

Macbeth

Scene Summaries

Act I

Scene i

This short scene establishes the supernatural element in the play and introduces the three witches (or weird sisters). During the disorderly scene, the witches reveal their plan to meet Macbeth.

Scene ii

After hearing a report about the battle against the traitors, which includes an account of Macbeth's glorious feats on the battlefield, Duncan orders that the title of Thane of Cawdor, which currently belongs to one of the traitors, be given to Macbeth.

Scene iii

After relating some of their foul deeds, the witches encounter Macbeth and Banquo on their return to Duncan's camp. They prophesize that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor as well as King of Scotland. However, they predict that Banquo, rather than Macbeth, will produce a line of kings. After the weird sisters disappear, Macbeth learns of his obtainment of the thaneship of Cawdor and begins to contemplate the other part of his prophecy.

Scene iv

Back at the royal court, Duncan names Malcolm as the heir to the Scottish throne. Significantly, Macbeth sees this recognition of Malcolm as an obstacle that he must overcome in order to become the King of Scotland. The scene ends with Duncan indicating that he will stay at Macbeth's castle that night.

Scene v

Upon hearing the news of the prophecy and Macbeth's new title through a letter, Lady Macbeth reveals her imperial ambitions through her famous "unsex me here" speech. Before Macbeth's arrival, she predicts that he won't have the will to actively pursue the throne, so she feels that she will have to convince him. When Macbeth arrives, she presumes that they will kill Duncan, but Macbeth refuses to discuss it at that time.

Scene vi

Duncan and his party arrive at the gates of Macbeth's castle. Lady Macbeth greets them and leads them into the castle.

Scene vii

In his first true soliloquy, Macbeth contemplates the consequences of killing Duncan from a variety of perspectives, revealing his inner struggle with the question. Also, Lady Macbeth executes her plans to convince her husband to commit regicide through a combination of insulting her husband's masculinity and demonstrating her own fierce support of this course of action. This scene ends the first act with Macbeth resolved to kill Duncan and obtain the Scottish throne.

Act II

Scene i

Although Banquo admits that he has been having dreams of pursuing the prophecy, he maintains his resolve to passively await the predictions when Macbeth broaches the possibility of taking action. Left alone, Macbeth hallucinates a dagger that leads him toward Duncan's chamber; where Lady Macbeth has drugged his servants.

Scene ii

Macbeth joins Lady Macbeth after killing Duncan. Macbeth is extremely distraught over his actions and claims to have heard voices saying he had murdered sleep. Lady Macbeth is much more calm and composed, however. She returns the daggers to Duncan's bedchambers and smears blood on Duncan's servants.

Scene iii

The comedic porter opens the gate and allows Macduff and Lennox to enter. Shortly after a humorous exchange between the porter and Macduff, the thane discovers Duncan's murder. Chaos ensues. In the conversation between the thanes, we learn that Macbeth, in a "fury," killed the two servants, thereby removing from the servants the possibility of defending themselves. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, flee to England and Ireland for their own safety.

Scene iv

This conversation between Ross and an old man recounts recent events for the audience. In addition to describing the natural disturbances that have followed the king's murder, their conversation reveals that Malcolm and Donalbain are being accused of planning the crime because they fled into exile. Ross also informs the old man that Macbeth has been named King of Scotland.

Act III

Scene i

In this scene, Banquo contemplates Macbeth's role in the murder of Duncan. Macbeth enters and encourages Banquo to attend the banquet, during which Macbeth will try to secure the support of the other thanes. However, the friendship present in their previous interaction has been replaced with a mutual suspicion. After Banquo's departure, Macbeth arranges his murder and the murder of his son, Fleance.

Scene ii

Macbeth and his wife discuss their course of action. Lady Macbeth is not as content as she was in previous scenes. She indicates her desire to place their evil actions in the past. Although he tells his wife to watch Banquo closely, Macbeth no longer includes her in his plans to maintain the throne.

Scene iii

The two murderers are joined by a third. Together, they attack Banquo and Fleance as they return to the castle. Banquo is killed but Fleance manages to escape.

Scene iv

The banquet begins with the seating of the noblemen and Macbeth's insistence to sit among the thanes rather than in his royal position. Banquo's ghost enters and sits in Macbeth's chair – literally and figuratively taking his place. The appearance of the ghost seriously disturbs Macbeth. Despite Lady Macbeth's attempts to retain order, Macbeth's disturbances and direct addresses to a ghost that only he can see cause the banquet to end in disorder. After the thanes depart, Macbeth notes Macduff's absence and decides to consult the witches.

