

MACBETH STUDY GUIDE

ACT ONE

Macbeth Act I, Scene i Summary

- Three witches (a.k.a. the "weird sisters") meet on a foggy heath (an open plain) in Scotland, amidst thunder and lightening. (It's all very dramatic and mysterious.)
- They discuss when they'll meet again, and decide to hook up "When the hurly-burly's done, when the battle's lost and won." The implication is that they've been up to something really naughty.
- Note: Even though the play's speech headings and stage directions refer to these three lovely ladies as "witches," the term "witch" only shows up once in the play. The sisters are, however, called "weird" six times, which seems significant because the term "weird" comes from the Old English term "wyrd," meaning "fate," aligning the three sisters with the three fates of classical mythology. (You know, the ones who controlled man's destiny.) In the opening scene, though, Shakespeare doesn't name them at all – they're referred to as "we three," which only adds to their mystery.
- They agree to get together again before sunset, and let the audience in on their plan to meet Macbeth. It seems whatever they've been plotting has included him, as this is the first mention of our title character.
- The witches then call out to Graymalkin and Paddock, who are the witches' "familiars," or spirits (usually animals like cats) that serve the witches.
- All three witches 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, hovering through the fog and filthy air.

Macbeth Act I, Scene ii Summary

- Duncan (the King of Scotland), his two sons (Malcolm and Donalbain), and Lennox (a Scottish nobleman) gather together with their attendants at a military camp in Scotland. (Check out this [nifty map of major locations](#) in the play.)
- King Duncan's forces have been busy fighting against the King of Norway and the traitor, Macdonwald.
- A wounded Captain arrives, fresh from the field, where he fought to help Duncan's son, Malcolm,

escape capture. The group asks the bleeding man for more news from the battle.

- The Captain reports that the battle wasn't looking so good – Macdonwald's forces kept arriving from Ireland and the Western Isles – until brave Macbeth fought through the "swarm" of enemy soldiers and disemboweled the traitorous Macdonwald.
- There's some hemming and hawing about Macbeth's great courage in the face of seemingly impossible adversity and the Captain continues his story: after Macbeth spilled Macdonwald's guts all over the ground, the battle flared up again when the "Norwegian Lord" brought new men to the field, but even this didn't daunt Macbeth and Banquo, who just redoubled their efforts.
- Then the Captain announces he's feeling faint from all the blood he's lost so he needs to see a surgeon, ASAP.
- The Thane of Ross arrives and announces he's just come from Fife, where the Scottish traitor, the Thane of Cawdor, has been fighting against Scotland along side the King of Norway. It turns out that Macbeth kicked serious butt here too. Sweno, Norway's king, is not allowed to bury his men until he hands over ten thousand dollars to the Scots.
- Duncan then proclaims the traitorous Thane of Cawdor will be executed, and Macbeth, responsible for the victory, shall have his title.
- Ross is sent to announce the news to Macbeth.

Macbeth Act I, Scene iii Summary

- The three witches meet again on the heath and check in about what everyone's been up to. The usual witchy stuff: one was killing swine; another recently asked a sailor's wife for her chestnuts. The sailor's wife told the lady to scram so the witches are going to punish the stingy chestnut hoarder by stirring up a little trouble (a storm with some crazy winds) for her husband's ship, which is currently at sea.
- The weird sisters are also going to torment the poor guy by depriving him of sleep and by "drain[ing] him dry as hay," which means the sailor's going to have some serious gastro-intestinal problems and/or that he's going to be unable to father children. (In the 16th and 17th centuries, it was common for people to believe in the existence of witches. It was also pretty common for people to believe that witches were in the habit of doing things like whipping up nasty storms and causing male impotence.)

- History Snack: as we know, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* during the reign of King James I of England (a.k.a. King James VI of Scotland), who was *really* interested in witchcraft – he authorized the torture of witches in Scotland in 1591 and also wrote a book on the subject, *Daemonologie*, in 1603. What started King James's witch-hunting craze? Historians note that it began in 1589, when James's betrothed, Anne of Denmark, sailed to Scotland for the wedding ceremony, the ship encountered a major storm and was forced to take refuge in Norway. James ended up traveling to Oslo, where the wedding took place. On his voyage back to Scotland with his new bride, James's ship encountered another crazy storm, which was blamed on witches. Later, six Danish women confessed to causing the storms that upset James's wedding.
- Witch #1, of chestnutty fame, also has a pilot's thumb, a convenient rhyme for "Macbeth doth come," heralded by "a drum."
- Hearing Macbeth's approach, the witches dance around in a circle to "wind up" a "charm."
- Macbeth and Banquo show up, and Macbeth delivers his first line: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." Hmm. Where have we heard that line before?
- Banquo notices the witches (they're kind of hard to miss) and speaks to them, noting they are unlike the earth's inhabitants, yet are on the earth.
- The witches put their fingers to their lips, which does not deter the perceptive Banquo from noticing their beards.
- Only when Macbeth tells them to speak do the witches call out. They hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and future King.
- Macbeth doesn't respond immediately. Banquo, who apparently took over the narration for these five lines, mentions that Macbeth is "rapt," as if he's in a trance. (Get your highlighter out – this word comes up a lot in the play.)
- Banquo asks if the witches will look into his future too. The sisters cryptically say he will be lesser and greater than Macbeth, and not too happy, but happier than Macbeth. And they say he will be father to kings, though he will not be a king himself.
- Macbeth says he's already the Thane of Glamis but it's hard to imagine becoming Thane of Cawdor, especially because the current Thane of Cawdor is alive. He demands to know where the witches got their information
- The witches don't respond, but simply vanish into the foggy, filthy air.
- Banquo suggests that maybe they're tripping on some "insane root" but conversation quickly moves on to the big news about their own fates, as promised by the witches.
- Ross and Angus, two noblemen sent by Duncan (the King), break up the party.
- Ross passes on that the King is pleased with Macbeth's battle successes of the day, and announces that the King would like to see him, and also that Macbeth is the new Thane of Cawdor.
- Macbeth does some private ruminating. If the sisters' first prophesy that Macbeth will be named Thane of Cawdor can't be evil if it's turned out to be true. On the other hand, the witch's prophesy could be evil, especially since it's got Macbeth thinking about something naughty.
- This is where we get the first inkling that Macbeth might be down for a little tyrannicide (fancy word for killing a king). He says he's just had a really awful and disgusting thought about "murder." These "horrible imaginings" make his hair stand on end and his heart beat 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.
- Macbeth concludes his dramatic musings and says that he's just going to leave things to "chance." If "chance" wants him to be king, then he doesn't have to lift a finger (against the current king) to make it happen.
- They hasten to the King, and Macbeth and Banquo agree to talk more about everything later.

