

Macbeth: Scene by Scene Synopsis

ACT 1

Act 1, scene 1

'When shall we three meet again?'

Three witches agree to gather on the heath before sunset where they will meet a man called Macbeth.

Act 1, scene 2

'What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won'

Duncan, the King of Scotland, asks an injured Captain how the battle against the allied powers of Norway and Ireland is progressing. He reports that the rebel Macdonald was faring well before Macbeth, a Scottish Captain, fought and beheaded him. While the Captain is taken off for medical help, two thanes enter – Ross and Angus – and announce that Macbeth has also conquered the Norwegian army, including the Thane of Cawdor, a traitor. Overjoyed at the news, Duncan decides to bestow Cawdor's title on Macbeth, and to execute the former thane.

Act 1, scene 3

'Thou shalt be King hereafter'

Macbeth and his fellow Captain, Banquo, encounter the three withes, who hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, of Cawdor and as 'King hereafter'. Banquo, they promise, will father kings but will never be one himself. Macbeth begs them to speak further, but the three figures melt into air. Ross and Angus enter with news of Macbeth's new title: the Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth begins to imagine the murderous act he would have to commit if he is to become King.

Act 1, scene 4

'The Prince of Cumberland!'

At Duncan's palace in Forres, the Thane of Cawdor's execution is announced. Macbeth and Banquo are heartily thanked for their victories on the battlefield. Duncan's eldest son, Malcolm, is named the Prince of Cumberland, a position which Macbeth notes he must 'o'erleap' to become King.

Act 1, scene 5

'Th'milk of human kindness'

Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband that describes his encounter with the witches and his new title. She worries that he is too kind to murder Duncan and decides to persuade him in person. A messenger brings news that the King will stay at the Macbeths' castle that night. Lady Macbeth calls upon spirits for strength to carry out the murder. Her husband enters and she tries to convince him of their cause.

Act 1, scene 6

'Our honour'd hostess'

Duncan and his attendants arrive at the Macbeth's castle, greeted by a hospitable Lady Macbeth. Duncan asks to meet with Macbeth.

Act 1, scene 7

'If we should fail?'

Macbeth leaves the evening banquet to consider his options: having been set on committing murdering Duncan, he now grows less certain. He tells his wife about his change of heart, but she persuades him back into their murderous plot.

ACT 2

Act 2, scene 1

'Is this a dagger, which I see before me?'

Later that evening, Macbeth meets with Banquo and his son, Fleance. Banquo tells of how he dreamt of the witches, but Macbeth lies that he has not given them much thought. After his guests exit, Macbeth sees an imaginary dagger hovering in the air. A bell rings, and Macbeth interprets it as Duncan's summons to heaven or to hell.

Act 2, scene 2

'I have done the deed'

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth meet in the darkness of the castle. Macbeth, with the daggers in hand, announces he has murdered Duncan. Lady Macbeth scorns him for taking the bloody daggers out of the room, and goes to plant them on Duncan's guards.

Act 2, scene 3

'Knock, knock'

The castle's drunken porter is awoken by a knocking at the gate. It is the noblemen Macduff and Lenox who have arrived to call upon the King. Macduff goes to wake Duncan and re-enters horrified, raising the alarm for his murder. The household gather and Macbeth announces that he has slain the two guards, considering them primary suspects. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, fearing for their own safety, flee to England and Ireland respectively.

Act 2, scene 4

'The sovereignty will fall upon Macbeth'

Ross, Macduff, and an Old Man discuss the murder, considering whether it was committed by the guards or the King's sons who have fled. It is announced that the title of King will fall upon Macbeth.

ACT 3

Act 3, scene 1

'Fail not our feast'

Macbeth, now King, invites Banquo to a feast that evening, and Banquo grows suspicious of his friend. Alone, Macbeth admits that he cannot stop thinking the witches' predictions for Banquo's kin. To rid himself of these concerns, he instructs two murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance.

