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***Macbeth*: Historical, Topical and Occasional Concepts**

Elizabeth I, the Armada Portrait: Note the Queen's hand on the Globe

When Henry VIII died in 1547, he was succeeded in the first instance by the ten-year-old Edward VI, the son whom Henry's third wife, Jane Seymour, had finally given him. When Edward died in 1553, Mary Tudor, sometimes known as "Bloody Mary", or, more properly, Mary I, who was the daughter of Henry and Catherine of Aragon, came to the throne, but she too died in 1558. Elizabeth, the only surviving child of Henry VIII, succeeded her half-sister. Although the reign of Mary had set a precedent for the presence of a woman on the English throne, it had not been a particularly successful one: Queen Mary had had to suppress a rebellion by the supporters of her cousin Lady Jane Grey, at the very start of her reign, had been bitterly disappointed not to produce a child, and had eventually died relatively young knowing that her crown would pass to a half-sister who would reverse everything she had tried to do in the matter of religion. Parliament implored Elizabeth to marry, so that she may be "properly" guided by a husband in matters of State, and produce heirs, but there was also great disquiet about this prospect, not least because Queen Mary's husband, Philip of Spain, had been widely unpopular in England.

However, Elizabeth did not marry. She might have if her childhood friend, Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, had been free, but he was already married by the time she ascended the throne. Their union was made even more impossible due to the suspicious circumstances under which his wife died (she was found dead at the foot of a flight of stairs), as the scandal following their marriage would be impossible to contain. So Elizabeth I ruled alone, with the help of her trusted council, headed by William Cecil, Lord Burghley. Thus, if politics in the

reign of Henry Tudor revolved around the king's desperate need for a son, politics in the reign of Elizabeth centred on the queen's gender. If a queen was an anomaly in the first place, an unmarried queen— indeed an unmarried woman at all in this period— was even more of one. Elizabeth benefitted, however, from an unforeseen effect of the Reformation. The disappearance of the intercessory role of the Virgin Mary and the Saints, many of whom had been women, had left a psychological and cultural void in the newly Protestant state: a void that a "virgin" queen was strategically well placed to fill. As a result, something of s cult developed around the queen, with a number of mythological personae— most notably various versions of the moon goddess— used to represent her, and these became a crucial part of the queen's public image. Speculations on her marriage, however, continued for the long 45 years she sat on the English throne, even beyond the time when it was obvious the queen was past her childbearing years.

James I and the Union of the Crowns

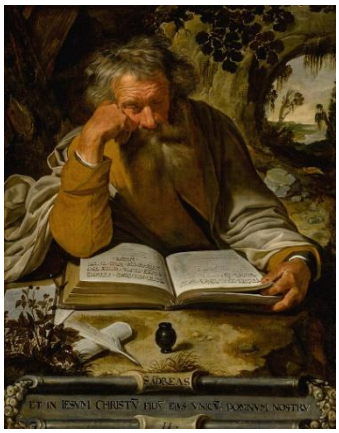
Though under great pressure to do so, the ageing Elizabeth steadfastly refused to name her successor. It became increasingly apparent, however, that it was going to be James Stuart, son of Mary, Queen of Scots, and by the time Elizabeth's health began to fail, many of her principal advisers, including Cecil, had been in secret correspondence with James in Edinburgh. Crowned King James VI of Scotland in 1567 when he was but one year old, Mary's son had been raised as a Protestant by his powerful guardians, and in 1589 he married the Protestant Princess Anne, of Denmark. When Elizabeth died on March 24, 1603, English officials reported that on her deathbed the queen had named James to succeed her.

Upon his accession, James— now styled James VI of Scotland and James I of England— made plain his intention to unite his two kingdoms. But the twain were less perfectly united than James optimistically envisioned: English and Scottish were sharply

distinct identities, as were Welsh and Cornish and other peoples who were incorporated, with varying degrees of willingness, into the realm. Fearing that to change the name of the kingdom would invalidate all laws and institutions established under the name of England, a fear that was partly real and partly a cover for anti-Scots prejudice, Parliament balked at James's desire to be called "King of Great Britain" and resisted the unionist legislation that would have made Great Britain a legal reality. Indeed, the ensuing years of James's rule did not bring the amity and docile obedience for which James hoped, and, though the navy flew the Union Jack, combining the Scottish Cross of St. Andrew and St. George's English one, the unification of the kingdoms remained throughout his reign an unfulfilled ambition.

