



**Macbeth**

**English – Leaving Cert**

**Quick Notes**

# Macbeth Act One

## Scene One

Immediately in **scene one**, we are introduced to the god-awful three witches, grim biddies who hint at Macbeth's future and set the tone for the entire play: "Fair is foul and foul is fair." They also hint at prophetic powers, when they plan to meet Macbeth on the heath the next day.

These ladies are important characters throughout the play, and manipulate Macbeth constantly. Their quote, "fair is foul and foul is fair", is an important one.

## Scene Two

In **scene two**, we are taken to a military palace at Forres, where we are introduced to King Duncan and his sons Malcolm and Donalbain. We hear about what a marvellous, brave warrior Macbeth is. King Duncan laps it all up and announces that he will make Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor.

The important characters in this scene are King Duncan, who is shown to be a wise and fair king, and his sons Donalbain and Malcolm. Macbeth is introduced to us as a heroic character who is admired by his peers. His friend Banquo is also described to us, and we hear that they are a powerful team.

The important quote to remember in this scene is the one pertaining to Macbeth's fighting prowess, as it hints at the development of his later bloodthirsty nature by saying that he faced the enemy and "unseamed him from the nave to th' chops, and fixed his head upon our battlements."

## Scene Three

In **scene three**, we're back with the witches again, who demonstrate their evil natures by talking about such pleasant pastimes as "killing swine" and about drowning a woman's husband just because she wouldn't share her chestnuts. Macbeth arrives with Banquo, and is

confused when they call him Thane of Cawdor. Through rhymes and riddles, the witches tell Macbeth that he will be king, and tell Banquo that his children will be kings. Then, they immediately vanish into thin air, which is a pretty neat trick if you can manage it.

As Macbeth and Banquo discuss this strange event, they are interrupted by the arrival of Ross and Angus, who inform Macbeth that the king has made him Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth is thrilled, and wonders if this means that the other prophecy will come true, that he will one day be king. He also contemplates whether he will need to commit murder to obtain his place on the throne.

This is the first time we see Macbeth, and our initial picture of him as a noble warrior blurs slightly. We see that along with his bravery and fighting ability he shows signs of burning ambition. He is eager to hear more on the prophecies, and wants to discuss them in greater detail.

Let's go through some of the important quotes from this scene. First of all, we have Macbeth's quote when he enters, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen". This ominously mirrors the witches' previous chant. Banquo's warning for Macbeth is an important one, as it foreshadows the plot of the play. He tells Macbeth "Oftentimes, to win us to our harm, The instruments of darkness tell us truths, Win us with honest trifles, to betray us in deepest consequence."

## Scene Four

In **scene four**, we see the kindly King Duncan once again, who is listening to the reports of Cawdor's execution from his son Malcolm. Macbeth and Banquo enter, with Ross and Angus. Duncan then announces his intention to name Malcolm the heir to his throne. Macbeth rejoices, but also privately notes that Malcolm now stands between him and the crown. Plans are made for Duncan to dine at Macbeth's castle that evening.

One important quote in this scene comes from Duncan, who talks of the previous Thane of Cawdor. He says "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face. He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust." This exclamation will prove to be ironic in a number of ways, and again reflects the theme the witches set out at the beginning of the play – "Fair is foul and foul is fair". Macbeth notes that there is a barrier in his way to the throne

when Malcolm is made heir, and says “That is a step On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap, For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires.”

## Scene Five

**Scene five** takes place in Inverness, Macbeth's castle. Here we are introduced to the fiery Lady Macbeth as she reads her husband's letter detailing his new title, the visit of the King and the prophecy of the witches. She revels in the idea of her husband becoming king, and vows to do everything she can to help him to the throne, calling down spirits to fill her with the necessary cruelty. Macbeth enters, and tells her that Duncan plans to depart the next day. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, informs him that the King will never see tomorrow.

The important quotes in this scene are all from the brilliantly dark Lady Macbeth, who cries “Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts! Unsex me here, and fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full of direst cruelty!” and tells her husband to hide his murderous thoughts and to “Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.”

## Scene Six

In the next scene, **scene six**, we are shown what a kind King Duncan is. He talks about how lovely the castle is, and thanks Lady Macbeth for having him. He asks to be taken inside to Macbeth, whom he professes to love dearly. This scene serves to hammer home how kind and gentle Duncan is, and will make Macbeth's later crime against him all the more heinous.

