

Macbeth: Act I

(A summary of the action)

Scene i: The opening scene has three witches meeting on a wild heath, singing a riddled song about meeting Macbeth soon.

Scene ii: King Duncan of Scotland, and his son Malcolm, find out from a wounded captain that Macbeth and Banquo (two thanes of Duncan's) have been victorious in their battle against the rebel Macdonwald, and the Norwegians. On another front, another rebel, the Thane of Cawdor and the Norwegians (with the Norwegian king himself) are also fighting; here Macduff is victorious. Duncan decides to make Macbeth Thane of Cawdor as a reward.

Scene iii: We see the witches again, and get an idea about just how bad they are. They recount what they've been doing since they last met. They cast a spell just before Macbeth enters.

Macbeth, who is a noble thane from Glamis (an area of Scotland where he has his castle) and Banquo, his friend, are just returning from the battle that was against some of their own countrymen, led by the traitor thane of Cawdor (another area of Scotland). They are on their way to see King Duncan when they meet the witches who greet Macbeth with the titles "Thane of Glamis" and "Thane of Cawdor" and "King of Scotland." They also prophesy that Banquo's heirs will reign over Scotland.

Macbeth tries to question the witches, but they vanish. He disregards their puzzling message until a messenger from the King meets them and tells Macbeth that Duncan has decided to reward his victory with the title "Thane of Cawdor" making him the local lord over this area. Macbeth is now convinced that the witches were prophesying; while Banquo is afraid they are evilly whetting Macbeth's ambition and tricking him. Banquo warns Macbeth, but Macbeth ignores his friend.

Macbeth sets his whole heart on the attainment of the other prophesy of the witches: to become King of Scotland. But Duncan is king, and a good man – Macbeth puts off his ideas of Kingship and goes off to meet Duncan with Banquo.

Scene iv: King Duncan gets the news that the traitor Thane of Cawdor has been executed. Macbeth enters and Duncan thanks him for his glorious victory. Macbeth says that it was all in his duty to his king, but then hopes his eyes don't betray the evil in his heart.

Scene v-vii: Lady Macbeth gets a letter from her husband explaining all that has happened. She is anxious for the third prophesy to be fulfilled – wanting Macbeth to be king. Perhaps even more than he does. Macbeth gets to their castle where she finds out that Duncan is planning on stopping at their home on his way back to his own castle after a victory parade throughout the kingdom. She decides that the perfect plot is to murder Duncan that night so that Macbeth can usurp the throne. She shares her idea with Macbeth. The king, does, indeed come to the castle, which seems to be a peaceful and beautiful place. That night, during a great feast Macbeth has second thoughts about the plan; Lady Macbeth accuses him of being less than a man and after reconsidering, Macbeth agrees to go through with the plan.

Questions:

1. Are the witches "really" there, or just in Macbeth's mind? What evidence is there to support your answer?
2. What does Banquo mean, when he warns Macbeth "oftentimes the instruments of darkness tell us truths, win us with honest *trifles* – to betray us in deepest consequence" – What is the

meaning of the trifles word/concept here? What is betrayed in “deepest consequence” as a result? So, put all the quotation together and explain it fully. Do you agree with him?

3. After reading Macbeth’s letter telling her of the weird sister’s prophesies, what does Lady Macbeth say about Macbeth’s character? What will she do about it?
4. Lady Macbeth asks Macbeth when Duncan shall leave. Macbeth answers “on the morrow.” What does Lady Macbeth then respond? What does she mean by this?
5. What does Macbeth’s soliloquy indicate about the decision to do the murder? What does he say about judgment and about his choice to commit the crime? What are the consequences of the crime? Why shouldn’t he commit it? After all these deliberations, what does he decide?
6. Lady Macbeth then enters. Macbeth tells her of his decision. What does she say that he should do? (Be sure to include the vivid image of the baby – what is the point of this story?)
7. What will Lady Macbeth do to cover up the fact that they did the crime?
8. Why does Macbeth tell his wife that she should only have boys for children?
9. What does Macbeth mean by “false face must hide what a false heart doth know”?
10. *Why* doesn’t Banquo seem to be impacted by the witches the same way Macbeth is?