

Macbeth Summary

Act I

The play opens with three witches on a desolate Scottish heath, foretelling the futures of key characters. They plan to meet Macbeth after the end of a battle.

Scottish generals Macbeth and Banquo are on their way home from a victorious war campaign when they encounter the three witches. The witches predict that Macbeth will be promoted to Thane of Cawdor and then King of Scotland, while Banquo's descendants will inherit the throne, though he will not. Soon after, Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor, validating the witches' prophecy.

Lady Macbeth, after learning of the prophecies and the first promotion, persuades her husband to speed up the second prophecy by murdering King Duncan. Macbeth is hesitant but, under the persuasive powers of his wife, he murders Duncan and takes the throne.

Act II

After killing Duncan, Macbeth is consumed with guilt and paranoia. He starts hearing voices, and Lady Macbeth tries to calm him. To cover up his crime, Macbeth kills the guards who might be blamed for Duncan's death.

Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, suspect foul play and flee for their lives, making them suspects in their father's murder.

Act III

Now king, Macbeth feels threatened by Banquo, given the witches' prophecy about Banquo's heirs. Macbeth hires assassins to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance. They succeed in murdering Banquo, but Fleance escapes.

At a banquet, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost, which unnerves him, exposing his guilt to the assembled guests. Lady Macbeth tries to play off his madness as a regular ailment.

Act IV

Macbeth seeks out the witches again for assurance. They warn him to be wary of Macduff but also give him a false sense of security, stating that he won't be defeated until Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane Hill and that no man born of a woman can harm him.

Macbeth, in his paranoia, has Macduff's family murdered. Macduff, who has gone to England to support Malcolm's claim to the Scottish throne, vows revenge.

Act V

Lady Macbeth's guilt manifests in sleepwalking, during which she tries to wash imaginary bloodstains from her hands. Consumed by guilt and paranoia, she eventually takes her own life.

Malcolm, Macduff, and their forces approach Macbeth's castle, using branches from Birnam Wood to hide their numbers, making it seem as though the forest itself is moving, fulfilling the witches' prophecy.

Macduff confronts Macbeth and reveals he was born via cesarean section and thus not "born of a woman" in a typical way. In the ensuing duel, Macduff kills Macbeth.

Malcolm is declared the rightful king of Scotland, restoring peace to the kingdom.

Throughout the play, themes of ambition, the corrupting power of unchecked power, the supernatural, and the effects of guilt are explored. Shakespeare's "Macbeth" stands as a cautionary tale about the perils of overreaching ambition and moral compromise.



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