

MACBETH STUDY GUIDE

ACT THREE

Macbeth Act III, Scene i Summary

- At Macbeth's new palace in Forres, Banquo, alone on stage, delivers a soliloquy (a speech that reveals his innermost thoughts to the audience), announces that Macbeth is totally suspect – it's likely he played dirty to get the crown. (Remember, Banquo was present when the witches' prophesized that Macbeth would be king. The witches also said that Banquo's descendents would be kings as well.)
- Short of being horrified by Macbeth's act, he takes some time to note that this must mean his part of the prophecy, regarding his royal seed, will also come true.
- Banquo pipes down when the newly crowned Macbeth, his lovely Queen, and a posse of noblemen enter the room. (Macbeth is looking rather cozy wearing his new crown and hanging out in his new digs.)
- Macbeth speaks very sweetly to Banquo, calling him his honored guest and requesting his presence at a fancy banquet to be held that night.
- Banquo plays it cool and ever so casually says that he's sorry, but he has other plans. Then Macbeth ever so casually asks what Banquo will be up to, and finds out that he'll be riding off somewhere before dinner.
- Having obtained the information he needs, Macbeth changes the subject to the fact that the "bloody" Malcolm and Donalbain are suspiciously missing, and respectively hiding out with new friends in Ireland and England. Plus, it seems that Duncan's sons are busy "not confessing" to Duncan's murder – instead, they're spreading nasty rumors about their father's death.
- Macbeth adds a little "by the way" as Banquo leaves, asking if his son, Fleance, will be riding along with him that evening. Fleance will indeed be going, and upon hearing this, Macbeth bids them farewell.
- Everyone except for Macbeth and some servants leave the room.
- Macbeth then has a servant call in the men he has waiting at the gate.
- Left to himself, Macbeth launches into a long speech about why it's necessary and good to kill his friend, Banquo. Macbeth fears Banquo's noble

nature, wisdom, and valor. Plus, if the rest of the witches' prophecy comes true, Macbeth notes he will have sold his soul to the devil (by killing Duncan) for Banquo's kids to take his crown.

- He concludes his speech by inviting fate to wrestle with him, and says he won't give up until he's won or dead. (Gosh. It seems like it's getting a whole lot easier for Macbeth to think about murder, don't you think? It is interesting to compare Macbeth's attitude towards murder here to what he was thinking at the beginning of the play.)
- The two men at the gate are brought in, and we discover that Macbeth intends for them to murder Banquo and his son while on their ride. Macbeth gives speeches to the two murderers about how Banquo is their enemy and anything bad that has ever happened to them is surely Banquo's fault.
- Macbeth says that no turn-the-other-cheek Christianity is necessary here.
- The murderers respond by saying that they are only "men," and then Macbeth uses the technique he learned while being berated by his own wife: he claims they're not real men if they're not brave enough to murder a man for their own good. (Seriously. It sounds like he's channeling his wife here.)
- The henchmen point out that such speeches are lost on them, as their lives are pretty crappy anyway. They're fine with taking a chance on eternal damnation.
- Macbeth notes that Banquo is his enemy, too, and he'd do the kingly thing and just have him publicly killed, except that they have a lot of mutual friends, which might make things a little awkward.
- The murderers agree to kill Banquo, after which Macbeth throws in that they'll have to kill the boy Fleance, too. He'll let them know within the hour about where to find Banquo, but right now he has to go get ready for a dinner party.

Macbeth Act III, Scene ii Summary

- Lady Macbeth asks a servant if Banquo is already gone, and finding he has left, asks the servant to get Macbeth for a little chat.
- Macbeth comes along, and Lady Macbeth tells him to look more chipper and not dwell on dark thoughts, as "what's done is done." Macbeth points out they've merely scorched the snake, not killed it.
- Macbeth compares dead Duncan's death as a state preferable to his; at least Duncan doesn't have to worry about loose ends.

- Lady Macbeth would rather he not be a downer at the party, and says as much.
- Macbeth says she should say a lot of really nice things about Banquo, who will be otherwise engaged and not attending the dinner party. ("Otherwise engaged" = dead.)
- Lady Macbeth thinks this is a bad idea, but Macbeth points out that so long as Banquo and Fleance live, his mind is full of scorpions.
- Lady Macbeth states that everybody dies, which may be a warning to Macbeth to cool it, or may be a self-reassurance that everyone has to go sometime, so her husband might as well murder their friend and his young son.
- Macbeth again points out that something dreadful will be done, and in one of her less astute moments, Lady Macbeth asks what that naughty thing might possibly be.
- Macbeth dodges the question, saying it's better for her to "be innocent" and not know his plans until they're accomplished and she can applaud him for it. (Hmm. It seems like Lady Macbeth no longer gets any say in her husband's affairs.)
- Macbeth appeals to nature to let night's black agents do their thing, and then he exits with Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth Act III, Scene iii Summary

- At a park near the palace, the two murderers are joined by a third. Only a bit of light remains in the sky.
- Banquo and Fleance approach on horseback and dismount to walk the mile to the palace, as usual.
- Banquo and Fleance have a torch, which is convenient for the murderers to see them by.
- Banquo begins with a friendly "it looks like rain" conversation with the murderers, and then is promptly stabbed.
- While being stabbed, he denounces the treachery and encourages Fleance to run away and eventually take revenge. In the meantime, the torch has gone out, and Fleance takes advantage of the darkness to escape.
- Banquo squarely dead and Fleance on the run, the murderers head off to the dinner party to report the half of the job they've done.

