**Kingship**

In his first appearance, King Duncan performs two of the basic duties of a king: punishing the bad and rewarding the good. Upon learning of the treachery of Cawdor and the heroism of Macbeth, he says, ["No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive / Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T12.html#62) [immediate] [death, / And with his former title greet Macbeth" (1.2.63-65)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T12.html#62). The phrase "bosom interest" means "vital interests," but "bosom" suggests that a relationship of love should exist between a king and his subject. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S12.html#ross)]

Soon after the witches hail him as "Thane of Glamis," "Thane of Cawdor," ["and king hereafter!" (1.3.50)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T13.html#50), Macbeth receives the news that he has been named Thane of Cawdor. This news throws him into a reverie, in which he says to himself, ["Two truths are told, / As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme" (1.3.127-129)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T13.html#128). Macbeth's metaphor is dramatic, or musical; he seems to be imagining himself as making a grand entrance as king, or maybe as an emperor, a king of kings. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S13.html#ross)]

Just as the King is commenting on the treachery of the former Thane of Cawdor, in comes the new Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth. The King greets Macbeth as ["worthiest cousin!" (1.4.14)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T14.html#11) and says in several different ways that he can't thank him enough. Macbeth answers with heroic modesty that ["The service and the loyalty I owe, / In doing it, pays itself" (1.4.22-23)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T14.html#21). That is, it's payment enough to know that he did the right thing as a loyal servant of the King. Then Macbeth adds,

[Your highness' part  
Is to receive our duties; and our duties  
Are to your throne and state](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T14.html#21) [stateliness, dignity] [children and servants,  
Which do but what they should, by doing every thing  
Safe toward your love and honour.   (1.4.23-27)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T14.html#21)

"Safe toward" means "to secure" or "to safeguard"; the idea is that it is every subject's duty to do everything he can for the king, both to keep the king safe and to earn the king's love and respect. Macbeth's speech pictures King Duncan as the loving father of a happy family, but Macbeth is already thinking about killing him. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S14.html#enterrest)]

When Lady Macbeth receives her husband's letter about the witches' prophecies, she is only worried that her husband is ["too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" (1.5.17-18)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T15.html#15). But she's sure she has no such problem, and she's eager for the chance to make him see things her way. Holding the letter, and speaking to Macbeth (even though he hasn't arrived yet) she says, ["Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear; / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round," (1.5.25-28)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T15.html#15). We might say that she's going to nag him, but she believes that she is going to enable him to reach his potential. She will "chastise" (make him ashamed of) everything in him that prevents him from being evil enough to be king.

Shortly, Macbeth appears and tells her that King Duncan will be staying with them that night. Lady Macbeth declares that King Duncan will never leave their castle alive and advises Macbeth to be a good hypocrite. He must give the king a warm welcome, the better to kill him that night. Apparently Macbeth shows a little reluctance, because she says,

[He that's coming  
Must be provided for: and you shall put  
This night's great business into my dispatch;  
Which shall to all our nights and days to come  
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom   (1.5.66-70)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T15.html#60)

"Sovereign" means not only "kingly" but also "absolute." Lady Macbeth is telling her husband that if he will only do as she tells him, they will be king and queen, with power over all. To her, the essence of kingship is ruthless power. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S15.html#start)]

When King Duncan is greeted by Lady Macbeth, he makes a little joke about the social difficulties of being king. He says to her:

[See, see, our honour'd hostess!  
The love that follows us sometime is our trouble,  
Which still we thank as love. Herein I teach you  
How you shall bid God 'ield us for your pains,  
And thank us for your trouble. (1.6.10-14)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T16.html#10)

Duncan's whole speech is based on our ancient custom of a guest saying something like "I don't want to trouble you," and the host replying with some version of "It's my pleasure." By saying that his people's love is sometimes his "trouble," King Duncan is saying that his loving people go to a great deal of trouble for him, and he's troubled by the fact that they take all that trouble. Nevertheless, when people take trouble for him, he knows that they do it because they love their king, and so he thanks them for their love. Next, referring to himself royally as "us," the King jokingly tells Lady Macbeth that he's saying all of this so that -- instead of him thanking her for taking trouble -- she will thank God and him for giving her trouble. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S16.html)]

