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The Mystery of Macbeth

Shakespeare uses animal imagery to show that Macbeth starts out loyal and brave, and gradually develops into a murderous trickster. In the beginning of Act 1 (in Scene 2), a captain gives word of Macbeth's loyal and valiant efforts in battle against the king of Norway by telling King Duncan that Macbeth is like both an "eagle" (I.ii.39) and a "lion" (I.ii.39), proving that in the beginning, Macbeth is loyal, strong, and proud, since people associate lions with loyalty, pride, and strength. Many people associate eagles with many of the same things. These descriptions help show the positive side of Macbeth, the caring, loyal subject. However, as the act progresses, Lady Macbeth tries to convince Macbeth to "be the serpent" (I.vi.78) under the innocent flower. Shakespeare uses the animal imagery here to convey that Macbeth is becoming tricky and traitorous, many characteristics associated with snakes. Macbeth does not disagree immediately with Lady Macbeth, showing that Macbeth is no longer as loyal or proud as he is in the beginning of the act, because he is thinking about becoming a trickster and a traitor to his lord, King Duncan, and shows that Macbeth has morally declined to the level of serpents. The things that one is compared to may often indicate one's character and ability.