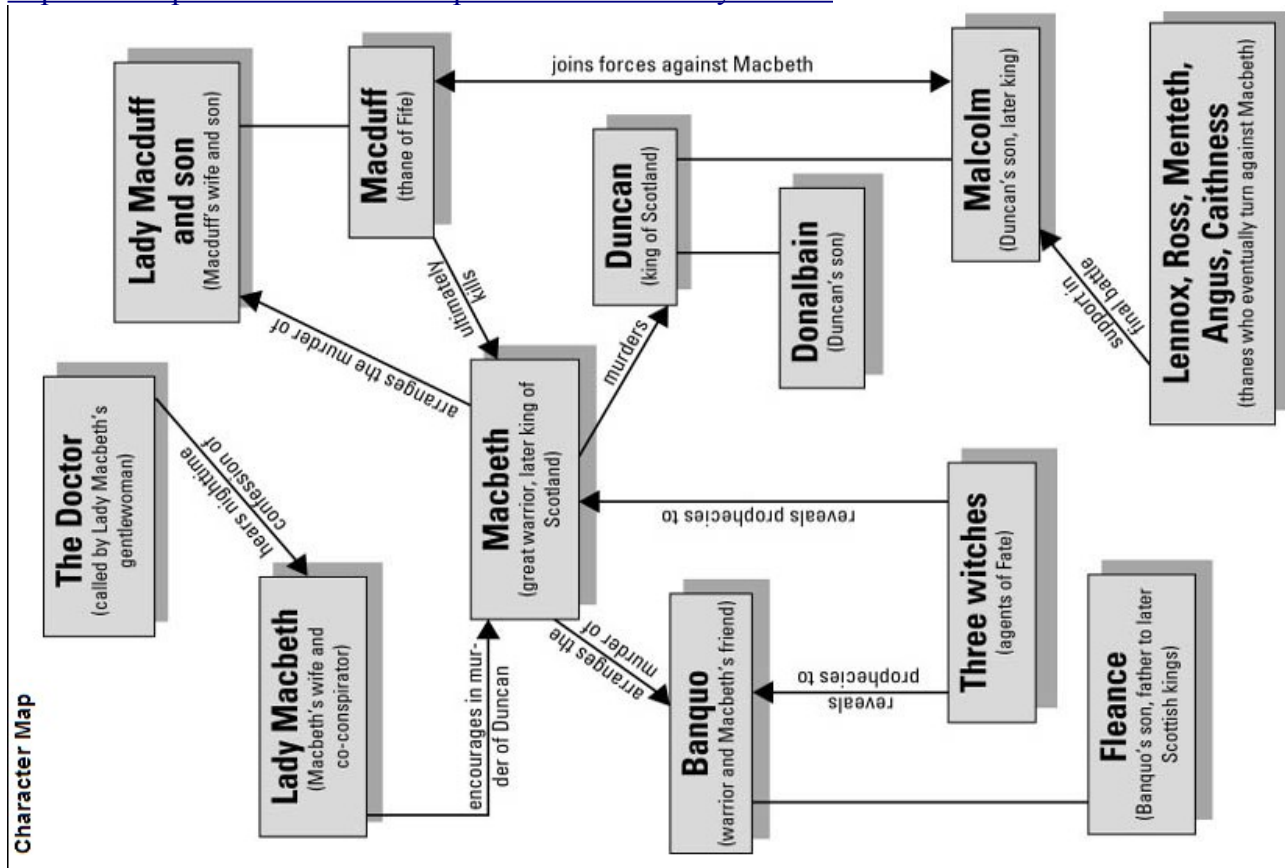


## Macbeth

Because we first hear of Macbeth in the wounded captain's account of his battlefield valor, our initial impression is of a brave and capable warrior. This perspective is complicated, however, once we see Macbeth interact with the three witches. We realize that his physical courage is joined by a consuming ambition and a tendency to self-doubt—the prediction that he will be king brings him joy, but it also creates inner turmoil. These three attributes—bravery, ambition, and self-doubt—struggle for mastery of Macbeth throughout the play. Shakespeare uses Macbeth to show the terrible effects that ambition and guilt can have on a man who lacks strength of character. We may classify Macbeth as irrevocably evil, but his weak character separates him from Shakespeare's great villains—Iago in *Othello*, Richard III in *Richard III*, Edmund in *King Lear*—who are all strong enough to conquer guilt and self-doubt. Macbeth, great warrior though he is, is ill equipped for the psychic consequences of crime.

Before he kills Duncan, Macbeth is plagued by worry and almost aborts the crime. It takes Lady Macbeth's steely sense of purpose to push him into the deed. After the murder, however, her powerful personality begins to disintegrate, leaving Macbeth increasingly alone. He fluctuates between fits of fevered action, in which he plots a series of murders to secure his throne, and moments of terrible guilt (as when Banquo's ghost appears) and absolute pessimism (after his wife's death, when he seems to succumb to despair). These fluctuations reflect the tragic tension within Macbeth: he is at once too ambitious to allow his conscience to stop him from murdering his way to the top and too conscientious to be happy with himself as a murderer. As things fall apart for him at the end of the play, he seems almost relieved—with the English army at his gates, he can finally return to life as a warrior, and he displays a kind of reckless bravado as his enemies surround him and drag him down. In part, this stems from his fatal confidence in the witches' prophecies, but it also seems to derive from the fact that he has returned to the arena where he has been most successful and where his internal turmoil need not affect him—namely, the battlefield. Unlike many of Shakespeare's other tragic heroes, Macbeth never seems to contemplate suicide: "Why should I play the Roman fool," he asks, "and die / On mine own sword?" (V.x.1–2). Instead, he goes down fighting, bringing the play full circle: it begins with Macbeth winning on the battlefield and ends with him dying in combat.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/canalysis.html>

