

# MACBETH

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

## AN INTRODUCTORY PACK FOR GCSE

Whether you're looking at this at home, or are back in school, this pack is a great way to get to grips with one of your key GCSE English Literature texts. Put together by the English Literature experts at York Notes, it will really kickstart your studies!

### So – what's in the pack?

1. Find out about Shakespeare, his times and the plot of *Macbeth*.
2. Explore the settings of the play – who lives where, and what key events are linked to these places.
3. Have a go at some warm-up tasks and activities to keep your brain active, and get a head start on your studies.
4. Follow up with our suggested links and ideas: websites, videos, and so on.

We hope you enjoy your introduction to this great play!



# Who was William Shakespeare?

## Five key things about William Shakespeare

- He was born in **Stratford-upon-Avon** in April **1564**, probably around St George's Day (23rd).
- He married **Anne Hathaway** in November 1582 when he was just **18** and she was 26.
- He went to **London** in the late 1580s, and from there began his work as a **poet** and **playwright**, eventually writing around **37 plays**, though there may have been even more.
- **Macbeth** was first performed in **1606**, towards the end of Shakespeare's career, after **James I** had come to the throne.
- Shakespeare returned to **Stratford** for good in 1614, and died there on April 23rd **1616**.



## What was his life like?

- Although not much is known for certain about his youth, it is likely he attended the **Kings' New School**, and would have studied the **classics** (Latin and Greek) as well as **religious studies**.
- Shakespeare was an **actor** and a **writer**, and was part of acting companies such as the **Chamberlain's Men**.
- This company performed in **different theatres** before being forced to move to a new theatre, which they built in Southwark, called **The Globe**.
- When **James I** succeeded Elizabeth I to the throne in 1603, he renamed the Chamberlain's Men the **King's Men** and became their **patron**.

## What was life like in England at this time?

- **Mortality rates** were **high** with disease ever present, but **London** was also a vibrant place of **trade** and a centre for the exchange of **ideas**.
- Religious and civil **conflicts** were never far from the surface, and both Elizabeth and James faced **rebellion** and **possible invasion**.
- **Theatres** and entertainment of all kinds were always under **scrutiny** by the **authorities**, so acting and writing was a **precarious business**.

# Macbeth – the plot

*Macbeth is based on historical events set in Scotland around the middle of the 11th century (probably just before the Battle of Hastings in 1066).*

## Act I

- Three strange **witches** meet on a **heath**, mentioning '**Macbeth**' and a '**battle**'.
- **King Duncan** is told of the bravery of two lords ('**Thanes**') called **Macbeth** and **Banquo** who have defeated Irish invaders and Norway.
- The witches meet Macbeth and Banquo and prophesy that Macbeth will become '**Thane of Cawdor**' and later, king of Scotland.
- Macbeth finds out he is to be rewarded with the title of Thane of Cawdor and we learn that the previous Thane has been executed for betraying King Duncan's trust. Macbeth starts to dream of being king himself.
- **Lady Macbeth**, Macbeth's wife, begins to plan the murder of Duncan.
- Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle at **Inverness**, where he is welcomed, not knowing his fate.

## Act II

- Macbeth is reluctant to go through with the murder but is egged on by his wife.
- On the way to kill the king, he sees a ghostly vision of a dagger, but he goes through with the murder anyway.
- **Macduff**, another Thane, finds Duncan dead the next day. Macbeth rushes in and murders the two servants, whom he and Lady Macbeth blame for the crime.
- Duncan's sons, **Malcolm** and **Donalbain**, slip away fearing for their own safety.
- Macbeth becomes king. Macduff refuses to go the coronation, suspecting Macbeth.

## Act III

- Banquo, Macbeth's old friend, suspects Macbeth of treachery. Macbeth orders Banquo and his son's murder. Banquo is killed but his son **Fleance** escapes.
- Banquo's ghost appears at a banquet to honour Macbeth, terrifying him. Lady Macbeth is forced to cover up his actions but the banquet ends in confusion.
- Macbeth begins to act independently, stating he will seek out the witches again.



