



T H E A T R E b a n s h e e

MACBETH SYNOPSIS

PRELUDE

Macbeth, the Thane of Glamis (a Scottish rank of nobility) who is loyal to the king, fights with his soldiers against a rebel army.

ACT I, SCENE I

Three witches gather to plan their encounter with Macbeth. They decide to meet later upon a Scottish heath that Macbeth will cross on his way home from battle.

ACT I, SCENE II

King Duncan of the Scots, along with his sons Malcolm and Donalbain, learns the news that his generals, Macbeth and Banquo, have defeated two separate armies—one led by the rebel Macdonwald, and one from Norway, who was being assisted by the treasonous Thane of Cawdor. The king is pleased with his captains' success, and, when Ross arrives to tell him that the Thane of Cawdor has surrendered, Duncan hands over the Thane of Cawdor's title and land to Macbeth.

ACT I, SCENE III

The Witches meet on the dark moor to await Macbeth. Macbeth and Banquo happen upon the Weird Sisters who greet Macbeth by his current title (Glamis), Thane of Cawdor, and King. Banquo is then told that although he will never be king, he will give birth to a line of kings. Macbeth and Banquo are startled by the prophesies and dismiss them until Ross and Angus arrive and inform Macbeth that the king has appointed him Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo are stunned by this news, realizing that one part of the Witches prophesy had already come true.

ACT I, SCENE IV

At Duncan's castle, the king thanks Banquo & Macbeth for their bravery and says he will visit Macbeth's castle in Inverness. He also announces that he has chosen his son, Malcolm, as Prince of Cumberland, and as such, the next king of Scotland. (At this point in history, it was not a foregone conclusion that a son would inherit the crown.) Macbeth leaves early to prepare for the king's arrival, with news of the king's successor and ambitious thoughts troubling his mind.

ACT I, SCENE V

At Macbeth's castle in Inverness, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband about the witches' strange foretelling and the fact that part of the prophesy has already come true. She is overjoyed at the prospect of becoming queen, but fears that Macbeth is not bold enough to do what is necessary to become king. She is willing to do whatever it takes, and is delighted when news arrives that Duncan is coming to her castle, providing her with opportunity to murder him and seize the crown. Once Macbeth joins her, she tempts him in her plan to kill the King.

ACT I, SCENE VI

Duncan and noblemen arrive at Inverness to be greeted warmly by Lady Macbeth. They praise the beauty of the castle and its environment— ironic considering the evil plans that have been hatched inside.

ACT I, SCENE VII

Macbeth steps away from the festivities and in a crisis of conscience decides that he will not kill King Duncan. When he breaks the news of the change of plans to his wife, she plays with his emotions and insults his manhood to the point where he once again agrees to murder King Duncan.

ACT II, SCENE I

As night falls, Banquo cannot sleep, his mind plagued with the prophesy. When he attempts to discuss his anxieties with Macbeth, Banquo is rebuffed and leaves for bed. Macbeth waits alone for a bell that will alert him to Duncan's guards' drunken sleep. Macbeth hallucinates and sees a bloody dagger floating in the air which prompts him to ponder evil in general and the deed he is about to perform. The bell sounds and Macbeth's resolve is complete; he prepares to murder the king.

ACT II, SCENE II

Lady Macbeth has drugged Duncan's guards and waits for Macbeth to commit the murder. Macbeth appears after committing the deed, terribly shaken. Lady Macbeth tries to calm him and force him to regain composure. She returns to the crime scene to place the daggers that Macbeth carelessly removed, in the hands of the dead guards.

ACT II, SCENE III

After a night of heavy drinking, Seyton, the porter, awakens to loud knocking at the entrance of the castle. He considers what it would be like to be the door-keeper of hell. Macduff and Lenox arrive to meet with King Duncan. Macduff discovers that the King has been slain. He awakens the household while Macbeth runs to King Duncan's quarters. Offstage, Macbeth kills Duncan's guards and reports to the other thanes that he has murdered Duncan's assassins in a fit of fury. Lady Macbeth faints to create a distraction. Malcolm and Donalbain, the king's sons, suspicious of foul play and aware that their lives may be in danger as well, decide to flee to England and Ireland, respectively.

ACT II, SCENE IV

An old man and Ross discuss an eclipse and other strange omens that have coincided with Duncan's murder. Macduff enters and tells Ross that, since the King's two sons have fled Scotland, they are presumed to be behind their father's murder. As a result of their treachery, their claim to the throne is forfeit, and Macbeth has been named king.

ACT III, SCENE V

Banquo wonders if Macbeth has done something terrible to bring the witches prophecy to fruition. Macbeth, now king, enters with his noblemen. Macbeth questions Banquo's plans for the day. Banquo tells him that he and his son, Fleance, are going to ride on the

vast castle grounds in the afternoon, but he assures Macbeth he will not miss the feast. Haunted by the witches' prophecy that Banquo's heirs become king, Macbeth hires a pair of murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance.

ACT III, SCENE II

Lady Macbeth reveals that she is not as happy as she thought she would be as Queen. Despite the fact that they now have exactly what they desired, Lady Macbeth confesses that they have gained nothing and lost everything by killing Duncan. Macbeth enters and he too admits to being wracked by guilt and fear. Macbeth informs her that he has more nefarious plans in the works.

ACT III, SCENE III

A third murderer joins the two hired by Macbeth. They set upon Banquo and Fleance. Banquo is murdered, but Fleance escapes.