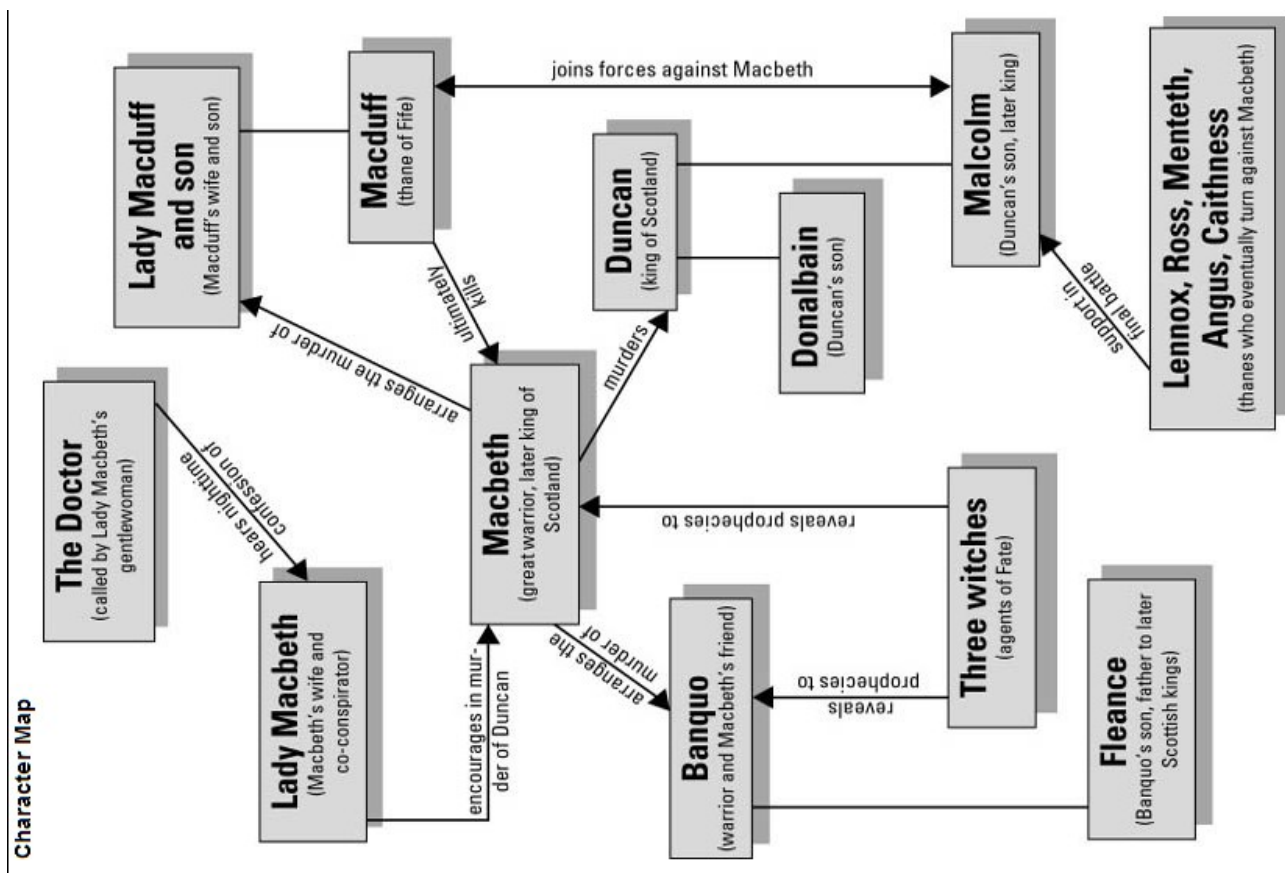


## Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most famous and frightening female characters. When we first see her, she is already plotting Duncan's murder, and she is stronger, more ruthless, and more ambitious than her husband. She seems fully aware of this and knows that she will have to push Macbeth into committing murder. At one point, she wishes that she were not a woman so that she could do it herself. This theme of the relationship between gender and power is key to Lady Macbeth's character: her husband implies that she is a masculine soul inhabiting a female body, which seems to link [masculinity](#) to ambition and violence. Shakespeare, however, seems to use her, and the witches, to undercut Macbeth's idea that "undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (I.vii.73–74). These crafty women use female methods of achieving power—that is, manipulation—to further their supposedly male ambitions. Women, the play implies, can be as ambitious and cruel as men, yet social constraints deny them the means to pursue these ambitions on their own.

Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband with remarkable effectiveness, overriding all his objections; when he hesitates to murder, she repeatedly questions his manhood until he feels that he must commit murder to prove himself. Lady Macbeth's remarkable strength of will persists through the murder of the king—it is she who steadies her husband's nerves immediately after the crime has been perpetrated. Afterward, however, she begins a slow slide into madness—just as ambition affects her more strongly than Macbeth before the crime, so does guilt plague her more strongly afterward. By the close of the play, she has been reduced to sleepwalking through the castle, desperately trying to wash away an invisible bloodstain. Once the sense of guilt comes home to roost, Lady Macbeth's sensitivity becomes a weakness, and she is unable to cope. Significantly, she (apparently) kills herself, signaling her total inability to deal with the legacy of their crimes.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/canalysis.html>



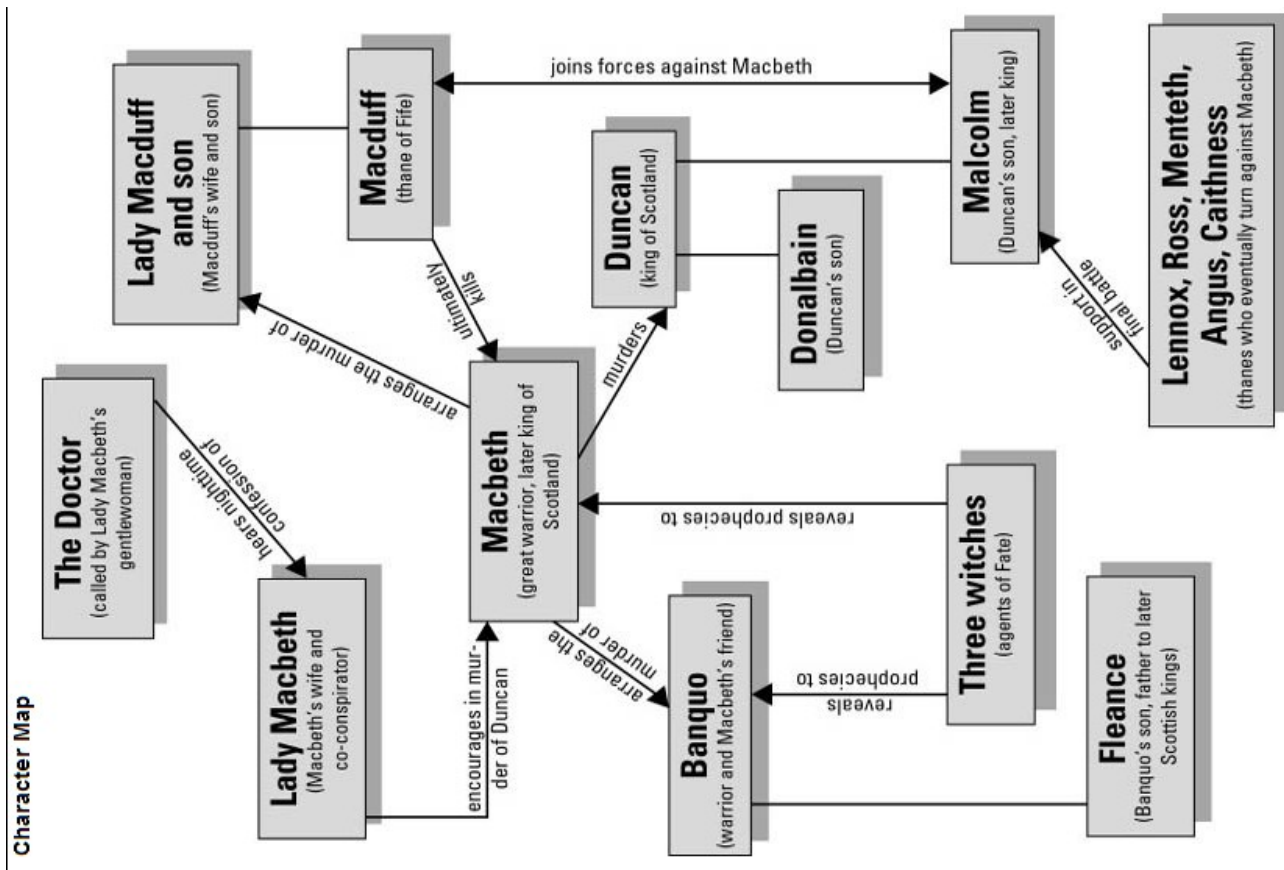
## The Three Witches

Throughout the play, the witches—referred to as the “weird sisters” by many of the characters—lurk like dark thoughts and unconscious temptations to evil. In part, the mischief they cause stems from their supernatural powers, but mainly it is the result of their understanding of the weaknesses of their specific interlocutors—they play upon Macbeth’s ambition like puppeteers.

The witches’ beards, bizarre potions, and rhymed speech make them seem slightly ridiculous, like caricatures of the supernatural. Shakespeare has them speak in rhyming couplets throughout (their most famous line is probably “Double, double, toil and trouble, / Fire burn and cauldron bubble” in IV.i.10–11), which separates them from the other characters, who mostly speak in blank verse. The witches’ words seem almost comical, like malevolent nursery rhymes. Despite the absurdity of their “eye of newt and toe of frog” recipes, however, they are clearly the most dangerous characters in the play, being both tremendously powerful and utterly wicked (IV.i.14).