### Act IV

- Macbeth visits the witches who tell him he should fear Macduff, but that he cannot be harmed by anyone **'born of woman'**. He also learns he will be safe until **Birnam Wood** moves to his castle!
- He orders the murder of **Macduff's wife and children**.
- In **England**, at the **King's palace** Malcolm is gathering forces. He tests Macduff's loyalty when he joins him. Macduff learns of the slaughter of his family and vows revenge.

### Act V

- The English army marches on Macbeth in his castle at **Dunsinane** disguised with branches taken from Birnam Wood – so one of the prophecies is fulfilled.
- Lady Macbeth is wracked with guilt, and apparently commits suicide.
- Macbeth takes on the enemy bravely and at first no one seems able to kill him, until he meets Macduff. Macduff reveals he was born by caesarean section (not **'of woman'**) and kills Macbeth.
- Malcolm becomes the King of Scotland.

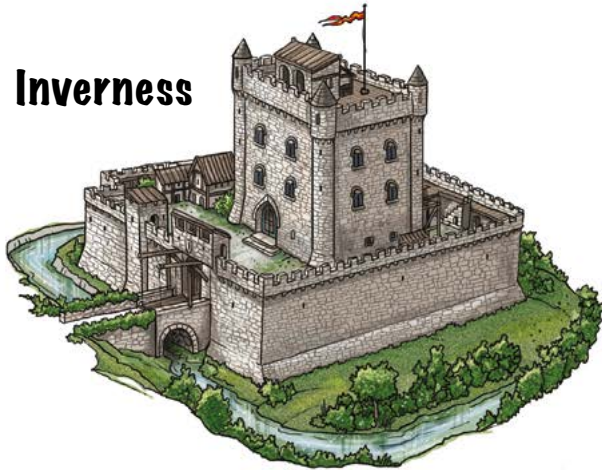




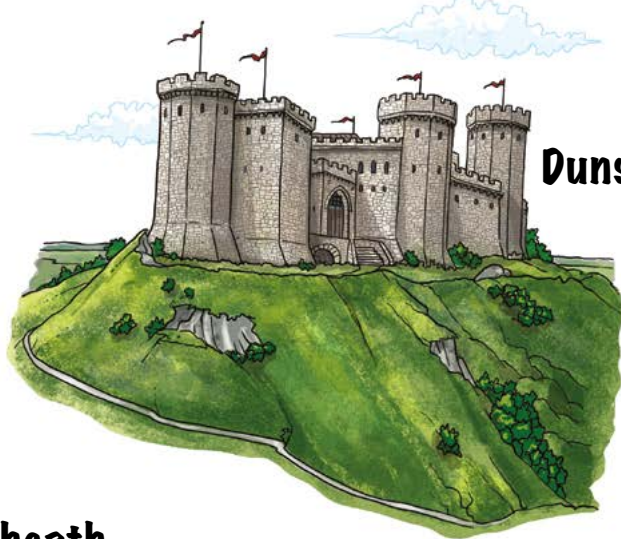
# The settings of *Macbeth*

Look at these pictures of some key settings in *Macbeth*. Can you label each setting with any of the important events or characters linked to it?

