

## KS4 SHAKESPEARE: *MACBETH* TOPIC SHEET

### 1. Context

**Playwright:** Shakespeare (April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1564-April 23<sup>rd</sup> 1616)  
**Dates:** written around 1606  
**Era:** Jacobean  
**Genre:** Tragedy = *A play ending with the suffering and death of the main character.*  
**Set:** Scotland,  
**Structure:** Five Act Play

**Macbeth.** The plot is partly based on fact. Macbeth was a real 11<sup>th</sup> Century king who reigned Scotland from 1040-1057. The play was most likely written in 1606 – the year after the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 – and reflects the insecurities of Jacobean politics.

**The Divine Right of Kings** says that a monarch is not subject to earthly authority and that they have the right to rule directly from the will of God. It implies that only God can judge an unjust king and that any attempt to depose, dethrone or restrict his powers runs contrary to the will of God and may constitute a sacrilegious act. The action of killing a king is called regicide.

**King James I of England (and VI of Scotland)** came to the throne in 1603 following the death of Queen Elizabeth I. The play pays homage to the king's Scottish lineage. The witches' prophecy that Banquo will found a line of kings is a clear nod to James' family's claim to have descended from the historical Banquo. While King of Scotland, James VI became utterly convinced about the reality of witchcraft and its great danger to him leading to trials that begin in 1591.

**Shakespearean Tragedy.** Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's tragedies and follows specific conventions. The climax must end in a tremendous catastrophe involving the death of the main character; the character's death is caused by their own flaw(s) (hamartia) yet the character has something the audience can identify with.

- Conventions of a TRAGEDY**
1. **Tragic Hero**
  2. **A struggle between Good and Evil**
  3. **Hamartia**
  4. **Tragic Waste**
  5. **External Conflict**
  6. **Internal Conflict**
  7. **Catharsis**
  8. **Supernatural Elements**
  9. **Lack of Poetic Justice**
  10. **Comic Relief**

### 2. Key Dramatic Devices

<b>soliloquy</b>	A speech or passage in a drama when a character on stage speaks to himself or herself, expressing their inner thoughts and feelings.
<b>hamartia</b>	The fatal flaw of a tragic hero.
<b>Tragic hero</b>	A heroic character that makes a judgment error that inevitably leads to his/her destruction.
<b>aside</b>	A remark or passage in a play that is intended to be heard by the audience but is supposed to be unheard by the other characters on the stage.
<b>Dramatic Irony</b>	A character speaks in ignorance of a situation or event known to the audience or other characters

### 3. Key Vocabulary

<b>Duplicitous</b>	Deceitful, treacherous and dishonest
<b>treacherous</b>	Guilty of, or involving betrayal or deception.
<b>tyrant</b>	A cruel and oppressive ruler.
<b>corrupt</b>	Having or showing a willingness to act dishonestly in return for money or personal gain.
<b>Machiavellian</b>	Cunning, scheming, and unscrupulous, especially in politics.
<b>fate</b>	The development of events outside a person's control, regarded as predetermined by a supernatural power.
<b>downfall</b>	A loss of power, prosperity or status.
<b>arrogance</b>	Unpleasantly proud and behaving as if you are more important than, or know more than, other people.
<b>hubris</b>	Excessive pride or self confidence.
<b>manipulate</b>	To control something or someone to your advantage, often unfairly or dishonestly.

### 4. Themes

<b>Ambition</b>	'Macbeth' is a play about ambition run amok. The witches' prophecies spur both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to action but the witches never make Macbeth or his wife do anything; they act on their own to fulfil their deepest desires and ambitions. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to be great and powerful, and sacrifice their morals to achieve that goal.
<b>Order and Disorder</b>	The play subverts the natural order of the world. Macbeth's actions are based on a supernatural belief in a prophecy. It depicts an anarchic world: Macbeth inverts the order of royal succession; his wife inverts the patriarchal hierarchy; the unnatural world disrupts the natural. The disruption underpins the conflict that is not only external and violent but internal as Macbeth and his wife come to terms with what they've done.
<b>Kingship and tyranny</b>	In the play, Duncan is always referred to as a 'king' while Macbeth soon becomes known as the 'tyrant'. Under a 'good' king, subjects are rewarded according to their merits, as when Duncan makes Macbeth Thane of Cawdor after Macbeth's victory over the invaders. Most importantly, the king must be loyal to Scotland above his own interests. Macbeth, by contrast, brings only chaos to Scotland—symbolized in the bad weather and bizarre supernatural events—and offers no real justice, only a habit of murdering those he sees as a threat. As the embodiment of tyranny, he must be overcome by Malcolm so that Scotland can have a true king once more.
<b>Appearance and reality</b>	Appearances are deceptive in the play and some characters trust appearances too much. Duncan trusts the wrong men with disastrous consequences, Macbeth trusts the witches and Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband's trust. This fine line between appearance and reality represents the line between good and evil.

### 5. Big Ideas

1. Shakespeare examines the **Corrupting Power of Unchecked Ambition** especially when it runs contrary to the **natural order**.
2. Shakespeare **questions** the relationship between **gender** and **power**.
3. Shakespeare uses the play to demonstrate the terrible consequences of engaging with the supernatural.

### 6. Big Methods

1. Shakespeare **uses blood as a metaphor for guilt** through the play. As the guilt increases, the volume of blood increases.
2. Shakespeare uses **apparitions** to present the consequences of ungodly behaviour and is ambiguous about whether they are real or imagined. As the consequences intensify, the apparitions become more intense and public.
3. Shakespeare's **characterisation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth** establishes the idea that ungodly deeds do not go unpunished. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth essentially switch roles as the play progresses.