

# OCR English Literature GCSE

## Macbeth: Character Profile

### Banquo

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## LORD BANQUO

### REPRESENTS MACBETH'S ANTITHESIS

#### INTRODUCTION

Banquo is a brave noble. At the beginning of the play we learn from the **Witches' prophecy** that his children will inherit the Scottish throne.

Banquo is similar to Macbeth in that they both have **ambitious** thoughts, however Banquo demonstrates restraint as he doesn't act upon these **desires**. The character of Banquo is the opposite to Macbeth, as he represents the route that Macbeth chose not to take. The path where ambition doesn't lead to betrayal and murder. Thus it is **Banquo's ghost**, rather than Duncan's, that haunts Macbeth.



#### SYMBOLISM

Shakespeare uses the **constructs of Macbeth and Banquo** to show how men can react when shown temptation. Banquo is portrayed as Macbeth's **foil** and is therefore **symbolic** of man's ability to **resist temptation**.

#### The Witches' prophecies

We can see the differences between the two men when we observe their reactions to the witches' prophecies. Macbeth is "**rapt withal**" which bears connotations of being **entranced and absorbed** by the Witches. However, Banquo will "**neither beg nor fear your favours nor your hate**" as he is **indifferent to their prophecies**. He takes the witches for what they physically appear to be - ragged old women. He doesn't trust them so he perceives their **prophecies with scepticism**.



Banquo's role as **foil** emphasised by the **juxtaposition** of his **prophecies** with Macbeth's "**lesser**" and "**greater**", with "**happier**" and "**not so happy**". Here, Shakespeare's use of **antithesis** in his phrasing hints that Banquo serves as



Macbeth's **antithesis**. This suggests Banquo is a **morally strong** and **virtuous** character who **resists evil**, providing a contrast to Macbeth, who is a morally weak, **innately flawed** and **evil character** who gives into temptation.

### Temptation

Shakespeare's exposure of both Banquo and Macbeth to temptation is necessary for the audience to view the contrasting responses to temptation. This allows them to decide which man is the **morally righteous** one.

Shakespeare portrays **temptation** as the **crux** of the play. It is vital for Banquo to be faced with temptation and ambition as it proves that Banquo is **morally strong**; his strength doesn't come from an easy path, but from **resisting temptation**. Macbeth's **hamartia** (a fatal flaw) is that he is **too weak to resist the influence** of the Witches and Lady Macbeth.

Arguably this is a message from Shakespeare to the audience that everyone is capable of evil and they must resist it. Banquo doesn't speak out against **injustice and corruption**, despite being tempted by the promise of being **"the root and father of many kings"**. He won't reveal the **evil prophecy** that promises him attractive things; perhaps this is because he wants it to come true too and has the **flaw of ambition**. However, his flaw is not his **hamartia**; he can resist it.

## CHARACTER IN CONTEXT

- **Response to the Supernatural:** Banquo resists the temptations of evil offered by the Supernatural (in the form of the Witches) throughout the play. This would have **appeased** a contemporary audience, which widely believed that the devil existed on earth and walked amongst humans trying to tempt them. Thus, the Witches can be seen as a **symbol of temptation to sin** that Banquo, as a **moral superior**, is able to resist.
  - When Banquo finds that the **prophecy** is coming true he responds with **"what, can the devil speak true"**. This implies that he views them as **agents of the devil** and sees them for what they are. This supports James I's view in **Daemonologie** that witches are controlled by the devil.
- **Church:** Banquo would have been perceived by a contemporary audience as a **moralistic character** as his values were in line with those of the Christian Church. He



calls upon God for **help in resisting temptation**: "*merciful powers, restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose*". Shakespeare uses the theme of **temptation**, which has **Biblical connotations**, in reference to Banquo.

## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

- Noble:** Shakespeare demonstrates the **noble qualities** and Banquo's "*royalty of nature*" as he is literally **royal in nature** - it was prophesied that "*thou shalt get kings*". Also, royal in terms of virtue – he is **honourable and virtuous**. Thus he will disapprove of the murder, fight for justice and remain loyal to the king (Duncan) - as warned by "*keep my bosom franchised*".
- Strategic:** The honour of Banquo is debatable as it could be argued that his response to the Witches' **prophecy is actually strategic**. It is important to consider why Shakespeare allows for this debate to be had, through his **ambivalent portrayal of Banquo**. Banquo is repeatedly referred to as being **noble and honourable**, throughout the play: "*noble Banquo*", "*worthy Banquo*", "*no less deserv'd*", "*wisdom that doth guide his valour*" and a "*royalty of nature*". Banquo states that he must "*keep my allegiance clear*" – is this **allegiance** to the past king (Duncan) which would make him a threat to Macbeth, or **allegiance** to any king (which could make him an ally). He speaks in terms of business: "*my allegiance*" – loyalty and commitment – "*my*" – almost like he's selling it and "*augment*" – make something greater / increase. This gives the sense of him playing **strategically** – carefully chosen and **non-committal language**. Allowing him to reserve his judgement so he can choose to support whichever side will best benefit him.
- Resistive to evil:** Banquo's response to evil separates him from Macbeth. They are exposed to the same influences – witches and promises of greatness - however, Banquo turns to God, asking for help in resisting evil and ultimately doesn't act on his ambitions as he recognises they are a force of evil.
  - This is evident as he is suspicious from the start, as he questions "*are you aught that man may question?*". Here, he is recognising the Witches **supernatural** and therefore untrustworthy.
  - When he finds that the **prophecy** is coming true he responds with "*what, can the devil speak true*" and this implies that he views them as **agents of the devil** – sees them for what they are; Banquo knows that the witches are a **route of temptation** to sin so he is able to resist them.



- **Aligned with Jesus:** Banquo could be used by Shakespeare to give a **moral message** to the audience about rejecting evil thoughts and the importance of turning to God in times of temptation. Banquo isn't perfect, and is tempted on some level by the Witches' prophecy, however his ability to reject evil is what makes him a moral character.
  - He is **less able to resist ambition** when he sleeps, shown by the comment: "*I dream'd of the three weird sisters last night*" (showing he subconsciously thinks about the Witches' prophecy). But instead of trying to hide this, he confesses to God and asks for help in remaining moral and virtuous. This has **Biblical connotations** as Jesus was **tempted three times** by the devil and resisted; perhaps Shakespeare is attempting to draw parallels between the Banquo and Jesus.

### EXAM TIP!

When analysing language techniques, ensure you refer to "Shakespeare" explicitly. This shows the examiner that you are considering his methods directly.



## KEY MOMENTS

CH	OCCURRENCE	SIGNIFICANCE
1.3	Banquo meets the Witches	Here, Banquo and Macbeth meet the three Witches and are told the prophecy. For Banquo, whilst they say he won't be King, they say his descendants will be. As Macbeth has just been told that he will be King, this sets up a tension between Banquo and Macbeth despite their long standing friendship. Banquo's reaction to the Witches is one of suspicion, whilst Macbeth immediately believes the prophecies.
3.1	Macbeth plots Banquo's murder	<p>Death at the peripeteia (sudden reversal of fortune)            Shakespeare has an <b>ulterior motive</b> to portray Banquo's death as a <b>noble one</b>. It is important to understand why Shakespeare deliberately decides for Banquo to be killed by <b>Macbeth's assassins</b> and die while saving his child. This death would have been more compelling to James I than the death of Duncan, due to James' <b>personal connection</b> and interest in Banquo and will, therefore, care about his death at the hands of Macbeth.</p> <p>This plotline is significant as Shakespeare made a change from the original version of Macbeth: His original source material of Macbeth (called the Holinshed Chronicles) has been <b>changed</b> by Shakespeare for this very reason. Originally, Banquo was portrayed as the <b>co-conspirator</b> of Macbeth and was involved in the murder. Shakespeare changed this story line to <b>flatter</b> Banquo and thus James I, who believed he was the descendant of Banquo. By presenting Banquo favorably, Shakespeare is showing <b>support and praise</b> for James. He needed to make the play enjoyable to the king and thereby win him as a <b>patron</b> – support his play company and win his political support against Puritans trying to ban theatre.</p> <p>Shakespeare also needed to demonstrate his belief in James' claim to the throne and the '<b>Divine Right of Kings</b>', and show he is not a threat to James' post-gunpowder plot. He was initially <b>connected to the plotters</b> – William Catesby (father of main plotter Robert Catesby) close friends with Shakespeare's father and people had been executed for lesser connections. Actors / playwrights were naturally suspected of crimes – moved around a lot and no fixed home or workplace – so were not accountable for.</p> <p>Banquo serves as a <b>dramatic device</b> – to act as Macbeth's <b>foil</b> and highlight his <b>moral weakness</b> through juxtaposition – but also as a</p>