**Inverness**



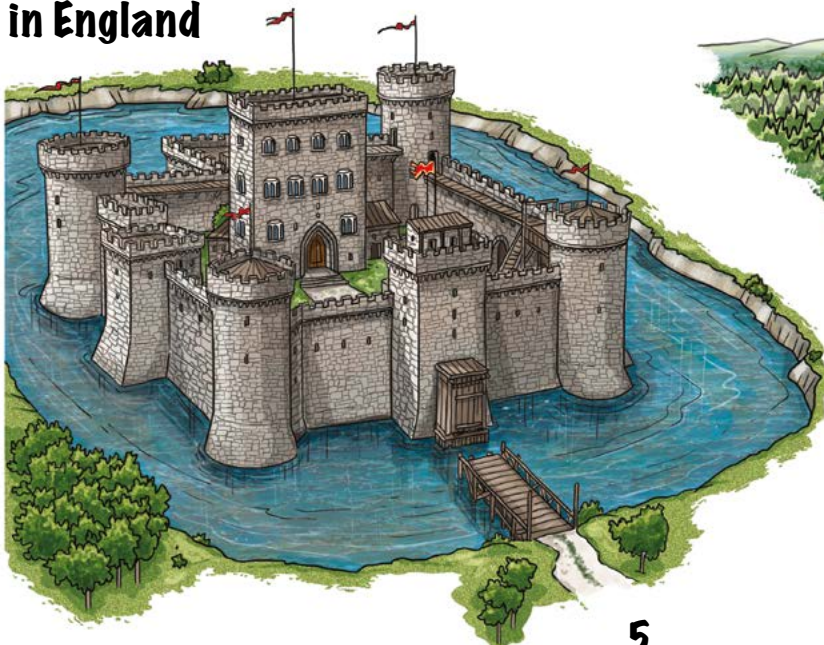
**Dunsinane**



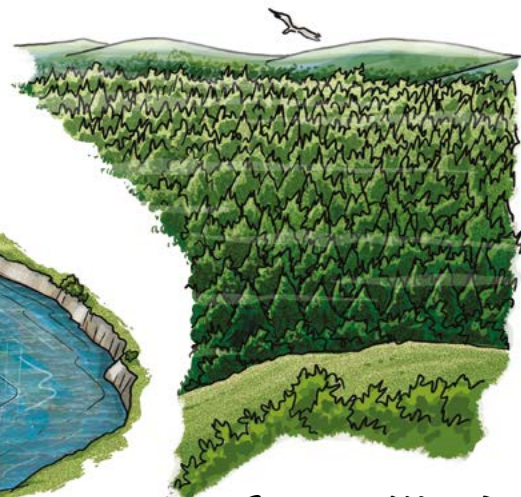
**The heath**



**King's Palace  
in England**



**Birnam Wood**



# Things to do

## 1. Dipping your toe into *Macbeth*!

You've read the plot, now experience the beginning properly. The opening scene of *Macbeth* may be short, but it packs a punch.

### Act I Scene 1

A *desert* place

*[Thunder and lightning. Enter three Witches]*

#### FIRST WITCH

When shall we three meet again  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

#### SECOND WITCH

When the hurlyburly's done,  
When the battle's lost and won.

#### THIRD WITCH

That will be **ere** the set of sun.

#### FIRST WITCH

Where the place?

#### SECOND WITCH

Upon the heath.

#### THIRD WITCH

There to meet with Macbeth.

#### FIRST WITCH

I come, **Graymalkin**!

#### SECOND WITCH

**Paddock** calls.

#### THIRD WITCH

**Anon**.

#### ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:  
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

*[Exeunt]*



### Glossary

**desert:** deserted

**ere:** before

**Graymalkin:** grey cat

**Paddock:** toad

**anon:** soon

## Activities

### Getting 'into' the scene

- Try reading it aloud either on your own or with your family. You could do different voices for the different witches (one could be very old, one child-like, etc.).
- What words, phrases or lines stand out? Tip out your pencil case, or use different font colours or typefaces if working online.
- What do you notice about the sound and structure of the scene? Using your colours or sticky labels, you could highlight any rhymes or patterns you notice.
- Now that you've done this, reread the scene, applying anything you have learned.

### Exploring its meaning

- Imagine you were directing the scene in a film or play. What sort of atmosphere or mood would you hope to create?
- How would you stage it? How would the witches be dressed? (You don't have to make them look like 'typical' witches.) What props or music would you add (if any)?
- Write up your ideas with drawings or diagrams.

### Follow-up

- Check out the opening as it was interpreted by Roman Polanski in his 1971 film version. What does it add or leave out from Shakespeare's original?
- How does it compare with your ideas?



## 2. A dagger of the mind

You are Macbeth. You've agreed to go through with the murder, but are still very troubled by the thought of it. Suddenly a ghostly dagger appears before your eyes, floating in the air. It seems to be leading you towards the king's bedchamber.



How do you react? How do you feel? Imagine you are Macbeth and write your thoughts in this box.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no handwriting or other markings on the paper.

