mean it? Do you think Macduff is a traitor in either sense?
7. In Scene 3, Malcolm deliberately lies to Macduff. What does this behavior, and the reason for it, reveal about Malcolm?

### Extending the Text

8. In Scene 3, Malcolm and Macduff decry the chaos that Macbeth's rule has brought to Scotland, as if Macbeth's disorder had become Scotland's. Does that happen today—does the weakness or the evil of a nation's leader become that of a nation itself? Explain your response.

### Challenging the Text

9. The murder of Macduff's small son is one of the most pitiful and shocking scenes in Shakespeare. Do you think it might have been better to have it reported after the fact rather than to have shown the carnage onstage? What would be lost and what would be gained by this change?

### Reviewing the Text

- a. What ingredients go into the witches' stew? What symbolic purpose does this vile concoction serve?
- b. What has Macbeth come to ask the witches, and how do they answer?
- c. Describe the three apparitions Macbeth sees when he visits the witches. What does each apparition tell him?
- d. Which nobleman does Macbeth plan to murder after talking with the witches? How is his plan foiled?
- e. At the end of Scene 1, what does Macbeth vow? How is his vow carried out in Scene 2?
- f. According to the conversation between Malcolm and Macduff in Scene 3, what has happened to Scotland during Macbeth's reign?
- g. What faults does Malcolm claim to have?
- h. How does Macduff respond to each of Malcolm's three "confessions"?

## Making Meanings, Act V

### First Thoughts

1. How do you feel about what happens to Macbeth's body after he is dead?

### Shaping Interpretations

2. Theatrically, the spectacle of Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep is one of the most striking scenes in the play. It is entirely Shakespeare's invention, not found or suggested in his source. Why do you suppose Shakespeare has her walk in her sleep? How is this scene related to the remarks that Macbeth makes about sleep in Act II, Scene 2, just after he kills Duncan?
3. In the sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth refers to many of her waking experiences. For example, the words "One: two" may refer to the moment in Act II, Scene 1, when she struck the bell, signaling Macbeth to go and kill Duncan. Find traces of other experiences in what she says and does while sleepwalking.
4. At the end of Act IV, Malcolm says, "The night is long that never finds the day." In what metaphorical sense does he use the terms *night* and *day*? How does his remark **foreshadow** the outcome of the play?
5. The last act of *Macbeth* contains the play's **climax**—the most emotional and suspenseful part of the action—the moment when the characters' conflicts are finally resolved. Which part of Act V do you consider the climax? Explain.
6. Shakespeare gave most of his **tragic heroes** an impressive dying speech in which they say something significant about their own life and death. Although he did not write such a speech for Macbeth, which speech of Macbeth's do you think serves in the play as his dying speech? Why have you selected this speech rather than some other one?

### Connecting with the Text

7. What are your reactions to the idea expressed by Macbeth that life "is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (Scene 5, lines 26–28)? Explain your response.

### Challenging the Text

8. Sometime shortly after 1660, a playwright named William Davenant (who claimed to be a natural son of Shakespeare) added another sleepwalking scene to *Macbeth*: He had the ghost of Duncan chase Lady Macbeth about the stage. How might this scene change the way audiences perceive Lady Macbeth's character? Might it make the other ghosts in the play seem any more or less real? What might the scene add to the play, and what might it take away?

### Reviewing the Text

- a. Why, according to the doctor, is Lady Macbeth walking in her sleep?
- b. In Scene 2, what opinion of Macbeth do the Scottish lords now hold?
- c. When does Lady Macbeth die?
- d. What is Macbeth's plan for dealing with the attacking troops? Why has he been forced to choose this plan?
- e. What changes in his personality does Macbeth describe in Scene 5, lines 9–15?
- f. In the speech in Scene 5 that begins "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" (lines 19–28), how does Macbeth describe life? What metaphors does he use?
- g. How are the prophecies proclaimed by the three apparitions in Act IV, Scene 1, fulfilled in Act V?
- h. At the end of the play, what has become of Macbeth? Who becomes king?