The audience is left to ask whether the witches are independent agents toying with human lives, or agents of fate, whose prophecies are only reports of the inevitable. The witches bear a striking and obviously intentional resemblance to the Fates, female characters in both Norse and Greek mythology who weave the fabric of human lives and then cut the threads to end them. Some of their prophecies seem self-fulfilling. For example, it is doubtful that Macbeth would have murdered his king without the push given by the witches’ predictions. In other cases, though, their prophecies are just remarkably accurate readings of the future—it is hard to see Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane as being self-fulfilling in any way. The play offers no easy answers. Instead, Shakespeare keeps the witches well outside the limits of human comprehension. They embody an unreasoning, instinctive evil.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/canalysis.html>

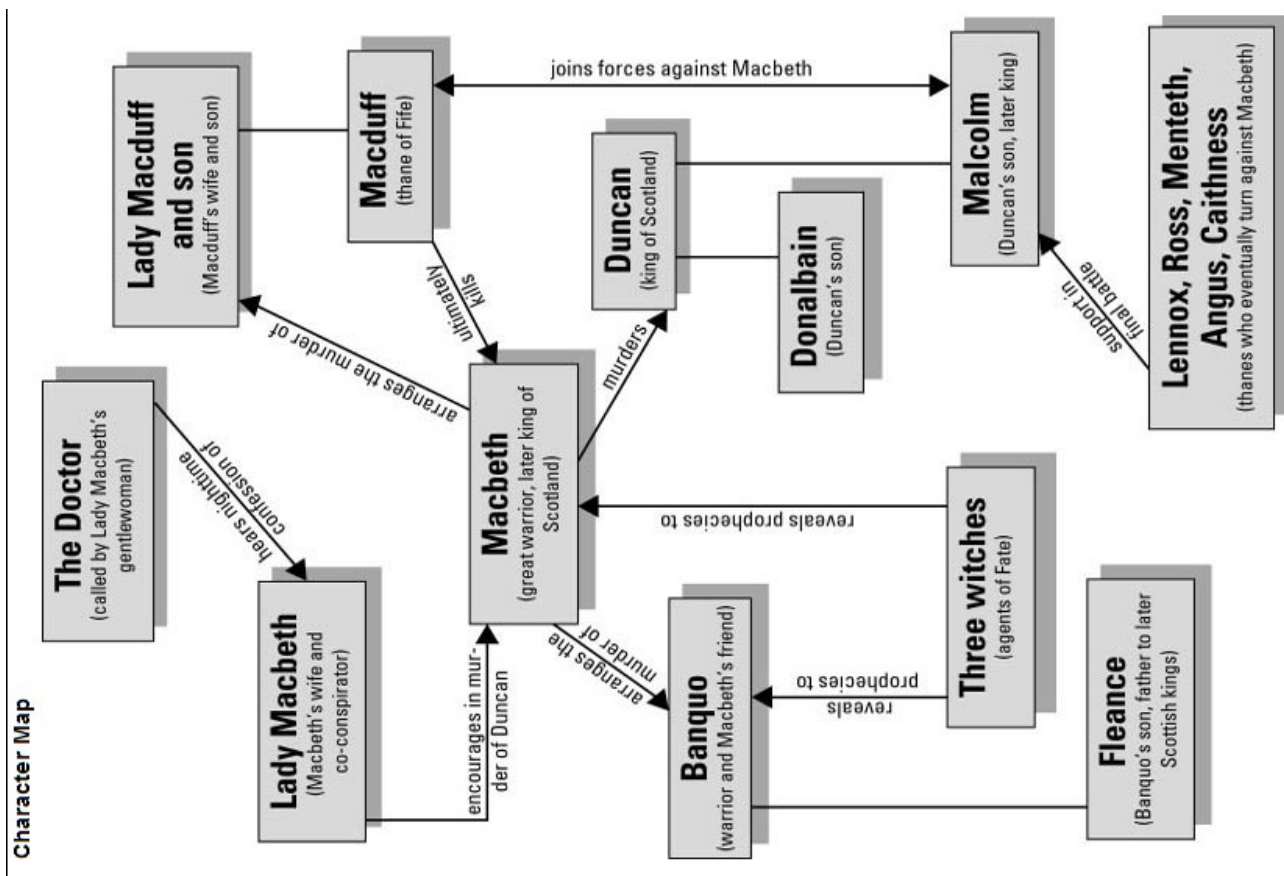


## Duncan

The king of Scotland should be a figurehead of order and orderliness, and Duncan is the epitome, or supreme example, of this. His language is formal and his speeches full of grace and graciousness, whether on the battlefield in Act I, Scene 2, where his talk concerns matters of honor, or when greeting his kind hostess Lady Macbeth in Act I, Scene 6. Duncan also expresses humility (a feature that Macbeth lacks) when he admits his failure in spotting the previous Thane of Cawdor's treachery: "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face" (I: 4,11).

Most importantly, Duncan is the representative of God on earth, ruling by divine right (ordained by God), a feature of kingship strongly endorsed by King James I, for whom the play was performed in 1606. This "divinity" of the king is made clear on several occasions in the play, most notably when Macbeth talks of the murdered Duncan as having "silver skin lac'd with . . . golden blood" (Act II, Scene 3). The importance of royal blood, that is, the inheritance of the divine right to rule, is emphasized when, in the final scene, Duncan's son Malcolm takes the title of king, with the words "by the grace of Grace / We will perform."