ACT III, SCENE IV

The banquet is underway in the great hall. Macbeth meets with the murders who tell of Fleance's escape. When Macbeth rejoins his guests at the dinner table, he finds his seat is already occupied by Banquo's ghost. The others do not see the ghost and are stunned to see Macbeth raving at an empty chair. Lady Macbeth tries her best to convince the guests that Macbeth is suffering from a strange ailment. Afraid that her husband is losing his mind and will reveal their crimes, Lady Macbeth sends their guests away. When they are alone, Lady Macbeth tells her husband that his lack of sleep is causing him to hallucinate. Macbeth insists that he must consult the three Weird Sisters to find out what dangers lie ahead.

ACT III, SCENE V

Lenox and Angus discuss the deaths of Duncan and Banquo. Lenox now suspects Macbeth has committed the murders and reveals his thoughts to Angus, who shares his suspicions. Angus tells Lennox that Macduff has joined Malcolm in England. Both men hope Malcolm and Macduff will return as soon as possible with an army to overthrow the tyrannical Macbeth.

INTERMISSION

ACT IV, SCENE I

The witches cast a spell in their cauldron in anticipation of Macbeth's visit. Macbeth enters and demands that the witches show him his future. They summon three apparitions. The first specter warns Macbeth to beware of Macduff. The second apparition informs Macbeth that no man born of a woman can do him harm, giving Macbeth great comfort. The third apparition tells Macbeth that he shall never vanquish'd be until the forest of Birnam moves itself to Dunsinane hill, site of Macbeth's new castle. This also gives Macbeth cheer, as a moving forest seems most unlikely. Macbeth's confidence is restored, but one question remains: will Banquo's descendants rule Scotland? The witches conjure a vision of eight kings—all descendants of Banquo. Macbeth flies into a rage at the witches who have revealed his worst fear. They provide a

mocking comfort by dancing for him. Seyton enters and tells Macbeth that Macduff has fled to England to join with Malcolm. Macbeth decides to kill Macduff and his whole family as punishment for his betrayal.

ACT IV, SCENE II

At Macduff's castle Lady Macduff is livid because her husband suddenly left her and their family to go to England. Ross tells her to remain calm, reminding her that Macduff would not leave unless it was of utmost importance. After Ross leaves, Angus warns Lady Macduff that she is in grave danger, and begs her to flee without haste.

ACT IV, SCENE III

Macduff has arrived in England to meet with Malcolm. Malcolm is suspicious of Macduff, in case he might be collaborating with Macbeth. Malcolm tests his loyalty to him and Scotland by pretending to be a greedy prince who will "cut off the noble's from their land" when he gains the Scottish crown. When Macduff openly mourns the corrupt rulers of this country, Malcolm confesses that his words were only to test Macduff's commitment. Ross comes from Scotland with the news about Macduff's family. Macduff vows revenge and they leave to gather their troops and head home for Scotland.

ACT V, SCENE I

Lady Macbeth's gentlewoman and a doctor observe Lady Macbeth sleepwalking. In her guilt-inspired trance she reveals all of her and her husband's terrible deeds. The Doctor is horrified to know the truth and he refuses to report to anyone what he has just seen and heard for fear that his own life will be in jeopardy.

ACT V, SCENE II

The Scottish Thanes return to Scotland and prepare to join their forces near Birnam Wood.

ACT V, SCENE III

Macbeth awaits a siege by the forces of Malcolm and Macduff. Because of the three apparitions, Macbeth believes he is invincible. Macbeth asks the Doctor about his wife's condition. The Doctor suggests she's troubled by mental health issues and Macbeth commands the Doctor to cure her. Although Macbeth is starting to crumble under the mounting pressure, he convinces himself that he need not fear defeat "Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane".

ACT V, SCENE IV

Malcolm orders his men to each cut a branch from a tree from Birnam forest to provide camouflage as they approach Macbeth's castle, Dunsinane—and thus, Birnam Wood is coming to Dunsinane.

ACT V, SCENE V

Lady Macbeth dies offstage, but Macbeth cannot grieve for her as he is wracked with his own existential doom. Macbeth's servant informs him that he thought he saw trees moving toward the castle. Macbeth understands that the Birnam Wood part of the

prophecy has come true, but fueled by both fury and arrogance, he prepares to meet the battle.

ACT V, SCENE VI

Malcolm, Siward (a nobleman and Duncan's cousin), Macduff and the other soldiers throw down their leafy screens and prepare to assault Macbeth's castle.

ACT V, SCENE VII

Macbeth and his followers fight Malcolm and Macduff's forces. Although Macbeth has resigned himself to defeat, he remembers the second apparition. Secure that he will never meet a man who was not born from a woman, he regains the hope that it is yet possible for him to escape. He meets and fights young Siward.

ACT V, SCENE VIII

Macbeth, regaining confidence, continues to fight Malcolm's army. Macduff, thirsting for revenge, seeks out Macbeth and finds him. As they fight, Macbeth boasts that he is indestructible. Macduff reveals that he was not of woman born, but was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb. Macbeth realizes that the witches' final prophecy has come true. Unwilling to surrender, Macbeth fights to the end.

ACT V, SCENE IX

The avenging army gathers, noting that Young Siward has fallen. Macduff joins the soldiers and hails Malcolm as the new King of Scotland. Malcolm thanks them for their duties and begins his reign on a note of hope.

GLOSSARY

Cawdor — a large region of land, whose lord is the Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth becomes the Thane of Cawdor after the previous one is executed as a traitor.

Dunsinane — Macbeth's heavily fortified castle once he becomes king.

Fife — the region of land belonging to Macduff and his family.

Glamis (pronounced Glahmz) — Macbeth's ancestral lands inherited from his father.

Inverness — Macbeth's castle in Glamis.

Thane — a title of nobility, comparable to an English earl.