## Scene Seven

Macbeth, on the other hand, is in **scene seven** pondering the murder of the king. He admits to himself that he has no reason to do it other than his own ambition. Lady Macbeth enters, and Macbeth informs her that he no longer intends to kill Duncan. Well, she doesn't like that at all and immediately goes about calling him a coward and questioning his manhood. Macbeth asks what will happen if they fail, but she tells him her marvellous plan: they will make the king's chamberlains drunk, and then sneak in and murder Duncan in his sleep. Macbeth is astonished by her ingenuity and he agrees to go forth with the murder.

When Macbeth is nervously contemplating the murder of his king, he mutters to himself “If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well it were done quickly”, reminding us that he is seriously planning on carrying this deed out. When his nerve fails him however, his wife must urge him to “screw your courage to the sticking place”, and he is so impressed by her valour, he tells her to “Bring forth men-children only, for thy undaunted mettle should compose nothing but males.”

## Act Two

### Scene One

**Scene one** opens with Banquo and his son Fleance walking in the torch-lit hall of Macbeth’s inner court at Glamis. Banquo seems troubled by the witches’ prophecy. Macbeth enters, and Banquo tells him that the king is asleep, and mentions that he had a dream about the witches. Macbeth claims he hasn’t given the witches a second thought (sure, Macbeth, sure), but promises to talk with him about it later, in order to get Banquo to leave the hall.

Left alone, Macbeth has a vision of a dagger floating in the air in front of him, with its handle pointing towards his hand and its tip aiming towards the room where Duncan sleeps. He tries to grasp the weapon and fails. The dagger turns red, and he claims it is an extension of his own bloody thoughts, and that he is resolved to carry out the murder. A bell tolls (Lady Macbeth’s signal that the chamberlain’s outside Duncan’s room are asleep) and Macbeth strides towards the room.

It is in this scene which Macbeth delivers the famous line “Is this a dagger I see before me, the handle towards my hand? Come, let me clutch thee; I have thee not, and yet I see thee still”. As soon as Macbeth hears the bell tolling he recognises the signal and says “I go, and it is done. The bell invites me. Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell that summons thee to heaven or to hell.”

### Scene Two

**Scene two** begins immediately, as Lady Macbeth enters when Macbeth leaves. We see just how bloodthirsty she is, as she talks about how she drugged the chamberlain’s, and imagines

her husband killing the king. Suddenly Macbeth cries out from the room, and she panics, wondering what could have possibly gone wrong. Macbeth comes out covered in blood however, and says that the deed is done. He's badly shaken, and tells her that the chamberlain's awoke during.

Lady Macbeth tries to steady her husband by getting him to focus on framing the chamberlain's, but she realises that he forgot to leave the daggers in the room. Despite her berating he refuses to go back in with them. Lady Macbeth has no time for this – she takes the daggers in, smears them with blood and plants them on the chamberlains. While she's gone, Macbeth hears mysterious knocking, and despairs over the amount of blood on his hands. The knocking starts again when Lady Macbeth enters, and she begins dragging her husband away, saying that there is someone at the door and it would look suspicious if they were caught standing there.

This scene contains some fantastic quotes, which vividly show us the mindset of each character. When she emerges, Lady Macbeth scoffs at the chamberlains, saying “That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold. What hath quenched them hath given me fire.” It's clear she is thriving on the tension and subterfuge. When he emerges however, Macbeth is shaken, repeatedly asking “But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'? I had most need of blessing, and “Amen” stuck in my throat.” Lady Macbeth leaves him alone to finish the deed, and he stares horrified at his bloody hands, asking “Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.” Finally, with a heartbreaking cry as they leave the scene, he reveals his regret as he states “Wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou couldst.”

## Scene Three

As the two disappear we enter **scene three**, a comedic interlude involving a drunken porter coming to open the great doors, to let in whoever is knocking. He opens to doors to Macduff and Lennox, who complain about his slowness to answer, but the porter replies that he was up late carousing and rambles on about the effects of drinking on the body and the sex life.

Macbeth then enters, something to be quite grateful for depending on your sense of humour, and Macduff asks him if the king is awake, as he was to meet with King Duncan early that

morning. Stiffly, Macbeth tells him that the king is still asleep, so Macduff enters the King's chambers to wake him. While he is gone, Lennox talks of the strange storms the previous night, and how screams were heard. He tells of a little earthquake, and that the fire in his hearth blew out. Suddenly, Macduff shouts that someone has murdered the king. Macbeth and Lennox run inside, and while they are gone more people arrive from different parts of the castle, roused by Macduff's shouts. Lady Macbeth is the first to arrive, and she laments that such a thing should have happened in her house.