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/Macbeth.id-65.html>



## Macduff

Macduff is the archetype of the avenging hero, not simply out for revenge but with a good and holy purpose. Macduff is the character who has two of the most significant roles in the play: First, he is the discoverer of Duncan's body. Second, the news of the callous murder of his wife and children (Act IV, Scene 3) spurs him toward his desire to take personal revenge upon the tyrannical Macbeth. When he knocks at the gate of Macbeth's castle in Act II, Scene 3, he is being equated with the figure of Christ, who before his final ascension into Heaven, goes down to release the souls of the damned from hell (the so-called "Harrowing of Hell").

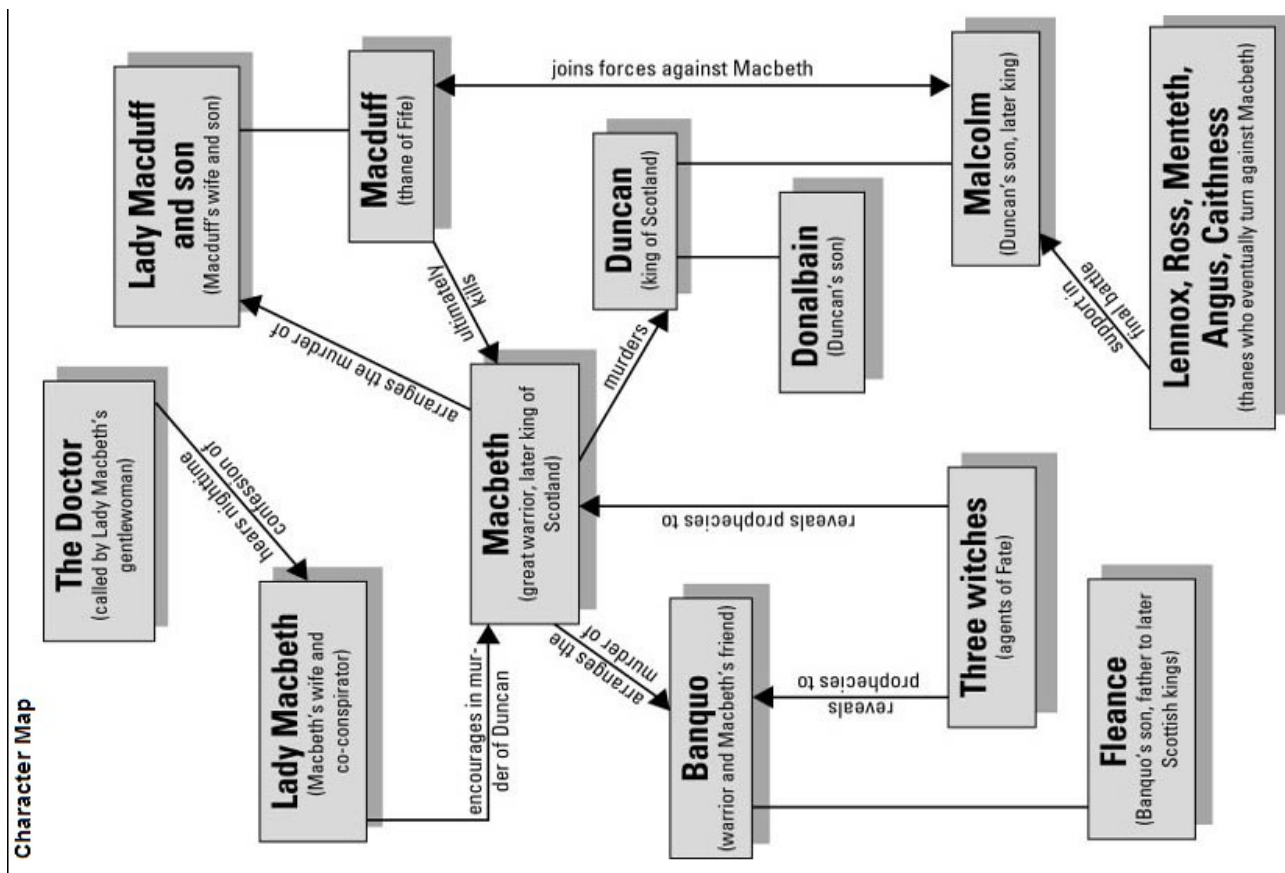
Like Macbeth, Macduff is also shown as a human being. When he hears of the death of his "pretty chickens," he has to hold back his emotions. Even when (in Act IV, Scene 3) Malcolm urges him to "Dispute it like a man," Macduff's reply "I will do so. But I must also feel it as a man" enables the audience to weigh him against Macbeth, an unfeeling man if ever there was one. In the final combat between hero and anti-hero, this humanity is recalled once more when Macduff cries out, "I have no words; my voice is in my sword." It is his very wordlessness that contrasts with Macbeth's empty rhetoric.

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/Macbeth.id-65.html>

## The Macduff family

Lady Macduff and her son appear in only one brief scene, but you will notice that Shakespeare takes great care to make them sympathetic characters (though the clever remarks of the son may irritate in some performances!). Together they are a model affectionate family; they bravely stand up to the murderers; the son is more concerned about his mother's escape than his own death. Thus they provide the strongest reason for thinking Macbeth a 'butcher': who could have such good and innocent people destroyed? Remember, also, that there are others (children, servants) whose deaths we only hear of.