St. George

The Union Jack of Britain combining the Red Cross of St. George (for England) and the White Saltire of St. Andrew (for Scotland).



Andrew, the Apostle

James lived a life which was largely separate from that of his queen, Anne of Denmark. Neither was he close to his eldest and the heir apparent, Prince Henry. But Henry died of typhoid in 1612, and it was James's youngest surviving child, Charles, who eventually succeeded him 1625. A sickly and unpromising child, Charles grew into an obstinate and remote king, emotionally dependent first on his father's great favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, and then, after Buckingham's assassination in 1628, on his French queen, Henrietta Maria, who was widely unpopular because of her very public Catholicism. Charles's increasingly strained relationship with Parliament led to its suspension in 1629. In 1642, civil war broke out between the kin Andrew the Apostle ing in the immediate closure of theatres, and effectively marking the end of the Renaissance. After seven years of hostilities, Charles was beheaded in 1649 on orders of Parliament, and from then on until

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1660, England spent eleven years as a Commonwealth, the first and only time the country functioned without a king.

James's Religious Policy and the Persecution of Witches

In a book he wrote, *Basilikon Doron* (1599), James denounced "brain sick and heady preachers" who were prepared to let ""King, people and law all be trod underfoot". In religion, as in foreign policy, he was above all concerned to maintain peace. He tolerated that the Church of England continued to cling to remnants of the Catholic past as wedding rings, square caps, bishops, and Christmas. He authorized a new English translation of the Bible, known popularly as the King James Bible, which was printed in 1611. Along with Shakespeare's works, the King James Bible has probably had the profoundest influence on the subsequent history of English literature. James seemed to have taken the official claims to the sacredness of kingship, and he certainly took seriously his own theories of religion and politics, which he periodically wrote down and had printed for the edification of his people. He was convinced that Satan, perpetually warring against God and His representatives on earth, was continually plotting against him. James thought he possessed special insight into Satan's wicked agents, the witches— he became convinced of their existence after an old woman apparently recounted to him with complete accuracy what he had said to his bride on their wedding night— and in 1597, while the King of Scotland, he published his *Daemonologie,* a learned exposition of their malign threat to his divine rule.

The "swimming" of a suspected witch.

In the 1590s, Scotland embarked on a virulent witch craze of the kind that since the fifteenth century had repeatedly afflicted France, Switzerland, and Germany, where many thousands of women (and a much smaller number of men) were caught in a nightmarish web of wild accusations.

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Tortured into lurid confessions of infant cannibalism, night flying, and sexual intercourse with the devil at huge, orgiastic "witches' Sabbaths", the victims had little chance to defend themselves and were routinely burned at the stake. In England too, there were witchcraft persecutions, though on a much smaller scale and with significant differences in the nature of accusations and the judicial procedures. English law did not permit judicial torture, stipulated lesser punishments in cases of "white magic", and mandated trials. After 1603, when James came to the English throne, he somewhat moderated his enthusiasm for the judicial murder of witches, for the most part defenceless, poor women resented by their neighbours. Though he did nothing to mitigate the ferocity of the ongoing witch-hunts in his native Scotland, he did not try to institute Scottish-style persecutions and trials in his new realm. It is sobering to reflect that plays like Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), Thomas Middleton's *Witch* (before 1616), and Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley's *Witch of Edmonton* (1621) seem to be less the allies of skepticism than the exploiters of fear.

Macbeth and Banquo encounter the weird sisters (1.3). From Raphael Holinshed, *The First Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577).

