



Macbeth

Revision notes

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Summary Act 1

Scene 1

Thunder and lightning crash above a Scottish moor. Three haggard old women, the Witches, appear out of the storm. In eerie tones, chanting in riddles, they discuss their plans to meet again upon the heath, after the battle, to confront Macbeth. They disappear as quickly as they arrived. The Witches then call out to Graymalkin and Paddock, who are the Witches' "familiar," or spirits (usually animals like cats) that serve them. All three then repeat a chorus that sets the tone for the play: "Fair is foul and foul is fair," whereupon they set back to their supernatural business, disappearing as quickly as they entered (A1.S1.L12).

Scene 2

At a military camp near his palace at Forres, King Duncan of Scotland enters along with his two sons (Malcolm and Donalbain), a Scottish nobleman (Lennox) and Attendants. Duncan asks a wounded Captain for news about the Scots' battle with the invaders from the "Western Isles" (Ireland), who are led by the rebel Macdonwald. The captain, who was wounded helping Duncan's son, Malcolm, escape capture by the Irish, replies that the Scottish generals Macbeth and Banquo fought through the "swarm" of enemy soldiers with great courage and violence. The Captain then describes for Duncan how Macbeth slew the traitorous Macdonwald. The Captain continues his tale, telling how, after Macbeth spilled Macdonwald's blood, the battle flared up once more when the "Norwegian Lord" brought fresh men on to the field. But even this, he says, could not daunt Macbeth and Banquo, who both redoubled their efforts. As the Captain is carried off to have his wounds attended to, the Thane of Ross (a Scottish nobleman) enters, having just returned from Fife, and tells the king that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor has been defeated and the army of Norway repelled. Duncan decrees that the Thane of Cawdor be put to death and that Macbeth, the hero of the victorious army, be given Cawdor's title of Thane. Ross leaves to deliver the news to Macbeth.

Scene 3

On the heath near the battlefield, thunder rolls and the Three Witches enter. The Second Witch says that she has just come from "killing swine" while the First Witch describes the revenge she has planned upon a sailor whose wife refused to share her chestnuts. Suddenly a drum beats, and the Third Witch cries that Macbeth is coming. The three then dance around in a circle to "wind up" a "charm." Macbeth and Banquo, on their way to the Duncan's palace at Forres, enter. Macbeth and Banquo show up, and Macbeth delivers his first line: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (A1.S3.L39). When they come upon the Witches and they shrink in horror at the sight of the haggard old women. Banquo asks whether they are mortal, noting that they don't seem to be "inhabitants o' th' earth" (A1.S3.L42). He also wonders whether they are really women, since they seem to have beards like men. The Witches hail

Macbeth as Thane of Glamis (his original title) and then as Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth is baffled by this second title, as Ross has not yet reached him with news of King Duncan's decision. The Witches also declare that Macbeth will be king one day. Stunned and intrigued, Macbeth presses the Witches for more information, but they have turned their attention to Banquo, once again speaking in misleading riddles. They call Banquo "lesser than Macbeth, and greater," and "not so happy, yet much happier"; then they tell him that he will never be king but that his children will sit upon the throne (A1.S3.L67–69). Macbeth begs the Witches to explain what they meant by calling him Thane of Cawdor, but they quickly vanish into thin air once they have spoken their riddles to the two companions.

Both in disbelief, Macbeth and Banquo discuss the strange encounter with the Three Witches. Macbeth fixates on the details of the prophecy: "Your children shall be kings," he says to his friend, to which Banquo responds; "You shall be king" (A1.S3.L88-89). They are interrupted by the arrival of Ross and Angus, who have come to escort them to the king. Ross then delivers his message to Macbeth; that the king has made him Thane of Cawdor and the former Thane is to be executed for treason. Macbeth amazed that the Witches' prophecy has come true, asks Banquo if he hopes his children will be kings. Banquo replies that devils often tell half-truths in order to "win us to our harm" (A1.S3.L132). Macbeth then ignores his companions and speaks to himself in a soliloquy, contemplating upon the idea that he might one day be king. He wonders whether the reign will simply fall to him or whether he will have to perform a dark deed in order to gain the crown. Macbeth contemplates tyrannicide. He comments that he has just had an awful and disgusting thought about "murder." These "horrible imaginings" make his hair stand on end and his heartbeat really fast – he's also feeling as though his mind has been divided. While Macbeth is deep in thought, Banquo comments to Ross and Angus that Macbeth seems "rapt," in a trancelike state. At last he shakes himself from his thoughts and the group departs for Forres. As they leave, Macbeth whispers to Banquo that, at a later time, he would like to speak to him privately about what happened with the Witches and the partial fulfillment of their prophecy.