While King Duncan is at dinner Macbeth almost talks himself out of the murder. He reflects that King Duncan is a good king, not arrogant or selfish. Macbeth says to himself that the king ["Hath borne his faculties](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T17.html#7) [royal powers] [so meek, hath been / So clear](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T17.html#7) [uncorrupted] [in his great office, that his virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off" (1.7.17-20)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T17.html#7). [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S17.html)]

The day after the murder of King Duncan, Ross speaks with an old man. The Old Man's memories go back seventy years, but nothing he can remember compares to what has happened during this night: ["I have seen / Hours dreadful and things strange; but this sore night / Hath trifled former knowings" (2.4.2-4)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T24.html). Ross replies ["Ah, good father, / Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's act, / Threaten his bloody stage" (2.4.4-6)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T24.html#4). The "heavens" are the heavens above, where God lives, and they are also the upper regions of Shakespeare's Globe theater. Ross is saying that the heavens frown angrily ("threaten") as they look down upon man playing his part on the stage of life, which has been made bloody by the murder of King Duncan.

King Duncan should have been honored and loved, so his murder was unnatural, and Ross and the Old Man go on to tell each other of all the unnatural things that have been happening lately. They do not know that Macbeth is the murderer, but as they speak we can see that the unnatural events reflect the contrast between King Duncan and Macbeth.

The Old Man says that ["On Tuesday last, / A falcon, towering in her pride of place, / Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd" (2.4.11-13)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T24.html#10). The falcon's "pride of place" is the highest point of its flight. And the owl, which usually catches mice on the ground, went up instead of down, and killed a falcon. Also, a falcon is a day creature, and a royal companion, while the owl is an untamable bird of night and death. If things in nature stands for things in human life, King Duncan was the falcon, and Macbeth the owl.

Even worse, King Duncan's horses, ["Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race, / Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out, / Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make / War with mankind." (2.4.15-18)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T24.html#14) A "minion" is someone's favorite. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were King Duncan's minions. The King showered them with honors and gifts, but they turned wild and made war on their master.

Thus the point is made that Macbeth's murder of his king is a crime against nature. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S24.html#start)]

Just before he sends the murderers to kill Banquo, Macbeth has a soliloquy in which he states his fear of Banquo. He says that Banquo has ["royalty of nature" (3.1.49)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T31.html#47), and courage, and wisdom. Macbeth also says, ["under him, / My Genius is rebuked" (3.1.54-55)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T31.html#54). A man's "Genius" is his guardian spirit, but Macbeth isn't being particularly mystic here. He feels that Banquo is naturally superior to him, and just being near Banquo makes Macbeth feel ashamed of himself. For example, he recalls, Banquo defied the witches and challenged them to speak to him. (In contrast, we should remember, the witches' prophecy put Macbeth into a kind of trance, a reverie of ambition and murder.) In short, Macbeth feels that Banquo is more fit to be king than he is, and for that, he's going to murder him. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S31.html#exeuntall)]

After he becomes king, Macbeth has a moment when he tries to be the kind of king that King Duncan was, humble and mild. At his feast Macbeth welcomes everyone, saying, ["You know your own degrees; sit down. At first / And last the hearty welcome" (3.4.1-2)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T34.html#1). The "degrees" of the guests are their social ranks. Normally, each guest would receive an individual greeting and then be escorted to his seat, with the highest ranking person sitting closest to the king, and the next highest the next closest, etc. Macbeth tells them that they know where they should sit, and welcomes everyone at once. He will ["play the humble host" (3.4.4)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T34.html#3), and sit among them, showing how friendly and down-to-earth he is, even though he is now the king. However, he can't keep up his act because un uninvited guest shows up -- Banquo's bloody ghost. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S34.html#start)]

Lennox and another Scottish lord have a conversation in which both of them refer to Macbeth as a "tyrant." It's clear from their conversation that life under a tyrant is a life of fear and lies.

Because Macbeth has many spies, they need to be careful what they say and to whom they say it. As the scene opens, they have just gotten to the point at which they are sure that they are on the same side and have many of the same thoughts. As Lennox says, ["My former speeches have but hit your thoughts, / Which can interpret further" (3.6.1-2)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T36.html#1). Perhaps the other Lord nods agreement, because Lennox now launches on a string of sarcasms about Macbeth.

