



Who's Who in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

The characters, in order of appearance:

The Weird Sisters are perhaps the most ambiguous characters in the play. There are three of them, and they always appear as a group. While they are called “witches” in the stage directions, in the dialogue they are referred to as “weird sisters” or “the weird women.” Their gender, however, is unclear.

Duncan is the ruler of Scotland at the beginning of the play. Shakespeare presents the character as gentle and elderly, gracious and kind. Duncan is stabbed to death while sleeping in Macbeth's castle.

Malcolm is Duncan's eldest child. Early in the play Malcolm is named Prince of Cumberland and heir to the Scottish throne. When Duncan is murdered, Malcolm flees to England, but returns to Scotland with an army to reclaim the crown from Macbeth.

Donalbain is Duncan's younger child. After the assassination, Donalbain flees to Ireland, and doesn't appear again in the play.

A **Captain** in Duncan's army reports on Macbeth and Banquo's achievements in the opening battle, until needing medical attention.

The Thane of **Ross** is a Scottish noble often charged with delivering important news in the play.

The Thane of **Lennox** is another noble who is first loyal, then rebels against Macbeth.

Macbeth begins the play as Thane of Glamis (pronounced “glahms”) and is described as a brave and valiant soldier. Macbeth is rewarded for success in battle with the additional title, Thane of Cawdor. Tempted by the prophecies of the weird sisters, inspired by ambition, and spurred on by a spouse, Macbeth murders Duncan and becomes monarch. Macbeth then orders the murder of a close friend, Banquo. Even children aren't safe: Macbeth orders the murder of Banquo's child, Fleance and goes so far as to have Macduff's entire family killed, children and servants and all. At the end of the play Macbeth is killed and decapitated in battle at the hands of Macduff.

Banquo is a general who fights alongside Macbeth in Duncan's army. Banquo is with Macbeth when they first encounter the weird sisters. They predict that Banquo will be ancestor to a long line of monarchs. King James I, who was England's monarch at the time Shakespeare wrote the play, believed that Banquo was his ancestor.

Lady Macbeth is married to Macbeth. Early in the play, this character calls on spirits to remove all remorse and replace it with cruelty. Lady Macbeth is responsible for the initial plan to assassinate Duncan and helps Macbeth with the details in carrying out the plot. Once on the throne, the married couple then seems to drift apart.

Fleance is Banquo's child. Macbeth orders that Fleance be murdered along with Banquo, but Fleance escapes.

The Porter appears in the scene immediately following the murder. Having been up most of the night ‘carousing’, the Porter takes a long time to answer the knocking at the castle gate. During this one appearance on stage, the Porter offers what may have been the first ever ‘knock knock’ jokes.

The characters, continued:

Macduff is the Thane of Fife, a region in the eastern part of Scotland. Macduff has the special duty of calling on Duncan in the morning at Macbeth's castle and discovers the assassination. Macduff chooses not to attend Macbeth's coronation, or the celebratory feast. Instead, Macduff travels to England to talk with Malcolm and the English king. It is while Macduff is away from home that Macbeth orders the murder of Macduff's family. In the play's final battle scene, Macbeth and Macduff come face to face.

An **Old Man** shares thoughts about strange, supernatural events with Ross and Macduff.

Murderers, hired by Macbeth, kill Banquo and try to kill Fleance.

Hecate, Queen of Witches, appears in a scene that some scholars believe was written by another playwright, Thomas Middleton, after Shakespeare retired.

Apparitions conjured by the Weird Sisters offer ambiguous prophecies to Macbeth.

Lady Macduff and all of **Macduff's children** and **servants** are murdered on Macbeth's orders, even though a **Messenger** brings a warning just before the **Murderers** arrive.

The Doctor and a **Gentlewoman** witness the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth, who talks about Duncan's murder. The Doctor determines that this patient needs more "the divine than the physician."

Menteith, Angus, and Caithness are among the Thanes who join Lennox and Macduff in rebelling against Macbeth.

Seyton (often pronounced "Sayton") is an officer who remains loyal to Macbeth until the end. It is Seyton who brings Macbeth word of Lady Macbeth's death.

Siward is Malcolm's uncle and a renowned soldier whose child, **Young Siward**, "an unrough youth", is killed in the battle by Macbeth.

A **soldier** follows Malcolm's order to have the troops cut down tree branches.

A **messenger** brings Macbeth reports of the coming English army. Macbeth threatens and mocks this messenger as a "cream-faced loon."

A note about our style:

In the Discovery Zone resources, we've done our best to provide descriptions of the plays' characters and events that are as open as possible to your interpretations. We hope this will make room for you to identify with more characters and imagine the stories in ways that resonate for you.

Questions for you to consider

- Which characters are most interesting to you? Who do you want to know more about? What makes you want to know more?
- How would you distinguish the Witches from the other characters? What might the different groups of characters wear? How might they move? What might they care about? How is each group distinct, and yet part of the same play?
- As you continue to learn about the characters, think about how you might cast actors to play them. You could take a realistic approach, casting people you know. Or you could take a fantasy approach and include famous people. Who would your dream cast be?

For an overview of what these characters experience in the play, please see our Discovery Zone resource, *What Happens in Macbeth*.