**An Introduction to *Macbeth***

**Warm-up**

The play begins with the brief appearance of a trio of witches and then moves to a military camp, where the Scottish King Duncan hears the news that his generals, Macbeth and Banquo, have defeated two separate invading armies—one from Ireland, led by the rebel Macdonwald, and one from Norway. Following their pitched battle with these enemy forces, Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches as they cross a moor[[1]](#footnote-1). The witches prophesy that Macbeth will be made thane (a rank of Scottish nobility) of Cawdor and eventually King of Scotland. They also prophesy that Macbeth’s companion, Banquo, will beget[[2]](#footnote-2) a line of Scottish kings, although Banquo will never be king himself. The witches vanish, and Macbeth and Banquo treat their prophecies skeptically until some of King Duncan’s men come to thank the two generals for their victories in battle and to tell Macbeth that he has indeed been named thane of Cawdor. The previous thane betrayed Scotland by fighting for the Norwegians and Duncan has condemned him to death. Macbeth is intrigued by the possibility that the remainder of the witches’ prophecy—that he will be crowned king—might be true, but he is uncertain what to expect. He visits with King Duncan, and they plan to dine together at Inverness, Macbeth’s castle, that night. Macbeth writes ahead to his wife, Lady Macbeth, telling her all that has happened.

**Questions:**

*1. Most of us consider a positive prophecy coming true a great thing for us. What might be the downside?*

*2. What values appear to be important in this time and culture, based simply on the paragraph above?*

*3. The number three is a common archetype in literature, and it represents spiritual truth and/or insight. How does this archetype work in Macbeth?*

**Classwork: Text Analysis**

Lady Macbeth desires the kingship for her husband and wants him to murder Duncan in order to obtain it (because just waiting for the prophecy to come true like the other one did seems less appealing than just slaughtering the current king). When Macbeth arrives home at Inverness and hears her brilliant idea, he objects, not so much on moral grounds as on the basis of uncertainty. This uncertainty is a trait his wife does not share. She overrides all of her husband’s objections, and gives him a pretty good idea of what she thinks of a man who hesitates to murder his king.

**Read Act II, Scene 7.**

1. **On the text sheet, list at least three adjectives that describe Lady Macbeth in this scene.**
2. **Highlight lines in the text that support the adjectives you have chosen.**
3. **On the text sheet, identify the tone Lady Macbeth appears to take in this scene.**
4. **Highlight lines in the text that help to establish Lady Macbeth’s tone.**
5. **How is Macbeth characterized in this scene? Annotate the text for this.**

Lady Macbeth persuades him to kill the king that very night. He and Lady Macbeth plan to get Duncan’s two chamberlains drunk so they will black out; the next morning they will blame the murder on the chamberlains, who will be defenseless, as they will remember nothing. While Duncan is asleep, Macbeth stabs him, despite his doubts and a number of supernatural portents, including a vision of a bloody dagger. When Duncan’s death is discovered the next morning, Macbeth kills the chamberlains—ostensibly out of rage at their crime—and easily assumes the kingship. Duncan’s sons Malcolm and Donalbain flee to England and Ireland, respectively, fearing that whoever killed Duncan desires their demise as well (which is actually true).

Fast forward. Over time, Lady Macbeth seems more affected by the crimes she has instigated than she ever expected to be. Duncan’s has not been the only murder. She has persuaded her husband to kill Banquo, seeing him as a threat to her husband’s new reign and the future reign of her own children (to jog your memory, go back to the witches’ prophecies in the warm-up info). She has also prompted her husband to kill Lady Macduff and Macduff’s children as a means of subduing a rebellious rival, Macduff. Now, Macbeth has become comfortable with bloodshed and has grown power-hungry and paranoid, and he has gone far beyond his wife’s control.

At night, in the king’s palace at Dunsinane, a doctor and a gentlewoman discuss Lady Macbeth’s strange new habit of sleepwalking. Suddenly, Lady Macbeth enters, in a trance, with a candle in her hand.

**Read Act V, Scene 1.**

1. **On the text sheet, identify Lady Macbeth’s tone in this scene.**
2. **Highlight lines in the text that help to establish this tone.**
3. **What is the overall mood in this scene? Identify this on the text sheet.**
4. **How has Lady Macbeth changed? Annotate within the text sheet.**
5. **How do the gentlewoman and doctor function in this scene (what is their purpose here)?**

**Classwork: Act it out!**

In your group, assign roles for these scenes and practice acting them out. Consider what you know about the characters now that you have analyzed them, and determine how to play the part most effectively. It is important that Lady Macbeth’s tone shift from one scene to the next, and the reactions of the other characters should be consistent with the scene and with their roles. Given the absence of much stage direction, consider what movements or gestures the characters should make, and write those directions in--and then use them as you act out your scenes!

1. a tract of open uncultivated upland; a heath [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. To give rise to; to bring about [↑](#footnote-ref-2)