Lennox says, ["The gracious Duncan / Was pitied of Macbeth: marry, he was dead" (3.6.4)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T36.html#1). This bitter joke describes both Macbeth's facade -- that he was sorry for King Duncan -- and the truth about Macbeth, which was that he was sorry for King Duncan only after he killed him. Then Lennox proceeds to ridicule Macbeth's version of everything that has happened to this point. Banquo died because he took a walk after dark, and Fleance must have killed him, because Fleance ran away. And speaking of that, wasn't it terrible for Malcolm and Donalbain to kill their father? And of course Macbeth felt terrible about Duncan's murder, which is why he killed the only two possible witnesses, Duncan's grooms. If Malcolm, Donalbain, and Fleance were in Macbeth's power, he'd certainly teach them a lesson or two about killing a father!

After a bit, Lennox drops the sarcasm and turns to the subject of Macduff. He has heard that Macduff has gotten on Macbeth's bad side because Macduff used some ["broad words" (3.6.21)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T36.html#20) about Macbeth, and because he failed to show up for Macbeth's banquet. Does the other Lord know, Lennox asks, where Macduff might be?

The other Lord does know. Macduff is on his way to the English court, where Malcolm has been respectfully received by King Edward the Confessor. Macduff has gone to plead with King Edward to help Malcolm by sending to Scotland the forces of Northumberland and Siward, two English nobles famous as warriors. If Macduff is successful, Scotland will be freed of Macbeth's tyranny. Then ["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 honours" (3.6.33-36)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T36.html#26).

Under Macbeth's tyranny, fear of his bloody knife darkens every moment of a person's life. In contrast to this reign of terror, a true king is given "faithful homage" and he awards "Free honours." Free honours are given by a king in recognition of service; they are "free" in the sense that person honored doesn't have to be a tyrant's yes-man in order to receive them. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S36.html#start)]

When Macbeth seeks out the witches, he curses them, calls them hags, and demands that they answer his questions. They give him their prophecies, the last of which is that Banquo will be the progenitor of a long line of kings, stretching to James of Scotland and England. Macbeth is stunned, and the first witch says that they will cheer him up with music and a dance, so ["That this great king may kindly say, / Our duties did his welcome pay" (4.1.131-132)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T41.html#125). The witch is being sarcastic. Macbeth is a tyrant, even to witches, and gave them no welcome; they repaid his angry demand for answers with deceptive and frightening "duties" -- their prophecies. As the witches are the opposite of dutiful subjects, Macbeth is the opposite of a great and kindly king. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S41.html#macbeth)]

In England, Macduff pleads with Malcolm to lead an army against Macbeth. Eventually, Malcolm says that he will, but first he tests Macduff's intentions. He wants to find out if Macduff wants what is best for Scotland, or just wants to defeat Macbeth.

Malcolm begins his test by saying that Scotland will suffer even more after Macbeth is crushed. The reason: Malcolm will be more evil than Macbeth. First, Malcolm says that he will be so lustful that ["your wives, your daughters, / Your matrons and your maids, could not fill up / The cistern of my lust" (4.3.61-63)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#57). Macduff's response is more than a little wimpy. He says that uncontrolled lust is bad, but he's sure that Scotland can provide Malcolm with enough willing women to satisfy him. But Malcolm goes on to declare that he's also so avaricious that ["were I king, / I should cut off the nobles for their lands, / Desire his jewels and this other's house: / And my more-having would be as a sauce / To make me hunger more" (4.3.78-82)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#76). Macduff admits that avarice in a king is even worse than lust, but he's sure that Scotland has abundance enough to satisfy Malcolm. Such lust and avarice would be bearable, balanced against good qualities. ["But I have none" (4.3.91)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#91), Malcolm answers. He goes on to assert that he has not a single virtue that a king needs. Not only that, but he is positively evil, so evil that ["had I power, I should / Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, / Uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth" (4.3.97-100)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#91).