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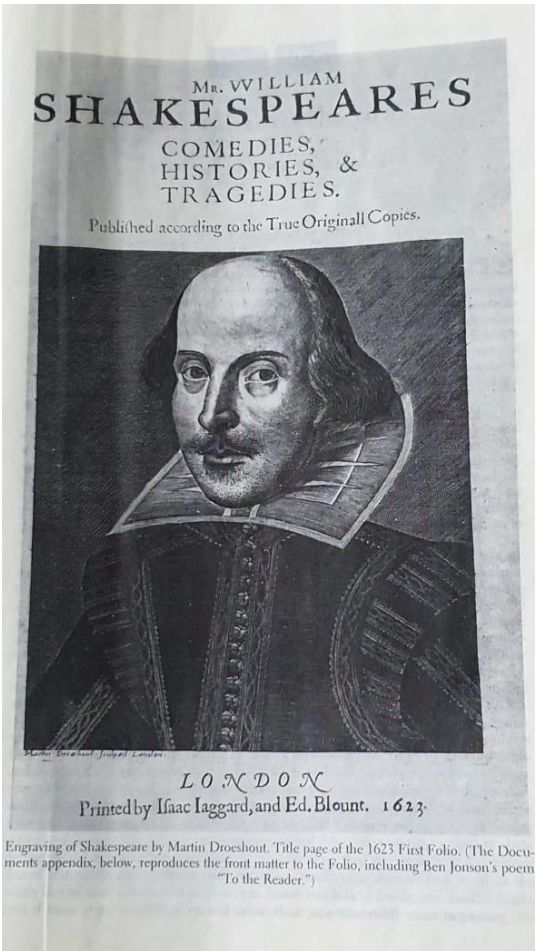
Witchcraft in Scotland. From *Newes from Scotland* (1591).

***Macbeth*: Textual Note**



Engraving of Shakespeare by Martin Droeshout. Title page of the 1623 First Folio. (The Documents appendix, below, reproduces the front matter to the Folio, including Ben Jonson's poem "To the Reader.")

The only authoritative text of *Macbeth* is the First Folio (1623), which consequently serves as the control text in most editions. Scholars tend to agree that the Folio version (F) was based on a promptbook, a transcript derived, in all likelihood, from Shakespeare's rough draft of the play. There are, however, signs that this source was itself an abbreviated version of the play as first written and performed, for the text in F is considerably shorter than any of the other major tragedies. Moreover, the Folio's *Macbeth* appears to be a version of the play revised, sometime after Shakespeare had ceased to be active with the King's Men, for a

court performance in the presence of King James. Scholars have long suspected that it contains material not by Shakespeare. In particular, the two songs referred to in 3.5 and 4.1 of F only by their opening phrases ("Come away, come away..." and "Black Spirits...") are very likely by the playwright Thomas Middleton. Songs with the same opening phrases appear in a manuscript of Middleton's unsuccessful play *The Witch* (c. 1613). Middleton may have been personally responsible for the revision of *Macbeth* reflected in the Folio text. He could, in addition to the songs, have added all of 3.5 (which seems to diverge stylistically from the rest of the play) as well as parts of 4.1, particularly Hecate's speeches.

As so often with Shakespeare, we do not have a secure date for either the composition or the first performance of *Macbeth*. The play is usually dated 1606, principally because of a joke made by a minor character that must have provoked a ripple of shuddering laughter among the original audiences. The joke comes at a strange moment: in the immediate wake of one of the most harrowing scenes of dread and soul sickness that Shakespeare ever wrote. Macbeth has just treacherously murdered the sleeping King Duncan, a guest in his castle. Deeply shaken by his deed and gripped by fear and remorse, he and ambitious wife are exchanging anxious words when they hear a knocking at the gate. The knocking is a simple device, but in performance it almost always has a thrilling effect. At this point, a porter, roused by the knocking but still half drunk from the evening's revelry, appears. As he hurls diatribes at the unknown visitors, he says of one of them, "Here's an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against each scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven" (2.3. 8-11). This is almost certainly an allusion to the recently executed Henry Garnet.

***Macbeth*: Legend and History**

The problems of situating the composition and earliest performances of *Macbeth*, and of determining its sources in written documents, contemporary events, and early Jacobean culture, are independent matters, often with no conclusive answers. One place to start is the often-remarked "connection" between the play and the accession of the Scottish King James, whose family provided England's and Scotland's native monarchs until the death of Queen Anne in 1714.

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The Gunpowder Plot

On November 4, 1605, the night before King James I was due to appear in person to open a new session of Parliament, officers of the crown apprehended a man called Guy Fawkes in a cellar that extended beneath the Parliament House. The cellar was filled with barrels of gunpowder and iron bars, concealed by a load of lumber and coal. Carrying a watch and devices to light fuses, Fawkes intended to carry out a desperate plot devised by a small group of conspirators, embittered by what they perceived as James's unwillingness to extend toleration to Roman Catholics. Under torture, Fawkes revealed the names of those who had conspired with him to blow up the entire government. Among those hunted down, arrested and brought to trial, was Father Henry Garnet, head of the clandestine Jesuit mission in England. Garnet, against whom there was, at best, only circumstantial evidence, pleaded innocent, but the government prosecutors made much of the fact that he was the author of *A Treatise of Equivocation*, a book showing how to give misleading or ambiguous answers under oath. Garnet, Fawkes, and the others were all declared guilty and executed, their severed heads displayed on pikes.