Malcolm and Donalbain are the last to awake, and are informed that the chamberlains were found with bloody daggers— Macbeth declares that he murdered the two chamberlain's on the spot. Macduff doesn't seem to be buying it, but Macbeth explains that his fury at Duncan's death was so great he could not control himself. How convenient, Macbeth! He then begins to describe the dead body in a distasteful and suspicious amount of detail. Lady Macbeth suddenly faints out of the stress of the situation, or in an attempt to draw attention away from her husband.

Aside, Malcolm and Donalbain whisper to each other, and agree that someone organised the murder the chamberlains carried out. Duncan's sons resolve to flee the court; Malcolm to England and Donalbain to Ireland, making it more difficult to murder them both.

After all that, let's quickly look at some of the important quotes in this scene. Macbeth acts very guilty here, and he doesn't help matters by going into unnecessary detail in describing the murder when he says "Here lay Duncan, his silver skin laced with his golden blood, and his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature." Donalbain is perfectly correct when he tells his brother Malcolm that "There's daggers in men's smiles".

## Scene Four

After such a tense, claustrophobic scene, it's a relief that **scene four** takes place outside the castle, as Ross, a Thane, walks with an old man, they both discuss how unnatural an act a king's murder is, and how nature has gone haywire as a result. Macduff emerges from the castle and announces that Macbeth has been made king by the other lords. Suspicion for the King's murder rests on the two princes, Donalbain and Malcolm, because of how quickly they fled the scene.

# Act Three

## Scene One

In **scene one** of act three, we meet Banquo once more. He's restless and pacing, pondering Macbeth's upcoming coronation, and his own prophecy. Macbeth regally enters followed by his queen, Lady Macbeth and both ask Banquo to be their honoured guest at a feast that night. Banquo graciously accepts. Macbeth tells Banquo that they should discuss Malcolm and Donalbain, and how the princes could be plotting against the crown. However, as Banquo leaves, Macbeth ensures to ask whether or not his son will be riding with him that evening.

Macbeth is alone until a servant enters with two dark men. Macbeth reminds the men, who are murderers he hired, of Banquo's various grievances towards them. He assures that he has been mistreated equally as bad and that he would execute Banquo publically but that they have many mutual friends. Macbeth also reminds the murderers that Fleance must be killed along with his father.

The most important quote in this scene comes from Banquo, who reveals that he has suspected Macbeth all along by saying "Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all, as the weird women promised, and I fear thou played most foully for it."

## Scene Two

In **scene two**, we come across Lady Macbeth enquiring if Banquo has left to go horse riding, and as soon as she learns that he has, she sends a servant to fetch her husband. Macbeth enters, and tells her that they are not finished yet, and that there are still other threats to the throne which must be eliminated. We see that he has not included his wife in his plans this time, when he merely tells her that he has planned something awful for Banquo and Fleance, and avoids answering her questions. Macbeth appeals to nature to let night's black agents do their work, and then exits with Lady Macbeth.

This scene is very interesting, as we see for the first time that Lady Macbeth's mental armour is cracking. It's clear she is unhappy and her new life isn't what she thought it would be. She exclaims that "Naught's had, all's spent, where our desire is got without content. 'Tis safer to



be that which we destroy than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.” This almost certainly has something to do with the change in her husband who, though he tells her “Oh, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!” he fails to confide his plans in her.

## Scene Three

In **scene three**, we unfortunately bear witness to the murder of Banquo. With his dying breath he denounces the treachery and encourages Fleance to flee and revenge him when he is older. Fleance escapes in the darkness.

## Scene Four

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth enter together as king and queen in **scene four**, followed by their court. Just as everyone is being seated for the feast, one of the murderers appears in the doorway. Aside, the murderer informs Macbeth that Banquo is dead, but that Fleance has escaped, which angers Macbeth – It is Fleance who poses the greater threat to his throne, as the witches’ prophesised that Banquo’s children will be kings.

Returning to his seat, Macbeth raises his glass in a toast to Banquo, but as he goes to be seated he finds Banquo’s ghost sitting in his chair. Macbeth is terrified, and speaks to the ghost, not realising that the rest of the court can’t see it. Lady Macbeth nervously tries to laugh off his “visions” as a childhood ailment, and tells the court to ignore his behaviour. She then turns to Macbeth and tries to get him to snap out of it, insulting his manhood, and dismissing the vision as a mere manifestation of his own fear. The ghost disappears and Macbeth recovers, repeating his wife’s story to the court. Moments later however, the ghost reappears once more, shocking Macbeth into further reckless outbursts.