<http://fourthyear.wordpress.com/macbeth-characters/>

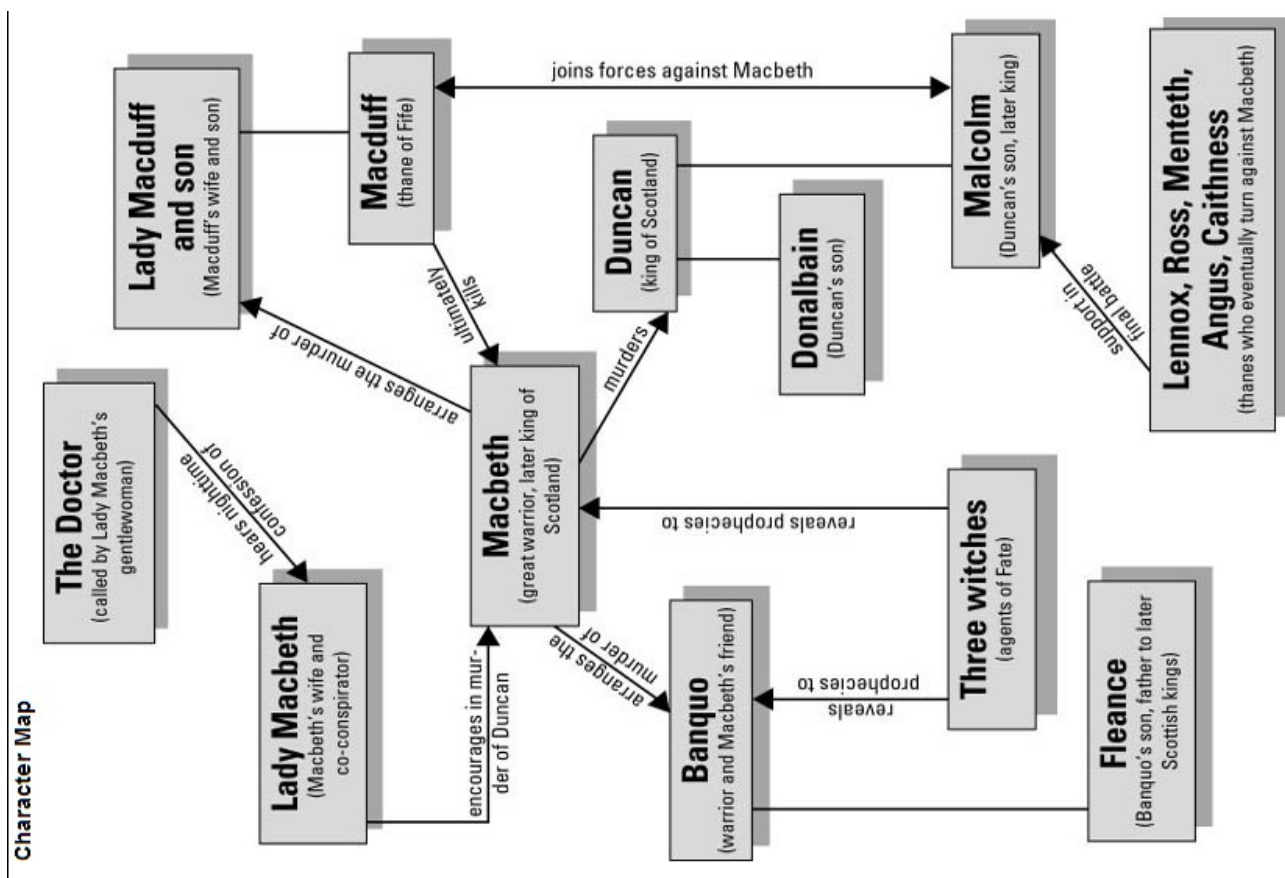


## Malcolm

With his brother Donalbain, Malcolm quickly ascertains the danger of remaining in Scotland and flees the country (Act II, Scene 3). By the time he reappears, in Act IV, Scene 3, he has won the support of Edward the Confessor (king of England), he has mobilized troops under Northumberland and Siward, and (to borrow a phrase from King Lear) he is “every inch a king.”

If Macduff is the stereotypical revenger, Malcolm is the embodiment of all that is good in kingship, and this is seen particularly in Act IV, Scene 3, in which he tests the allegiance of Macduff. His testing of Macduff, although dramatically longwinded, is psychologically accurate. By pretending to be what he is not, he hopes to coax from Macduff a confession of his loyalty. This feature of his character — playing a part in order to strengthen the prospect of good — is in stark contrast to Macbeth, who plays a part in order to advance his own evil. In the final scene of the play, Malcolm is presented as the future king. His use of the phrase “by the grace of Grace” indicates the importance that he attaches to the service of good and reminds the audience of his direct descent from one who ruled by divine right, as opposed to Macbeth, who usurped the throne. Like his father Duncan, Malcolm is the representative of order.

