

- The play opens with three witches in *'A deserted place'*. They discuss meeting with Macbeth.
- A sergeant returns from the war and tells King Duncan about Macbeth's bravery on the battlefield.
- The witches meet Macbeth and Banquo. They greet Macbeth as *'Thane of Glamis'* and *'Thane of Cawdor'* and suggest that he *'shalt be King hereafter'*. They tell Banquo that he *'shalt get kings'* though he won't be king himself.
- When he is given the title 'Thane of Cawdor' by King Duncan, Macbeth thinks the witches' predictions must be reliable.
- Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband and is excited by the prospect of his becoming king.
- Macbeth decides that Duncan is too good a king to murder, but Lady Macbeth persuades him otherwise.





**Think!** How does Shakespeare introduce Macbeth in Act 1?

- Before we meet Macbeth, Shakespeare builds the audience's sense of expectation and paints a picture of a brave warrior.
- The witches plot to meet Macbeth '*Upon the heath*' after the '*battle's lost and won*' (Act 1 Scene 1). Their riddling language creates a sense of mystery around him. Their presence is disturbing and the audience might associate Macbeth with evil from the outset.
- The sergeant describes Macbeth as '*Valour's minion*' (Act 1 Scene 2) suggesting that he is exceptional in his bravery. Duncan confirms this, referring to him as '*noble Macbeth*' (Act 1 Scene 2) and '*valiant cousin*' (Act 1 Scene 2) – we anticipate a brave and honest warrior.



What contradictions does Shakespeare set up around Macbeth at the start of the play?



## Answers

- The witches declare **'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'** (Act 1 Scene 1) – their contradictory language suggests that Macbeth is also both 'foul' and 'fair'.
- Macbeth's first words echo the witches': **'So foul and fair a day'** (Act 1 Scene 3).
- Macbeth is **'noble'** and **'valiant'**, but also brutal. The sergeant describes how he sliced Macdonald from **'the nave to the chaps'** (Act 1 Scene 2).
- Lady Macbeth says he is **'too full o' the milk of human kindness'** (Act 1 Scene 5) – contradicting the image of Macbeth as a ruthless warrior.



By making the audience wait until Act 1 Scene 3 to meet the play's namesake, Shakespeare builds tension and anticipation. He establishes an eerie atmosphere and connects Macbeth with the supernatural. He also shows Macbeth's ruthless reputation on the battlefield – the audience almost expects Macbeth to be superhuman.

## Theme

## Motif: blood

**Think!** How does Shakespeare use the motif of blood throughout the play?

Reference to Greek god of the ocean. Heightens Macbeth's plea and emphasises his despair.

Image foreshadows Lady Macbeth's later attempts to wash away an imaginary spot.



MACBETH

...Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand?

Blood on hands is recurring metaphor for guilt.

Rhetorical question – Macbeth (and the audience) knows the answer is 'no'.

Macbeth is responsible for killing Duncan. He does not want to accept that.



Find at least three other instances from the rest of the play where blood is a significant image.

1. Which characters open the play?
2. Which character tells Macbeth to *'look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under it'*?
3. What does Macbeth worry about when he thinks about killing Duncan?
4. Who appears as a ghost at the banquet?



Which characters could be described as loyal to Scotland?