Lady Macbeth immediately sends the alarmed guests from the room, making excuses for her husband all the while. As they leave, the ghost vanishes once more. Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that he has heard from a spy that Macduff is staying away from court – an act which verges on treason. He says he will visit the witches tomorrow so that he might receive another prophecy, and vows to do whatever he can to keep his throne. Lady Macbeth, clearly unnerved by her husband’s behaviour, says that he needs sleep and they retire to their chamber.

All of Macbeth's quotes in this scene contain gory imagery, and are evidence of how twisted his mind has become. When he is attempting to pull himself together after seeing Banquo's ghost, he mutters "It will have blood, they say. Blood will have blood." Finally, he reflects that it is too late to turn back from his murderous path, when he says "I am in blood, stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er."

## Scene Five

Because we know you missed them, the witches are back in **scene five**, and this time they're getting an earful from their boss, Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft. Hecate declares that the next time Macbeth comes to meet them, there will be visions and sprites to lull him into a false sense of security and confuse him.

## Scene Six

We move elsewhere in Scotland in **scene six**, and see Lennox walk with another lord as they discuss the sorry state of Scotland. Banquo's murder has been officially blamed on Fleance, who has fled like Duncan's sons. We discover that Macduff has gone to England to join Malcolm in pleading with England's King Edward for aid overthrowing Macbeth, and that the news of this has prompted Macbeth to prepare for war. The important quote in this scene is that of the lords wish for peace - "Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights, Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives."

# Act Four

## Scene One

**Scene one** of act four contains one of the most famous scenes in Shakespeare's writings – We see the three witches in a dark cavern, over a bubbling cauldron, chanting spells and listing ingredients, "Eye of newt and toe of frog, wool of bat and tongue of dog". Macbeth enters and asks them to explain their prophecies, and in response, they call up horrible apparitions to answer him.

First, a floating head warns him to beware of Macduff, who Macbeth states he already suspects. Second, a bloody child appears, telling him that he will never be killed by a man born from a woman. Third, a crowned child holding a tree states that Macbeth will never be vanquished until Great Birnham Wood moves to Dunsinane Hill. Finally, a procession of eight ghosts walks by, the last carrying a mirror showing that the line stretches on eternally. Banquo's ghost walks at the end of the line.

Macbeth demands to know what the last vision means, but the witches merely tease him and vanish. Lennox enters and tells him that Macduff has fled to England, and an enraged Macbeth resolves to act immediately on his thoughts from now on, and to send murderers to capture Macduff's castle and to kill Macduff's wife and children.

It is important that you can quote the apparitions in this scene, but don't worry, they rhyme! The First apparition warns Macbeth of Macduff, saying "Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff, Beware the thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough." The second apparition informs Macbeth that no one born of woman will kill him, by telling him "Be bloody, bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn the power of man, for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth." Finally, the last apparition tells him that he will not lose this throne until Birnham wood moves to Dunsinane. "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him." Another important quote is the one which shows us that Macbeth's heart has hardened in his anger at Banquo's legacy, and that he is throwing off all reason - "The very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand." When we see that the first thing to come to Macbeth's heart is the murder of an innocent family, we realise that the noble warrior from the start of the play is finally nowhere to be seen.

## Scene Two

**Scene two** is a heartbreaking one. It opens with Lady Macduff lamenting the absence of her husband to Ross, and how he has left them to fend for themselves. When he leaves, she spends a tender moment joking with her son. Suddenly, a messenger enters, warning Lady Macduff she is in danger and urging her to flee. She refuses, and a group of murderers enters and claim that Macduff is a traitor. Both mother and son are killed.

## Scene Three

In **scene three**, we are shown what Macduff is getting up to in England, and find him conversing with Malcolm. Malcolm, it would appear, is craftier and less trusting than his father. In order to determine if Macduff is truly acting in the interests of Scotland, he talks about what a terrible king he, Malcolm, would be. He claims that he is lustful, greedy and violent, and Macduff despairs, crying out “O Scotland, Scotland!” He agrees that Malcolm is not fit to be king, and Malcolm tells him he has passed his test of loyalty and embraces him as an ally.

Ross, the Scottish nobleman enters. He has just arrived from Scotland, and brings news of the tyranny of Macbeth. At first, he can't bring himself to tell Macduff of his family's death, and implores Malcolm to return. Malcolm reveals that he will do so, with ten thousand soldiers lent to him by King Edward. Ross breaks down then, and tells Macduff that Macbeth has murdered his wife and children. Macduff vows revenge upon Macbeth, promising that he will slay him himself.