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/Macbeth.id-65.html>



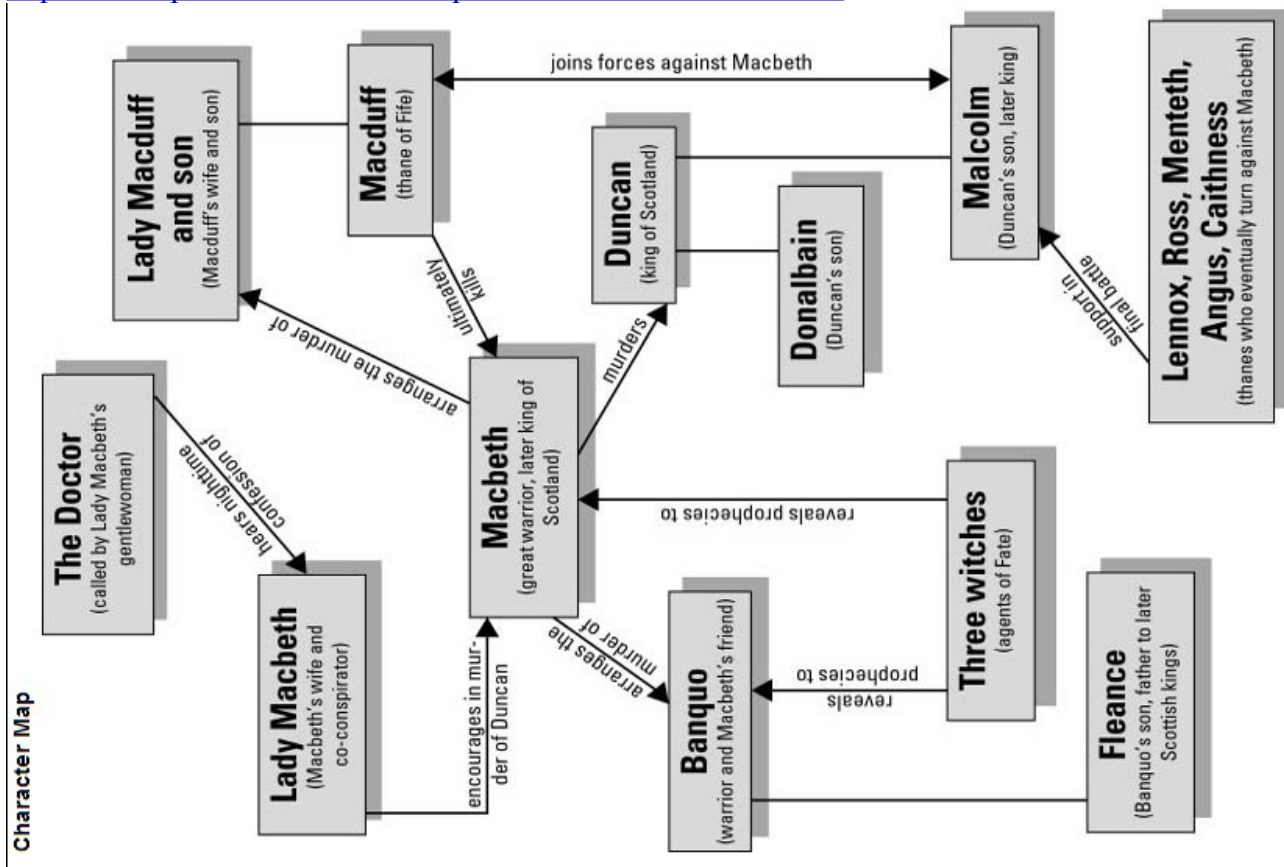
## Banquo

Banquo's role in the original source for Macbeth was as Macbeth's co-conspirator. In Shakespeare's play, he is depicted instead as Macbeth's rival; the role of fellow plotter passed to Lady Macbeth. Like Macbeth, Banquo is open to human yearnings and desires: He is, for example, just as keen to hear what the Witches have in store for him in Act I, Scene 3. He is kept from sleep by his dreams of the Witches (Act II, Scene 1). And in his soliloquy at the start of Act III, Scene 1 — "Thou hast it now . . ." — there is more than a hint of resentment and, possibly, of the same naked ambition that leads Macbeth astray. Nevertheless, Banquo is a sympathetic figure for several reasons. First, he is ignorant of what the audience knows concerning the murder of the king and of his own impending doom. Second, he is a father whose relationship with his son is clearly an affectionate one.

<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/WileyCDA/LitNote/Macbeth.id-65.html>

Banquo - The brave, noble general whose children, according to the witches' prophecy, will inherit the Scottish throne. Like Macbeth, Banquo thinks ambitious thoughts, but he does not translate those thoughts into action. In a sense, Banquo's character stands as a rebuke to Macbeth, since he represents the path Macbeth chose not to take: a path in which ambition need not lead to betrayal and murder. Appropriately, then, it is Banquo's ghost—and not Duncan's—that haunts Macbeth. In addition to embodying Macbeth's guilt for killing Banquo, the ghost also reminds Macbeth that he did not emulate Banquo's reaction to the witches' prophecy.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/shakespeare/macbeth/characters.html>