Eighteen months before these momentous events, a company of London actors experienced what was for them an important change in their legal status. On May 19, 1603, a scant two months after the death of Queen Elizabeth and the accession of King James, Shakespeare's company, the Lord Chamberlain's Men, was formally declare to be the King's Men. The players had every reason to be grateful to their royal master and be attentive to his pleasure and interest. It has long been argued that one of the most striking signs of this gratitude is *Macbeth*, based on a story from Scottish history particularly apt for a monarch who traced his line back to Banquo, the noble thane whose murder Macbeth orders after he has killed King Duncan.

Raphael Holinshed

In Shakespeare's principal historical source, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England Scotland and Ireland* (first published in 1577 and later expanded in 1587), Banquo aids Macbeth in the murder of the King. Shakespeare suppresses this complicity. The witches (or "weird sisters") who tell Macbeth that he would be king tell Banquo that he would be the

father of kings, but Banquo seems determined not to be drawn into any conspiratorial attempt to realise these prophecies. When, just before Duncan's assasination, Macbeth indirectly asks for his support, Banquo speaks of keeping his "allegiance clear" (2.1. 27). James believed, or claimed to believe, that he descended from one Banquo, Thane of Lochaber in the eleventh century when the King of Scotland was Macbeth.

In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, the 'Historie of Scotland"contains two accounts Shakespeare unquestionably appropriated, one of the reign and murder of King Duff, the other of Macbeth's rise and reign (Holinshed's source, in turn, seemed to be Hector Boece's *Scotorum historiae*; 1526, 1575). In Holinshed's account, Macbeth's career is influenced by his ambitiuos spouse: she "lay sore upon him to attempt" regicide "as she was verie ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to beare the name of a queene". As mentioned earlier, Banquo is a fully-committed co-conspirator in Holinshed's report, and it goes on to elaborate on Macbeth's ten-year-reign as a good and responsible ruler, his trust in witches and wizards, the coming of Birnam Wood to Dunsinane, and includes many other events and even phrases that were transmuted into *Macbeth*. Shakespeare avoided involving Banquo in the regicide and decided to paint Macbeth as a tyrannous villain. The reasons for these significant changes are abundantly clear. James truly believed in the absolute power of the throne and the necessary reverence subjects of the King owed to him. James also maintained his hereditary connection to Banquo. Both these reasons restricted Shakespeare from favouring a character who kills a King as well as involving a predecessor of the current King in the conspiracy.

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Banquo and his supposed descendants, including King James VI of Scotland;

***MACBETH* AND THE SUPERNATURAL**

The supernatural, according to the *Oxford Dictionary*, "includes all those phenomena, which cannot be explained by the accepted laws of natural science or by physical laws". William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* is one of his shorter tragedies and was probably composed in late 1606. *Macbeth* is the last of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, the others being *Hamlet, King Lear, and Othello.* The play is considered by many scholars to be Shakespeare's darkest work. Macbeth was written especially for James I and was performed in 1606. James I was king of Scotland when he came to the English throne. In Shakespeare's principal historical source, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England Scotland and Ireland* (first published in 1577 and later expanded in 1587), Banquo aids Macbeth in the murder of

the King. Shakespeare suppresses this complicity. The witches (or "weird sisters") who tell Macbeth that he would be king tell Banquo that he would be the father of kings, but Banquo seems determined not to be drawn into any conspiratorial attempt to realise these prophecies. In the play, just before Duncan's assassination, Macbeth indirectly asks for Banquo's support. Banquo, however, speaks of keeping his "allegiance clear" (2.1. 27). James believed, or claimed to believe, that he descended from one Banquo, Thane of Lochaber in the eleventh century when the King of Scotland was Macbeth. James maintained his hereditary connection to Banquo, and it was one of the primary reasons that restricted Shakespeare from favouring a character who kills a King as well as involving a predecessor of the current King in the conspiracy.