Scene v

Hecate appears and confronts the witches with their entrapment of Macbeth. Hecate informs the witches of a plan to use illusions to fool Macbeth into a false sense of security that will eventually cause his downfall.

Scene vi

Lennox and another lord discuss recent events in this scene. Lennox mocks the implication that Duncan's sons were responsible for his death by applying the same logic to Fleance and Banquo. The lord informs Lennox of Malcolm's activity in England and Macduff's recent trip to join Malcolm in preparation for a rebellion against Macbeth. Through the lord, we also learn that Macbeth is preparing for war.

Act IV

Scene i

Macbeth revisits the witches, and they show him four apparitions that predict the future. The first apparition, an armed head, tells Macbeth to beware of Macduff. The second, a bloody child, informs the king that no man born of woman will be able to kill Macbeth. The third, a crowned child holding a tree, indicates that until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill, he will not be conquered. A fourth apparition depicts the initial prophecy of Banquo's royal descendants. Macbeth learns of Macduff's departure and orders the execution of Macduff's family.

Scene ii

Ross and Lady Macduff discuss Macduff's departure for England, which has left his family unprotected. After a pitiful conversation between Lady Macduff and her son, a messenger enters and warns them to flee for their safety. Lady Macduff refuses, and soon murderers enter who kill their son onstage and pursue Lady Macduff off the stage.

Scene iii

Macduff arrives in England and reunites with Malcolm. Suspicious of anyone from Scotland, Malcolm tests Macduff by pretending to be tyrannical. After Macduff passes the test by remaining loyal to Duncan's son, Malcolm speaks of the healing power of Edward the Confessor, England's king, and informs Macduff of England's military support for their impending war against Macbeth. The scene closes with the appearance of Ross, who relates recent events in Scotland, primarily the murder of Macduff's family.

Act V

Scene i

A doctor and a gentlewoman witness Lady Macbeth sleepwalking. The gentlewoman indicates that Lady Macbeth sometimes composes a letter in her sleep. On this night, however, she rubs her hands together in an effort to "wash" a spot of blood off. Although the doctor and the gentlewoman realize that her conscience is burdened, they don't understand that it stems from her complicity in Duncan's murder. After Lady Macbeth returns to bed, the doctor commands that precautions be taken to prevent Lady Macbeth from committing suicide.

Scene ii

A group of Scottish thanes enter on their way to Birnam Wood to unite with Malcolm and English forces. They also indicate that although Macbeth's army still obeys him, it no longer feels loyalty toward the King.

Scene iii

Waiting for the battle to begin, Macbeth oscillates between being overly aggressive and confident and being melancholic. Although, he provides a glimpse into his inner turmoil by saying that he is "sick at heart," his presentation is balanced by confidence in the second group of prophecies.

Scene iv

The Scottish thanes unite with Malcolm and the English forces at Birnam Wood, Malcolm reveals his plan to use tree branches to disguise the approach of the army to Dunsinane Castle. With a large army, this strategy will create the illusion that the woods are moving.

Scene v

Preparing for war, Macbeth learns of his wife's death and exhibits little grief. A messenger informs Macbeth of the "approach" of Birnam Wood. Questioning his invulnerability, Macbeth decides that if he is to die, he wants to die in battle.

Scene vi

Nearing Dunsinane, Macbeth orders his army to discard their branches, and Macduff calls for attack.

Scene vii

Not content to sit safely behind the castle walls, Macbeth engages the enemy on the plain, slaying Young Siward, son of Siward, the Commander of the English Army. Macduff passes over the stage in search of Macbeth. Siward and Malcolm enter. Siward informs Malcolm that Macbeth's army has surrendered the castle.

Scene viii

Macbeth and Macduff finally meet, and Macbeth learns that Macduff was surgically removed from his mother's womb and thus was not born of a woman. Although Macbeth initially refuses to fight, Macduff's plans to make a spectacle of the tyrannical king prompts him to action, and they fight their way off the stage. Siward is informed of his son's death and honorably commends his son's valor without grieving. Macduff reenters with Macbeth's head and declares Scotland free. The play ends with Malcolm and the thanes leaving for Scone where Malcolm will be crowned King of Scotland.