Scene 4

At the palace, Duncan hears reports of Cawdor's execution from his son, Malcolm, who says that Cawdor died nobly, confessing freely and repenting for his crimes. Enter Macbeth and Banquo followed by Ross and Angus. Duncan thanks the two generals (Macbeth and Banquo) profusely for their heroism in the battle, and they profess their loyalty and gratitude toward their king. Duncan announces his intention to name Malcolm the heir to his throne. Macbeth declares his joy but notes to himself that Malcolm now stands between him and the crown. Plans are made for Duncan to dine at Macbeth's castle that evening in celebration of Malcolm being named heir, and Macbeth goes on ahead of the royal party to inform his wife (Lady Macbeth) of the king's arrival.

Scene 5

In Inverness (Macbeth's castle) Lady Macbeth reads a letter she has received from Macbeth. The letter announces Macbeth's promotion to the Thaneship of Cawdor and details his meeting with the Three Witches. Lady Macbeth murmurs that she knows Macbeth is ambitious, but fears he is "too full o'th' milk of human kindness" to take the steps necessary to make himself king (A1.S5.L12). She resolves to convince her husband to do whatever is required to seize the crown. A messenger enters and informs Lady Macbeth that the king rides toward the castle, and that Macbeth is on his way as well. As she awaits her husband's arrival, she delivers a famous speech, in which she begs;

. . . you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty (A1.S5.L38–41).

She resolves to put her natural femininity aside "unsex me here" so that she can do the bloody deeds necessary for Macbeth to seize the crown. Macbeth enters, and he and his wife discuss the king's visit. Macbeth tells his wife that Duncan plans to depart the next day, but Lady Macbeth declares that the king will never see tomorrow. She tells her husband to have patience and to leave the planning to her.

Scene 6

Duncan, the Scottish Lords, and their Attendants enter. They arrive outside Macbeth's castle. Duncan praises the castle's pleasant environment, and he thanks Lady Macbeth, who has emerged to greet him, for her hospitality. She replies that it is her duty to be hospitable since she and her husband owe so much to their king and the "honours" he bestowed upon them. Duncan then asks to be taken inside to Macbeth, whom he professes to love dearly.

Scene 7

Inside the castle, as music plays and servants set a table for the evening's feast, Macbeth paces by himself, pondering the idea of murdering the king. He says that the deed would be easy if only he could be certain that it would not set in motion a series of terrible consequences. He follows this by declaring his willingness to risk eternal damnation but realizes that even on earth, bloody actions "return / To plague th'inventor" (A1.S7.L9–10). As well as being damned to Hell in the afterlife, Macbeth muses that killing Duncan in his own home would be a serious violation of hospitality. He then considers the reasons why he ought not to kill Duncan:

- Macbeth is Duncan's kinsman, subject, and host;
- the king is universally admired as a virtuous ruler.

Macbeth notes that these circumstances offer him nothing that he can use as motivation for murder. He faces the fact that there is no reason to kill the king other than his own ambition, which he laments, is an unreliable guide.

Lady Macbeth enters and informs Macbeth that the king has dined and that he has been asking for him. Macbeth declares that he no longer intends to kill Duncan: “we will proceed no further in this business” (A1.S7.L32). Outraged, she calls him a coward and questions his manhood: “When you durst do it,” she says, “then you were a man” (A1.S7.L53). He then asks her what will happen if they fail. She promises that as long as they are bold, they will be successful. Then she tells him her plan: while Duncan sleeps, she will give his chamberlains wine to make them drunk, and then she and Macbeth can slip in and murder Duncan. They will smear the blood of Duncan on the sleeping chamberlains to cast the guilt upon them. Astonished at the brilliance and daring of her plan, Macbeth tells his wife that her “undaunted mettle” makes him hope that she will only give birth to male children (A1.S7.L80). He then agrees to go forth with the murder.

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