		political device to simultaneously entertain the king and demonstrate Shakespeare's loyalty and support.
3.3	Banquo is murdered	<p>Banquo's death marks the breakdown in Macbeth's marriage, and Lady Macbeth's <b>mental deterioration increases</b>. They start to <b>distance from one another</b> after this point as Lady Macbeth disapproves of Banquo's murder "<b>you must leave this</b>" and thus Macbeth stops involving her in his plans.</p> <p>Macbeth starts acting independently of his wife, as she is no longer necessary and is <b>redundant</b>. Lady Macbeth has lost her reason to be <b>evil and powerful</b> – she can't support her husband. She gives in to her <b>guilt as her conscience</b> starts to take over and she goes insane.</p> <p>Macbeth and Lady Macbeth develop in <b>reverse directions</b>. Macbeth becomes more like how Lady Macbeth was formerly, while Lady Macbeth becomes more like Macbeth was. This is therefore a <b>reversal of gender roles</b> and the point at which Macbeth cannot return to virtue, which is evidenced through the extended metaphor: "<b>I am in blood stepp'd in so far that should I wade no further, returning were as tedious as to go o'er</b>" - here the <b>metaphor of wading through "blood"</b> is <b>symbolic of guilt</b>. Macbeth was a <b>reluctant killer</b>, tempted by Lady Macbeth and the witches. He felt regret and recognised the injustice of Duncan's death - "<b>wake Duncan with thy knocking, I would thou couldst</b>". Before, he was killing only to <b>speed up the prophecy</b>. However, now he is <b>killing despite it</b>. He is attempting to change it. Shakespeare does this to <b>portray his greed</b> – what he has will never be enough, he will never feel secure. Thus he will <b>keep doing evil</b> because "<b>things bad begun make strong themselves by ill</b>".</p>
3.4	Banquo's ghost	After being killed by Macbeth in the scene before, Banquo reappears as a ghost at a Banquet held by Macbeth and his wife; however, he is only visible to Macbeth. This, along with the floating dagger, enables Macbeth's paranoid mind even more. Banquo's ghost appears and disappears three times, increasing the chaotic state of Macbeth's thinking.



## RELATIONSHIPS

**Macbeth** | Initially, Macbeth and Banquo are portrayed as having a very strong and loyal friendship due to their many years serving beside each other in battle. However, this relationship is tested when the two characters meet the Witches. From then on, Banquo is skeptical of their prophecies whereas Macbeth is not, causing a **division** and setting up Banquo as Macbeth's **foil** for the rest of the play. Banquo has always been overshadowed by Macbeth's victories. In Act Three, murderers were instructed by Macbeth to kill Banquo, and Banquo's ghost then appears to haunt Macbeth.

**The Witches** | Banquo is suspicious of the Witches and their prophecies from when he and Macbeth first meet them in Act One Scene Three. They **create friction** between Banquo and Macbeth by telling them that whilst Macbeth will become King, Banquo's children will also become kings which in turn makes Macbeth suspicious of Banquo.

**Fleance** | (Banquo's son) Banquo appears to have a very protective and affectionate attitude towards his son, instructing him to **"fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly"** (A3S3) when it is apparent he is under attack from Macbeth (who thinks Fleance will become king eventually, due to the Witches' prophecies, and therefore is a threat). He manages to escape, but comes back at the end of the play to avenge his father and take the throne of Scotland, with the help of MacDuff.





## KEY QUOTES

Shakespeare uses **metaphorical language** and **supernatural imagery** as Banquo proclaims "***the earth hath bubbles***" and questions "***have we eaten on the insane root?***".

- This quote demonstrates how Banquo works to distance himself from the witches whilst Macbeth aligns himself with them.
  - The **contemporary audience** would recognise the witches as a **force of evil** and thus favour Banquo.
  - While a modern audience would perhaps view the Witches as **humorous**, due to the lack of a belief in witches' existence.

***"Our fears in Banquo / Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature / Reigns that which would be feared."***

- Macbeth is shown to fear Banquo's "***royalty of nature***"
  - Banquo has had the same experience as Macbeth, yet Banquo has responded as Macbeth should have. This means Banquo serves as a constant reflection of how Macbeth should have acted. He also serves as a **constant reminder** of the **morality** Macbeth started with and is losing.

The two character's **contrasting responses** to the prophecies could be explained as Macbeth's name was first mentioned by the Witches, who were "***there to meet with Macbeth***".

- Therefore Macbeth knows he is the focus of their intent and thus allows them to **control him** as he is aligned and connected to the Witches. whereas Banquo could be less susceptible as the prophecies are not directly aimed at him, even though they concern his children.

Banquo asks the witches to "***speak then to me***" as he wants to know what the "***seeds of time***" have in store for him.

- This demonstrates that though Banquo is interested by the **prophecy** and does show his own ambition, the ambition he possesses is not as strong as Macbeth's (or he tries to disguise it).



