**Macbeth**

Macbeth is first referred to by the wounded captain, ‘For brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name’ (1: 1:16). In this same conversation Duncan says of Macbeth and Banquo, ‘They smack of honour both’. (1:1:43) This ‘honourable’ ‘brave’ man first appears in Scene 3 when he meets the Weird Sisters. He is frightened by them: Banquo says, ‘Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear/ things that do sound so fair?’ (1: 3: 51–52)

When it comes time to kill Duncan, Macbeth has doubts. He decides not to go through with it, but is swayed by his wife, Lady Macbeth. After Duncan’s murder Macbeth is sometimes strong and determined and sometimes overawed by guilt. He determines his friend Banquo must be murdered – he knows too much. Yet upon seeing Banquo’s ghost at the banquet Macbeth is wracked with guilt and fear.

At the end of the play the audience again sees the brave Macbeth as he soldiers on to the end and faces the final battle. His strength at this point stems from his confidence in the witches’ prophecies.

Macbeth is often considered a tragic hero – contributing to his own demise by some moral weakness. Macbeth’s tragic flaw is “vaulting ambition”. Unlike Romeo, Othello or Brutus, Macbeth does not contemplate suicide when his situation is grim. He even says, ‘Why should I play the Roman fool and die/ On my own sword’ (5:10:1-2). Macbeth is also, of course, a villain, though perhaps not as evil as other Shakespearean villains like Iago in *Othello*, King Richard III in *Richard III* or Edmund in *King Lear*. Macbeth struggles with his own conscience throughout the play, whereas these other villains do not.

**Lady Macbeth**

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare’s best known and most complex female characters. She plots the murder of the king and pushes her husband into the deed when he is having second thoughts. She is more ambitious than Macbeth, although in this patriarchal society of Medieval Scotland, she needs to attach her rise to that of her husband. She says, ‘Unsex me here’ (1: 4:39), highlighting her desire for masculine power. Shakespeare uses Lady Macbeth to challenge Macbeth’s all-male world. She manipulates him throughout the play and strongly challenges his manhood as a means of stirring him into action.

Lady Macbeth does not manage to maintain her strength and composure. After the murder Macbeth gathers his strength and attempts to overcome his guilt as he strives to maintain a grip on the kingdom. Lady Macbeth suffers the same guilt that plagues Macbeth but it drives her insane. Sleepwalking through the castle, wiping invisible blood from her hands: ‘out out damn spot’ (5:1:30) is the climax of her madness.
The Weird Sisters
The Weird Sisters open the play and set up the dark, sinister tone of Macbeth. Although they refer to each other as ‘Sister’ (1:3:1 and 3) and collectively call themselves the ‘weird sisters’ (1: 3:30), they are most often known as ‘The witches.’ The witches are enormously powerful in their manipulation of Macbeth, yet they do not actually cast a spell on him; they only deliver predictions and conjure up apparitions to show him. The witches often speak in a different rhythm to other characters in the play. Instead of pentameter, they use tetrameter (four beats to a line) when chanting or casting spells. Shakespeare often used this form for magical or supernatural characters throughout his work.

Banquo
Banquo is a general and witnesses the Weird Sisters with Macbeth. He could be considered Macbeth’s best friend. Macbeth acts on the Weird Sisters’ prophecy, whereas Banquo does not. According to the witches’ prophecy, Banquo’s children will inherit the Scottish throne. After Macbeth kills him, Banquo’s ghost haunts Macbeth at the royal banquet table.

King Duncan
King Duncan is the epitome of a noble and virtuous leader, although naïve and unaware of the true character of his followers. He has two sons, Malcolm – his anointed successor – and Donalbain. Duncan is murdered in his sleep by Macbeth, while a guest at Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s castle. His death reflects the destruction of order in Scotland. Order will only be restored when Malcolm, a descendant of King Duncan’s line, occupies the throne.

Macduff
Macduff is another nobleman in the play and his title is the Thane of Fife. He is suspicious of Macbeth’s rise to the throne from the beginning. Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff’s wife and son. Macduff leads the crusade to unseat Macbeth and to place Malcolm, the rightful king, on the throne. He also seeks revenge for the murder of his wife and young son.

Malcolm
Malcolm is the elder son of King Duncan. He is anointed Prince of Cumberland by his father in Act 1. After Duncan is murdered, Malcolm escapes to England, fearing he may be killed next. Later, in league with Macduff, Malcolm becomes a serious threat to Macbeth’s reign. After Macduff kills Macbeth at the end of the play, Malcolm assumes the throne, promising to get “even” with both friends and enemies.

Fleance
Banquo’s young son. Fleance escapes the murderers, sent by Macbeth, who kill his father. It is not clear where he is at the end of the play, yet the audience is left to assume that he or his children may come to rule Scotland one day, as in the Weird Sisters’ prophecy.