After describing himself as the worst possible person on the face of the earth, Malcolm then asks Macduff if someone like him is fit to govern. ["Fit to govern! / No, not to live" (4.3.102-103)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#102), Macduff bursts out. Then he laments the fate of Scotland and is about to storm off, but Malcolm calls him back and unsays everything he's just said about himself. He is, he now says, chaste, generous, and trustworthy. In short, he will be a true king, not the tyrant that Macbeth is.

After the tyranny of Macbeth is contrasted with the goodness of Macduff and Malcolm, we are again reminded of what a good king should be. A doctor enters and tells Macduff and Malcolm that a crowd of sick people are waiting to be cured by the English king. Their sickness can't be cured by doctors, but only by the king: ["at his touch-- / Such sanctity hath heaven given his hand-- / They presently amend" (4.3.143-145)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#141). The doctor leaves, and Macduff asks what disease he was talking about. Malcolm explains, ["'Tis call'd the evil" (4.3.146)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#146). (The disease is scrofula, which causes ugly swellings of glands in the neck. It was called "the king's evil" because of the popular idea that a holy king could cure it by touching the diseased person.) Malcolm goes on to speak of what a miracle-worker the English king is. He brings God's healing power to his people, and it's a wonder, because ["How he solicits heaven, / Himself best knows" (4.3.150)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#146). In addition to being able to heal the sick, the English king ["hath a heavenly gift of prophecy, / And sundry blessings hang about his throne" (4.3.157-158)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T43.html#146). Malcolm doesn't mention Macbeth, but the only apparent reason for this description of the English king is to provide a picture of heavenly good to contrast with Macbeth's hellish evil. Shortly after, news comes of Macbeth's most recent act of tyranny -- the slaughter of Macduff's innocent wife and children. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S43.html#start)]

When she walks in her sleep, Lady Macbeth relives the moment just after the murder of King Duncan, when her husband could do nothing except stare at his bloody hands holding the bloody daggers. In her sleep she says to him, ["What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?"(5.1.37-39)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T51.html#35). Her point is that Macbeth is king (or about to be) and therefore it doesn't matter who knows that he murdered King Duncan. She thinks (or thought) that kingly power would solve all problems, but it doesn't save her from madness. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S51.html#ladymac)]

When he is brought news of the approach of the English army, Macbeth knows that he could lose the battle, and he tries to find a way to accept defeat. In a famous passage, he tells himself that his life is not worth living:

[I have lived long enough: my way of life  
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,  
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,  
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.   (5.3.22-28)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T53.html#19)

We can see that Macbeth now understands the consequences of being a tyrant. He rules only by fear, which means that all those he rules hate him. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S53.html#start)]

Standing before Dunsinane, Siward, the leader of the English troops, comments to Malcolm: ["We learn no other but the confident tyrant / Keeps still in Dunsinane, and will endure / Our setting down before 't" (5.4.8-10)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T54.html#7). He means that Macbeth seems to be so confident of the strength of his castle that he's willing to let his enemies lay siege to it, rather than going on the attack. Malcolm replies that Macbeth really doesn't have a choice: ["Both more and less have given him the revolt, / And none serve with him but constrained things / Whose hearts are absent too" (5.4.12-14)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T54.html#7). By "more and less" Malcolm means both the nobles and the common soldiers; Macbeth the tyrant controls only those who are within reach of his sword. [[Scene Summary](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/S54.html#start)]

In the final scene, Macduff, carrying Macbeth's head on a pole, hails Malcolm as king of Scotland and says, ["Behold, where stands / The usurper's cursed head: the time is free" (5.8.54-55)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T58.html#54). The "time is free" because they are all now free of Macbeth's reign of terror over Scotland. Macduff then leads the men in a shout of victory and loyalty. He says, ["I see thee compass'd with thy kingdom's pearl, / That speak my salutation in their minds; / Whose voices I desire aloud with mine: / Hail, King of Scotland!" (5.8.56-59)](http://shakespeare-navigators.com/macbeth/T58.html#54). "Compassed" means "encircled" and Malcolm's "kingdom's pearl" is Malcolm's circle of loyal thanes, who encircle him like a string of pearls encircles a crown. Macduff knows that these thanes already think of Malcolm as their king, and now he asks them to join him in shouting out loud, "Hail, King of Scotland!" And so they do, honoring Malcolm, above whose head looms the severed head of Macbeth