Macbeth Act III, Scene iv Summary

- Meanwhile, back at the dinner party, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Ross, Lennox, other lords, and attendants are about to share the new King's

celebratory meal. Macbeth makes a big show of welcoming everyone, as does Lady Macbeth.

- The first murderer enters as everyone is being seated. Macbeth darts off to see the first murderer, who informs him that they've slit Banquo's throat, but that Fleance has escaped.
- Macbeth laments the loss, as now Banquo is dead, but Macbeth's fear lives on in Banquo's son, heir and threat to Macbeth's newly won throne. He says Fleance is but yet a young snake, and time will surely make him grown venomous with revenge. In the meantime, at least Banquo is dead. The murderer is sent off, and Lady Macbeth calls Macbeth back to the party.
- And now the fun begins: Banquo's ghost shows up. Because the ghost is silent, he gets to creep around quite a bit before anyone notices. While everyone is busy not noticing, Macbeth raises a toast and calls special attention to Banquo's absence as unkindness or mischance on Banquo's part. This is particularly hilarious given the presence of...Banquo's ghost.
- Again Macbeth is invited to sit, and in the spot they've reserved for him sits...Banquo's ghost. Naturally, Macbeth goes into a fit, and the lords all take notice, while Lady Macbeth excuses him for these "momentary" fits he has had since childhood. She urges them to keep eating, and then corners Macbeth, who is still hysterical.
- Lady Macbeth asks if Macbeth is a man, because he's not acting like one so much as he is acting like a sissy. Lady Macbeth dismisses the vision as a painting of his own fear. Meanwhile, Macbeth is discoursing with the ghost that only he sees, and it disappears.
- Macbeth notes it is unnatural for murdered men to not stay murdered. He is also still pretty wired. At Lady Macbeth's chiding, he apologizes to the group for his momentary fit and seems normal again until the ghost shows up once more. Again Macbeth calls out a toast to the missing Banquo (he's just asking for it now) and noting the ghost, screams out at him that if he appeared in any other form, Macbeth's nerves would not tremble.
- After some challenging along this line, it's pretty clear the party's over, and though Macbeth tries to recover, he scolds everyone else for seeming to be so calm in the face of such a horrible sight.
- Lady Macbeth tells the now very worried lords to leave immediately, and as they exit, Macbeth philosophizes that blood will have blood.
- Morning is now approaching, and Macbeth points out that Macduff never showed at the party. He lets out that he has had a spy in Macduff's house.

He promises to go to the witches the next day, and announces that he's in so deep a river of blood, it would be as hard to go back as to cross.

- Lady Macbeth, wearied, insists he just lacks sleep. The scene concludes with Macbeth suggesting that his fears are just the effect of being young at the murdering/tyranny game. They go to bed, with more murder to follow.

Macbeth Act III, Scene v Summary

- The witches again meet at an open place, this time with Hecate, the goddess of witches, who lays into the weird sisters in a lengthy, rhyming speech that sounds a bit like a nursery rhyme. She is angry at them for meddling in the affairs of Macbeth without consulting her first, as she could've done a better job. Also, she points out, Macbeth isn't devoted to them, but to his own ends.
- Nevertheless, Hecate will take over the lead in the affair, and she charges them to all meet in the morning, when Macbeth will come to know his destiny, whatever that means. Hecate will create more illusions to add to his confusion, and instill in him a false hope that he might save the crown yet.
- Meanwhile, some spirits sing that Hecate should "come away" with them.
- Then there's a catchy witch song and dance and everyone exits after Hecate.
- FYI: Some literary critics believe that Shakespeare wasn't responsible for this episode. Act III, scene iv, according to some, is far too hokey to be Shakespeare's work so it must have been added to the play some time between the time the play was first written (1606) and its publication, in the first folio (1623), which was after Shakespeare's death (1616). A fellow playwright, Thomas Middleton, may have written the snazzy songs in this scene.

Macbeth Act III, Scene vi Summary

- The same night, elsewhere in Scotland, the nobleman Lennox discusses Scotland's plight with another lord. They find it curious that Duncan was murdered, that his run-away sons were blamed, that Banquo has now been murdered, that *his* run-away son (Fleance) is being blamed, and that everyone has a major case of déjà vu. Plus, the murders of Banquo and Duncan were too conveniently grieved by Macbeth, who had the most to gain from the deaths. They call Macbeth a "tyrant," and then note that Macduff has joined Malcolm in England.

- Malcolm and Macduff are doing a pretty good job of convincing the oh-so gracious and "pious" King Edward of England, along with some English noblemen, to help them in the fight against Macbeth, the tyrant.
- FYI: Shakespeare's giving England and King Edward the Confessor (1042-1066) some serious props here.
- The other noblemen pray that Malcolm and Macduff might be successful and restore some order to the kingdom, even though news of the planned rebellion has reached Macbeth and he is preparing for war. The noblemen tell us that Macbeth had sent a message for Macduff to join him, and Macduff's answer was a firm "no." The deck seems to be stacked against Macbeth, at this point.