Macbeth Act I, Scene iv Summary

- Duncan asks after whether the Thane of Cawdor has been done in. Cawdor is indeed dead. As he faced his death, he confessed as that he was a traitor (not so much a revelation) and repented.
- Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus then meet the King. The King is grateful; Macbeth and Banquo pledge their loyalty.
- The King announces that his son Malcolm will be named Prince of Cumberland, which is the last stop before being King of Scotland. They'll all celebrate the good news at Macbeth's place.
- Macbeth takes his leave of the group and has an aside, noting that now Malcolm is all that stands in the way of his kingship. Macbeth tells us he's

thinking naughty thoughts again and hopes nobody can tell that he's got "black and deep desires."

- Macbeth heads home before the party – King Duncan and his peeps will meet him at Glamis Castle (a.k.a. Inverness).

Macbeth Act I, Scene v Summary

- Lady Macbeth receives a letter from Macbeth, calling her his "dearest partner of greatness," and telling her of the witches' prophecy.
- Lady Macbeth says she's worried her husband's not up for killing the current king in order to fulfill the witches' prophesy. Macbeth, she says, is "too full o'th' milk of human kindness" and isn't quite wicked enough to murder Duncan. (Looks like Lady Macbeth isn't going to leave anything to "chance.")
- Lady Macbeth says she's going to browbeat her husband into action.
- When a messenger enters and announces that King Duncan will stay the night at Inverness as a guest of the Macbeths, Lady Macbeth tells us it'll be King Duncan's last night on earth.
- Then Lady Macbeth delivers one of the most interesting and astonishing speeches ever. She calls on spirits to "unsex" her, "make thick [her] blood," and exchange her breast "milk for gall."
Translation: Lady Macbeth calls on murderous agents to stop her menstrual flow and change her breast milk for poison (undo all the physical features that make her a reproductive woman). Basically, she suggests that being a woman and a mother could prevent her from committing a violent deed.
- When her husband (the guy who's "too full o'th' milk of human kindness") enters the castle, Lady Macbeth tells him that King Duncan's spending the night but he won't be waking up the next morning.

Macbeth Act I, Scene vi Summary

- Duncan, his sons, Banquo, and a bevy of noblemen arrive at Glamis Castle (Inverness), complimenting the Lady Macbeth, their "honoured hostess," for her seeming hospitality.
- Lady Macbeth is pretty charming here – she says that the Macbeth's are grateful for the "honours" bestowed on Macbeth by the king and tells the men to make themselves at home.
- There's a whole lot of very formal "You're so gracious." "Noyou're the one who's so gracious" talk here before Lady Macbeth finally takes the king to see her husband.

Macbeth Act I, Scene vii Summary

- Somewhere in the castle Macbeth sits alone, contemplating the murder of King Duncan. Now, pay attention because this part is important.
- Macbeth says that if it were simply a matter of killing the king and then moving on without consequences, it wouldn't be a big issue. The problem with murder is what happens afterward – Macbeth would be damned to hell in the afterlife. Macbeth also muses that murdering Duncan in his own home would be a serious violation of hospitality. He's supposed to protect the king, not murder him. Plus, Duncan is a pretty good king (if not a bit "meek") and heaven is bound to frown upon murdering such a good fellow. Things likely wouldn't go Macbeth's way come judgment day. Probably not a good idea to commit murder. Macbeth realizes he has no justifiable cause to kill the king and he admits that he's merely ambitious.
- In the midst of his doubt, Lady Macbeth enters.
- Macbeth announces "we will proceed no further in this business," meaning the murder plot is off.
- Lady Macbeth gives him a tongue-lashing, questions his manhood, and lays out the plan to get Duncan's guards drunk and frame them with the murder. She insists that Macbeth keep his promise to kill the King. She claims she'd tear a nursing child from her breast and "dash" its "brains out" if she had promised to do it. Therefore, if Macbeth can't keep his vow, then he isn't a man.
- Macbeth commends her for her strength (enough for the both of them, it seems) and he finally resolves to go through with the murder.