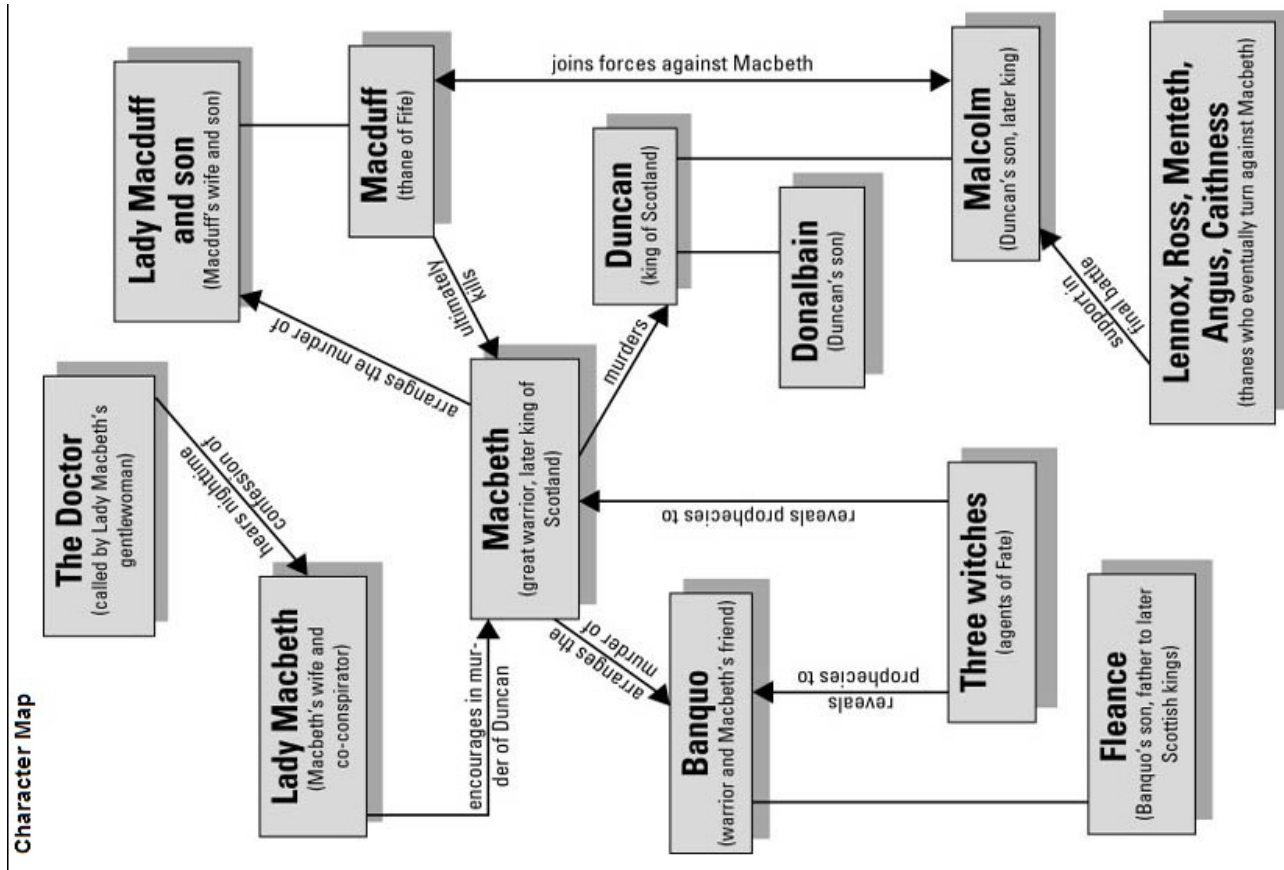


Lennox, Ross, Menteth, Angus, Caithness Thanes of Scotland, all of whom eventually turn against the tyrannical Macbeth.

### The Scottish Lords

Apart from Banquo and Macduff, five characters are identified as Thanes of Scotland: Lennox (or Lenox), Ross, Menteth (or Menteith), Angus and Caithness. They have little individuality: as a group they tend to be loyal to Duncan, transfer their allegiance to King Macbeth and then rebel against him when things deteriorate too far. On stage Ross can be made an interesting character, as he is present at so many of the key events: the news of Macbeth's favour from Duncan, the discovery of Duncan's death, the royal banquet with Banquo's ghost, the murder of the Macduffs, the breaking of the news to Macduff~ the final battles. He also seems disturbed at the events surrounding Duncan's death. His loyalties may be seen to change or sometimes to be concealed.

<http://fourthyear.wordpress.com/macbeth-characters/>



## Servants

There are many characters who are employed as everything from Doctors to Messengers. Many lack individuality. The most interesting are:

**The Porter:** Shakespeare's acting company employed at least one clown who would expect a humorous role even in tragedies or history plays. Macbeth has very little humour, but the drunken porter is the clown's one chance for satirical comedy.

**Seyton:** The only named servant, Seyton remains loyal to Macbeth. As he first appears in Act 5, it is quite common in production to use Seyton for some of the earlier Messenger and Servant parts.

**Murderers:** The murderers of Banquo are ordinary men who have fallen on hard times: Macbeth persuades them that Banquo is to blame, though, almost certainly, Macbeth himself is. But who is the 'Third Murderer' who joins them with instructions from Macbeth and takes charge? This must be some trusted servant of Macbeth: surely not the King himself? More effective on stage is to expand the role of Seyton and use him as Macbeth's attendant and the Third Murderer.

<http://fourthyear.wordpress.com/macbeth-characters/>