## Act Five

### Scene One

In **scene one** of act five, we are finally shown how the terrible series of dark deeds in this play have taken their toll on Lady Macbeth. We are introduced to her Doctor, and one of her gentlewomen, who discuss her strange habit of sleepwalking. Suddenly, Lady Macbeth enters with a candle in her hand, which the gentlewoman says she insists on always having. In her sleep, Lady Macbeth moans and laments the murders of Duncan, Lady Macduff and Banquo. She seems to see and smell the blood on her hands and claims nothing will ever wash it off, and no perfume erases the stench. She leaves, and the Doctor states that it seems like Lady Macbeth needs help from God, not a doctor.

Lady Macbeth's mind has finally shattered under the combined stress of her situation, the sudden distance between her and her husband, and her overwhelming guilt. Her mind projects the vision of blood on her hands, and she desperately tries to scrub it off - “Out damn spot,

out I say". She swings wildly between frantic regret, and calm platitudes - "What's done cannot be undone" - but it's clear that she is weighed by regret. "The thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?—What, will these hands ne'er be clean?"

## Scene Two

**Scene two** finds the nobles of Scotland outside the castle in the country near Dunsinane discussing the military situation. The English army led by Malcolm approaches, and the Scottish army will meet them near Birnham Wood, joining forces before the battle. All agree that Macbeth, though some think him brave and others insane, is acting only in his own interests and not the nation's. Everyone agrees that Macbeth needs to go. They all agree to fight wholeheartedly for Scotland.

## Scene Three

In **scene three**, Macbeth strides about the hall of Dunsinane, almost delirious with confidence and boasting that he has nothing to fear since "none of woman born" can harm him, and he will rule securely "till Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane." A messenger enters telling of the approach of an army of ten thousand Englishmen. Macbeth readies for battle, while the Doctor informs him that Lady Macbeth is not sick, but kept from rest by "thick-coming fancies". Macbeth orders him to cure her of her delusions.

## Scene Four

**Scene four** takes place in the country near Birnam wood, where Malcolm and his generals discuss and hatch a plan. They decide that each soldier should cut down a bough of the forest and carry it in front of him as they march to the castle, which will disguise their numbers.

## Scene Five

Within Dunsinane, in **scene five**, Macbeth still boasts that his victory is assured, but suddenly woman's shrieking cry is heard and a servant appears to tell Macbeth that the queen committed suicide by jumping from the battlements. Macbeth is stunned by the news, but suddenly, a messenger enters and exclaims that a "grove" of trees is advancing towards

Dunsinane. Macbeth is enraged and terrified, realising that the witches' prophecies were twisted, and that his throne could be taken from him on this very day

The most important quote from this scene is when Macbeth numbly talks about time, declaring famously that "Life is but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more. It is a fairy tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing"

## Scene Six

The battle begins in **scene six**, as Malcolm, Macduff and an English Earl ally named Siward land their army outside Dunsinane.

## Scene Seven

We move to the battlefield in **scene seven**, where we see Macbeth insolently striking about him with his sword, confident in his invincibility because no man born of woman can harm him. He slays Siward's son, and disappears into the fray once more. Immediately, we see Macduff searching the chaos frantically for Macbeth, whom he has vowed to kill himself. Malcolm and Siward appear then, and Siward notes that the Scottish lords who have joined them are fighting exceptionally well, and that Malcolm is close to victory.

Elsewhere on the battlefield, Macbeth emerges once more, and at last meets Macduff, who calls the tyrant king a "hell-hound". They fight, and when Macbeth insists that he cannot be killed because of the prophecy that none of woman born shall slay him, Macduff victoriously tells him that he was born through caesarian section. Immediately, Macbeth realises that he will die, but vows to continue fighting rather than surrender. He throws up his shield, but is slain by Macduff, who holds Macbeth's head in his hand and proclaims Malcolm King of Scotland. Malcolm declares that all his thanes will be made earls, according to the English system of peerage, making them the first earls in Scottish history. Everyone who had to flee the country because of Macbeth's tyranny can now return. Cursing the "dead butcher" Macbeth, his "fiend-like" queen and all those who helped them, Malcolm declares everyone around him friends, and welcomes them to his coronation in Scone.

The important quote from this scene is that of Macduff's victorious cry that he was "from his mother's womb/ Untimely ripped."

**THE END**

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