Now, check out the actual scene – Act II Scene 1. Read it aloud from around line 31 (**'Is this a dagger that I see before me?'**) to the end of the scene and think about how you could perform these lines.

- What key words or phrases could you stress or emphasise to show Macbeth's indecision?
- What actions would he make? Are there any words or phrases which suggest he is moving or gesturing in a particular way?
- Where would he stand or move on the stage? Would he spend the whole speech at the front talking to the audience – or somewhere else?



### 3. Updating *Macbeth*

*Macbeth* has been updated in several stories and films – there's a famous gangster film, *Joe Macbeth*, and the BBC produced a version in which he was an ambitious and murderous chef!

In fact, the themes of *Macbeth* – **betrayal, ambition, murder, guilt** – are present in many popular television series such as *Line of Duty* or *Top Boy*.

Can you think of any ways of updating the story? Come up with your very best idea!

Here are some possible scenarios:

Police force

Army

Fishermen out at sea

Ballet school

Law firm

Football or other sports team

Music business

My idea:

I would set *Macbeth* in...

# Want to know more?

If you are reading or studying *Macbeth* for the first time, here are some really useful and interesting resources you could check out.

## Background to the play and Shakespeare himself

1. If you want to check out the real history behind the play, the British Library has lots of interesting stuff! There is a section, 'Holinshed as a source for Macbeth', on how Shakespeare took historical events and adapted them to his needs.  
Go to: <https://www.bl.uk>, search for 'Holinshed Chronicles' and click 'View Online'
2. What was Shakespeare's relationship with King James I like? Check out the section on Macbeth which explores why Shakespeare might have tailored the play for the king.  
Go to: <https://www.bl.uk>, search for 'Royal Shakespeare: a playwright and his king' and click 'View Online'
3. The play begins with supernatural beings – the three Witches. But why would this have interested contemporary audiences? And how were witches seen in Shakespeare's day?  
Go to: <https://www.bl.uk>, search for 'Witches in Macbeth' and click 'View Online'
4. The BBC Teach site has a whole section dedicated to Shakespeare's life and works.  
Go to: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach> and search for 'Shakespeare's life, work and legacy'

## Finding out more about the plot, theme and characters

1. There is a useful animated version of the play on BBC Teach. It doesn't go into lots of depth, and mixes the original language with modern narration, but it could help bring the key events to life for you.  
Go to: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach> and search for 'Macbeth KS2' to find the whole series
2. If you want to delve deeper into characters and themes, take a look at the Shakespeare Unlocked series of films on BBC Teach. Here you can find clips of actors from the Royal Shakespeare Company interpreting different scenes.  
Go to: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach>, click 'Secondary' then 'Drama 14–16' and find 'Shakespeare Unlocked – Macbeth'

# Finally, don't forget that York Notes has lots more resources to help you with your studies!

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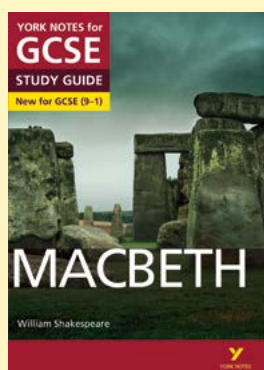
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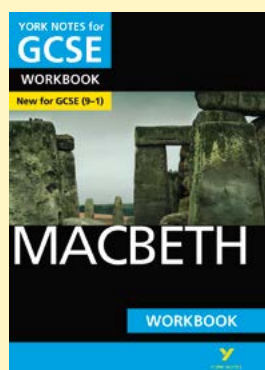
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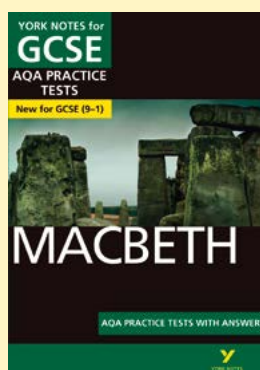
**Also available for *Macbeth* GCSE 9-1:**



Study Guide



Workbook



Practice Tests

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