

# MACBETH ACT SUMMARIES

## ACT I

Three witches meet Macbeth and Banquo on the heath as the men return from battle. They predict that Macbeth will be named Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland and that Banquo will be the father of kings. The witches vanish; Ross enters to greet Macbeth with the title of Cawdor, the traitor whom King Duncan has determined must be executed and whose title and lands will be given to Macbeth. This immediate "earnest of success commencing in a truth" causes Macbeth to consider the extent of his ambition and Banquo to warn that predictions are often harmful as well as beneficial. (iii.)

Announcing that his eldest son, Malcolm, is to be his heir, Duncan states his intention to visit Macbeth's castle, Glamis. (iv.) When Lady Macbeth reads the letter Macbeth has sent ahead, she determines her husband must take advantage of the opportunity Duncan's forthcoming visit offers as a way of fulfilling the prophecy. However, she fears that though Macbeth is "not without ambition," he is "too full o' th' milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way." (v.) Macbeth is not as determined as his lady about the need for murder. He considers reasons he should defend rather than threaten the life of his king. Lady Macbeth remains adamant and pressures him with attacks on his manhood as well as reminders of their feelings for each other. She convinces Macbeth to proceed by presenting her plan to drug Duncan's guards and leave evidence that will implicate them in the crime. (vii.)

## ACT II

Macbeth sees a "dagger of the mind" leading him towards Duncan's chamber. (1.) Lady Macbeth has drugged the guards, noting that Duncan's resemblance to her father has stayed her from doing the deed herself. After the murder, Macbeth carries the bloody daggers from the chamber causing Lady Macbeth to reprimand him for his great show of emotion. After she returns the daggers and smears the guards with blood, she tells Macbeth, "a little water clears us of this deed." (ii.)

The porter attends the knocking at the gate, creating a comic relief scene of his imaginings. Macduff discovers the body, and Macbeth kills the guards, explaining the act as his overwrought response to their unjust offense. Duncan's sons realize their danger and decide that Malcolm will go to England and Donalbain will go to Ireland. (iii.) Their flight makes them suspect, and Macbeth is crowned King of Scotland. (iv.)

## ACT III

Macbeth plans to overturn the witches' prophecy that Banquo's sons will become kings by sending two murders to kill both Banquo and his son, Fleance. (i.) Macbeth no longer needs Lady Macbeth's involvement and bids her be "innocent of the knowledge" of his decisions. (ii.) A third murderer, obviously not known by the other two, joins them, and although Banquo is slain, Fleance escapes. (iii.)

At the banquet, Macbeth is terrified by the bloody ghost of Banquo. Since no one else sees the apparition, Lady Macbeth attempts to excuse his behavior and eventually has to end the banquet. Macbeth determines to visit the witches again. (iv.)

Suspicion of Macbeth is mounting, and Macduff joins Malcolm in England. (vi.)

## **ACT IV**

The witches show Macbeth three apparitions which warn him to beware Macduff, promise him that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth," and assure him he will remain safe until Birnam Wood moves. He feels comforted by these prophecies without seeing their double meaning but is shaken by a vision of Banquo and his eight descendants. (I.)

Malcolm tests Macduff's loyalty to Scotland, and they plan strategy with English forces to oust Macbeth. (iii.) Meanwhile, Macbeth has Lady Macduff and all her children slain. (ii.)

## **ACT V**

Lady Macbeth, while sleepwalking, reveals her knowledge of the deaths of Duncan, Lady Macduff, and Banquo. Her continual washing of her hands cannot ease her dread or make her feel cleansed. The doctor and attendant realize they cannot help her. (i.)

Macbeth is too involved with battle preparations against Malcolm and English and Scottish troops to spend much time considering his wife's dreams. (iii.) When he hears of Lady Macbeth's death, he contemplates that life is "full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." He reassures himself with the predictions only to see the woods advance when Malcolm's soldiers camouflage themselves with boughs from Birnam Wood. (v.)

Macbeth sees the ambiguity of the predictions but goes bravely into battle. He kills young Siward who dies fearlessly (vii.) and then faces Macduff who tells him that he was not "of woman born" but was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb. Finally realizing the true implications of the predictions, Macbeth refuses to yield to Macduff and face capture and ridicule. He confronts Macduff and bravely fights to the death. Macduff displays the "usurper's cursed head" and acclaims Malcolm the new King of Scotland. (viii.)