In *Macbeth*, which is often referred to as "The Scottish Play" by actors unwilling to name it because of its horrific plot, the supernatural is an integral part of the structure. The most prominent evidence of the supernatural is the Weird Sisters, a trio of witches that seek out Macbeth to announce his "fate" of becoming Thane of Cawdor and "king hereafter". Prior to their arrival, the idea of becoming king had apparently never occurred to Macbeth. In the process of returning home after a victory in his army's battle, he looked forward to receiving praise from King Duncan and his people. Shocked by the witches' unexpected prophecy, he exclaims, "....the Thane of Cawdor lives /A prosperous gentleman, and to be king /stands not within the prospect of belief" and continues to demand more information from the sisters. Soon after they vanish and leave him feeling elated and guilty at the same time— elation in the anticipation of their prophecies turning into truth, and guilt at his own murderous thoughts that he had undoubtedly visited many times in his blind greed for power.

In the play, the Three Witches represent darkness, chaos, and conflict, while their role is as agents and witnesses. Their presence communicates treason and impending doom. During Shakespeare's day, witches were seen as worse than rebels, "the most notorious traytor and rebell that can be". They were not only political traitors, but spiritual traitors as well. Much of the confusion that springs from them comes from their ability to straddle the play's borders between reality and the supernatural. They are so deeply entrenched in both worlds that it is unclear whether they control fate, or whether they are merely its agents. They defy logic, not being subject to the rules of the real world. The witches' lines in the first act: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air" are often said to set the

tone for the rest of the play by establishing a sense of confusion. Indeed, the play is filled with situations where evil is depicted as good, while good is rendered evil. The line "Double, double toil and trouble," communicates the witches' intent clearly: they seek only trouble for the mortals around them. The witches' spells are remarkably similar to the spells of the witch Medusa in Anthony Munday's play *Fidele and Fortunio* published in 1584, and Shakespeare may have been influenced by these. While the witches do not tell Macbeth directly to kill King Duncan, they use a subtle form of temptation when they tell Macbeth that he is destined to be king. By placing this thought in his mind, they effectively guide him on the path to his own destruction. This follows the pattern of temptation used at the time of Shakespeare. First, they argued, a thought is put in a man's mind, then the person may either indulge in the thought or reject it. Macbeth indulges in it, while Banquo rejects.

According to J. A. Bryant Jr., *Macbeth* also makes use of Biblical parallels, notably between King Duncan's murder and the murder of Christ:

No matter how one looks at it, whether as history or as tragedy, *Macbeth* is distinctively Christian. One may simply count the Biblical allusions as Richmond Noble has done; one may go further and study the parallels between Shakespeare's story and the Old Testament stories of Saul and Jezebel as Miss Jane H. Jack has done; or one may examine with W. C. Curry the progressive degeneration of Macbeth from the point of view of medieval theology.

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SECONDARY CHARACTERS

The secondary characters that appear in the play are relatively flat; they are given the attributes necessary for their representative role in the play. In addition to serving frequently as a messenger, Ross represents the general attitudes of the Scottish nobility in his distress at the murder of Duncan and his initial acceptance of Macbeth's accession, and only acquires

some individuality with his sympathy for Lady Macduff and her son and his anguished reporting of their murder to Macduff. Lennox has a more personal voice in the irony of his farewell at the end of the banquet (IILiv.119-20) and of his long speech in III.vi, but even that has a representative function in setting out in an orderly manner Macbeth's various crimes, to which the eyes of the nobles have now been opened. And this emergence of Lennox as a personality does not prevent his use as an apparently loyal attendant on Macbeth in IV.i. Malcolm is a major character in the drama, but his characterisation is clearly determined by the need to make him the antithesis of Macbeth— in his orderly conduct of affairs, his piety, his combination of resolution with prudence, and his youth. This last attribute is conveyed more dramatically, perhaps, by his clumsy effort to comfort Macduff and his youthful optimism about the outcome of the battle, but while we may admire Malcolm it is doubtful if we know him sufficiently as an individual to sympathise greatly with him— except, perhaps, at that moment of vulnerable isolation expressed by his covert interchange with Donalbain after the murder of their father (II .iii.l18-23, 133-44). Macduff has a similar role in the pattern of the play as the champion of legitimate monarchy, but the vehemence of his horror on discovering the murdered King, his blunt refusal to temporise with Macbeth— 'with an absolute "Sir, not I"' (III.vi.40)— and his stunned grief when he learns of the massacre of his family give substance to his character. His exposure of them to Macbeth's vengeance is a genuine issue in the play, made more real by the distress of Lady Macduff. The conflict between her sense of betrayal and loyalty to her husband and the sad playfulness of her conversation with her son make her also one of the more individual of the secondary characters. But the only character developed sufficiently to contrast with Macbeth as much by what he is as by what he says and does is Banquo. His role was determined by the contrast between the fertility of his royal progeny and the sterility of Macbeth's reign, but Shakespeare's imagination has worked on this idea. The imagery of natural fertility that gathers about him— suggested initially by the Witches' prophecy— conveys also a sense of his magnanimity, a generosity of character that leads him to ignore the implications of Macbeth's crafty questioning about his movements on the day of his murder; such low cunning is entirely alien to his frank nature. As Macbeth's dark, tormented soul is projected outwards into the imagery of night, so Banquo's equable temperament is reflected in the tranquil atmosphere of his description of the martlets (I.vi.3-1 0). Thus by the time we hear Macbeth's tribute to his 'royalty of nature' (III.i.49) he is only expressing what we have