- In this situation, he remains **composed and in control** as he states "***neither beg nor fear your favours nor your hate***".
  - This reveals that Banquo is a very moralistic and responsible character who is not easily led astray.
  - This **juxtaposes** Macbeth's response, who commands the Witches to "***stay, you imperfect speakers***", revealing his **desperation**.

Both Macbeth, who describes the witches as "***imperfect***", and Banquo have recognised the witches as unnatural and evil, yet Macbeth chooses to ignore this because he wants to believe their prophecies.

- However, the Witches' prophecy **prompts the question**: why does Banquo save his son? He tells Fleance to "***fly***" – but also "***thou mayst avenge***". Therefore, it is clear that he wants Fleance to avenge his death and perhaps kill Macbeth or to take the **crown and therefore fulfill the prophecy**.
- Earlier in the play, the father-son relationship is not depicted as being close or loving, as Shakespeare employs the **formal language** of "***boy***" and "***sir***", rather than 'father' or 'son'. Here, he makes the audience question whether his sacrifice is out of love, or out of ambition.

### ***"I dream'd last night of the three weird sisters"***

- This suggests that Banquo had been thinking of the witches before they met, as when he admits this is still the same night as they met the witches.
  - This point could just be an oversight on behalf of Shakespeare – which wouldn't be the first (for example, the thane of Cawdor had been killed...then executed?!?).
  - Or, arguably, it could be evidence that Banquo is **not entirely unconnected** to the **supernatural** either, like Macbeth supposedly is.

Banquo suspects Macbeth but doesn't speak out as he states "***I fear thou played'st most foully for't***".

- He suspects Macbeth because he can **identify evil as a moral person**.
- Or, perhaps, he suspects Macbeth because it's what Banquo would have done in Macbeth's position, as he had "***cursed thoughts***" himself.



**"noble Banquo", "worthy Banquo", "no less deserv'd", "wisdom that doth guide his valour" and a "royalty of nature".**

- Banquo is repeatedly referred to as being **noble and honourable** throughout the play.
- Shakespeare thus makes it clear that he is widely regarded as such and there should be no doubt to his loyalty. Yet, in Shakespeare's play 'Othello' the antagonist **Iago** is similarly known to be **honest and honourable** - yet is anything but these qualities.

The Witches predict Banquo being **"lesser than Macbeth and greater"**.

- This becomes true: In status, he is lesser (sir) but he is **morally superior**, with a stronger will. He remained loyal to the king and **obedient** to God and the 'Great Chain of Being' and therefore he will have a **greater afterlife**.

Banquo frequently speaks in terms of business:

- **"my allegiance"** – loyalty and commitment – **"my"** – almost like he's selling it.
- **"augment"** – make something greater / increase.
- **"franchised"** – a **privilege or authorisation** granted by a governing power.

This gives the sense of him playing **strategically** – carefully chosen and **non-committal language**. Allowing him to reserve his judgement so he can choose to support whichever side will best benefit him.

**"the instruments of darkness tell us truths; win us with honest trifles to betray's in deepest consequence"**.

- Here, Banquo is referring to the Witches as being **"the instruments of darkness"**. Unlike Macbeth, who is refusing to see the potential consequences of believing in the prophecies, Banquo is aware that there is likely a trap involved in the predictions.

Whereas Macbeth asks Banquo to **"cleave to my consent"**, Banquo vows to **"keep my allegiance clear"**.

- This demonstrates he will not go against the king even if it benefits him.



### "I shall be counselled"

- He is willing to be advised and tempted by Macbeth, which shows he's **franchised** – wants to retain the privileges he has gained from loyalty to the king and this may change to new king.
  - States that "**my duties**" are "**forever knit**" to Macbeth
  - He has shifted his **loyalties and allegiance** to Macbeth rapidly.
- Therefore, it is clear that his **loyalty is not fixed** – to any king, but rather, he is loyal only to serve himself.

The **contemporary** audience widely believed that the devil existed on earth and walked amongst humans trying to tempt them. Thus, the witches can be seen as a **symbol of temptation** to sin that Banquo, as a **moral superior**, is able to resist. Macbeth being crowned as the **Thane of Cawdor** gives credibility to the Witches' prophecy and makes it seem like they will come true.

- Macbeth responds with **additional ambition**: "**yield to that suggestion**", while Banquo recognises it is a trick as he states "**the instruments of darkness tell us truths; win us with honest trifles to betray's in deepest consequence**".
  - Banquo recognises that this is temptation, and giving into it will have severe (religious) consequences.
- **His suspicion doesn't protect him from death**, but it protects him from moral and religious disgrace.
  - Will still **die in God's favour** as he resisted sin.