Act 3, scene 2

'Full of scorpions is my mind'

Macbeth reveals to his wife that he is working on securing their position by removing all potential risks that stand in the way, but refuses to elaborate further.

Act 3, scene 3

'Fly, good Fleance'

The murderers ambush Banquo and Fleance on their way to the castle. They kill Banquo, but his son manages to run away.

Act 3, scene 4

‘Shake not thy gory locks at me’

At the banquet, one of the murderers appears at the door to tell Macbeth the news of Banquo’s death, and Fleance’s escape. Invisible to all but Macbeth, Banquo’s ghost enters and sits at the table. Macbeth’s distress at the apparition brings the banquet to an end.

Act 3, scene 5

‘A dismal and a fatal end’

Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft, is angry with the three witches for meddling in Macbeth’s life without involving her. She demands that the group meet again in the morning, predicting Macbeth will come looking for them then.

Act 3, scene 6

‘Our suffering country’

Lennox talks with another Lord about Banquo’s murder, for which Fleance is suspected. The Lord notes that Macduff has joined Malcolm at court in England, and the pair is gathering troops to attack Macbeth.

ACT 4

Act 4, scene 1

‘Double, double toil and trouble’

Macbeth visits the witches and demands they answer his questions. The witches conjure apparitions to do so. The first, an armed head, tells him to beware Macduff. The second, a bloody child, tells him no-one born of a woman can harm him. The third, a crowned child, tells him that he will never be conquered until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Finally, a pageant of eight Kings appears, followed by the spirit of Banquo. The witches vanish and Macbeth decides he must kill Macduff’s family.

Act 4, scene 2

‘What is a traitor?’

While Lady Macduff laments her husband’s going to England to her son, a group of murderers enter the house. The son attempts to stand up for his father, but is fatally stabbed. The other family members are chased off-stage.

Act 4, scene 3

'He has no children'

In England, despite his initial uncertainty, Malcolm is convinced of Macduff's good intentions. Ross informs Macduff that his family have been slaughtered, and advises him to take revenge.

ACT 5

Act 5, scene 1

'Out, damned spot!'

A doctor and a waiting-gentlewoman observe Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking. She repeatedly makes the motion of washing hands, claiming there is blood on them.

Act 5, scene 2

'The English power is near'

Four Scottish Lords, including Lennox, discuss the progress of the English army led by Malcolm, his uncle Siward, and Macduff. It is reported that Macbeth has fortified Dunsinane in preparation.

Act 5, scene 3

'Throw physic to the dogs'

Macbeth orders his servant, Seyton, to arm him, while the Doctor gives an unhopeful report of Lady Macbeth's health.

Act 5, scene 4

'What wood is this?'

The English forces arrive at Birnam wood, and Malcolm instructs the troops to use its greenery as a disguise to approach the castle.

Act 5, scene 5

'She should have died hereafter'

Seyton announces the Queen has died, and a servant tells Macbeth that he has witnessed Birnam wood moving towards the castle (in actuality, the disguised English army).

Act 5, scene 6

'Your leavy screens throw down'

Malcolm orders his soldiers to leave their disguises and storm the castle.

Act 5, scene 7

'Tyrant, show thy face'

Macbeth comes across a young member of the English forces, Young Siward, and kills him instantly. He leaves just as Macduff enters, searching for the tyrant.

Act 5, scene 8

'Turn, Hell-hound, turn!'

Macduff succeeds in hunting down Macbeth. The King is initially unafraid: assured that he cannot be harmed by anyone born by a woman. But Macduff reveals he was not born naturally, but delivered by caesarean. The pair fights and Macbeth is slain.

Act 5, scene 9

'Hail, King!'

Ross tells Siward his son has died in the battle. Macduff emerges grasping Macbeth's head, proclaiming Malcolm as the new King of Scotland. Malcolm invites all his allies to see him crowned at Scone.