already felt about him. In consequence his failure to act against Macbeth is a problem that cannot be avoided, but his character has a complexity that leaves it open to various interpretations. Compared with the unambiguous but inert virtues of Malcolm he has the vitality of real life. The limited development of most of the secondary characters focuses attention on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Their characters, and the moral drama played out in their minds, are examined in detail throughout the play.

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MULTIPLE-CHOICE QUESTIONS

1. Who killed Macbeth?

a. Duncan b. Malcolm c. Donalbain **d. Macduff**

2. Who discovered Duncan's body?

a. Ross b. Angus **c. Macduff** d. Banquo

3. What are the Act and Scene numbers of the 'Porter Scene'?

a. Act I, Scene ii **b. Act II, Scene iii** c. Act III, Scene iv d. Act IV, Scene v

4. What are the Act and Scene numbers of the 'Banquet Scene'?

a. Act II, Scene iii **b. Act III, Scene iv** c. Act IV, Scene v d. Act V, Scene vi

5. What are the names of Duncan's sons?

a. Macbeth and Banquo b. Banquo and Fleance **c. Malcolm and Donalbain**

d. Ross and Lennox

6. 'Out, out, brief candle,/ Life is but a walking shadow...'— Who said this?

a. Lady Macbeth **b. Macbeth** c. Nurse d. Doctor

7. How do the Witches greet Banquo?

a. 'Hail, King hereafter!' b. 'O valiant cousin!' **c. 'Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.'** d. 'Thou shalt be King of Scotland!'

8. Lady Macbeth calls on supernatural powers to _____.—Fill in the blank.

a. 'Beguile the time.' b. 'Hover through the fog and filthy air.' c. 'Sleek o'er your rugged looks' **d. 'Unsex me here.'**

9. What does Macbeth imagine to be floating in front of him before he goes to murder Duncan?

a. Dagger b. Poison c. A child's head d. Sword

10. Where does the Porter imagine he is guarding the gate?

a. Inverness **b. Hell** c. Dunsinane d. Birnam Wood

11. What do Malcolm and Donalbain decide to do after Duncan is murdered?

a. Kill the guards **b. Flee to England and Ireland** c. Kill Macbeth d. Kill Lady Macbeth

12. What does the first apparition tell Macbeth?

a. Beware Macduff! b. Beward Siward! c. Beware Banquo! d. Beware Malcolm!

13. What does the second apparition tell Macbeth?

a. None of a woman born shall be King b. None of a woman born shall beware thee

c. None of a woman born shall take Dunsinane **d. None of a woman born shall harm Macbeth**

14. What does the third apparition tell Macbeth?

a. That he should travel from Dunsinane to Birnam Wood

b. That he should kill Lady Macbeth

c. That he will fall when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane

d. None of the above

15. What happens to Lady Macduff?

a. Lady Macbeth kills her b. She joins her husband at Dunsinane **c. She is killed**

d. She becomes Queen of Scotland

16. What new title does Macbeth receive in Act I of the play?

a. King of Scotland b. Thane of Glamis c. Thane of Fife **d. Thane of Cawdor**

17. What does Lady Macbeth say she would do with her child if she had to?

a. Rip its heart out **b. Dash its brains out** c. Cut off its head d. Abandon it

18. Macbeth was initially the Thane of _____.

a. Fife **b. Glamis** c. Cawdor d. Norway

19. Which phrase did the song of the Witches begin with?

a. Fair is foul b. Four is fair c. Foul is fair d. Foul is four

20. Who killed Banquo?

a. Macbeth b. Fleance **c. Two assasins** d. Lennox