

MACBETH STUDY GUIDE

ACT FOUR

Macbeth Act IV, Scene i Summary

- On a dark and stormy night, the three witches are hanging out in a cave roasting marshmallows and chanting spells around a boiling cauldron, into which they cast all sorts of nasty bits, from lizard's leg to the finger of a "birth-strangled babe." Hecate enters, announcing "something wicked this way comes." Not surprisingly, Macbeth promptly follows. (So does a [Ray Bradbury](#) novel and cinematic adaptation, but not for another few centuries.)
- Macbeth gives the witches some props for being able to control the weather and conjure crazy winds that batter churches, cause huge ocean waves to "swallow" ships, destroy crops, topple castles, and so on. (Hmm...this reminds us of Act I, scene iii, where the witches say they're going to punish a sailor's wife by whipping up a nasty little storm for her husband, who is at sea.)
- Macbeth says he has some more questions about his future and he wants some answers from the weird sisters, pronto.
- The witches add some more ingredients to the cauldron, and then apparitions begin to appear, each addressing Macbeth.
- First, an armed head warns him to beware of Macduff. Second, a bloody child promises, "None of woman born shall harm Macbeth." Macbeth welcomes this good news and, assuming Macduff was born the natural way, Macbeth thinks he has nothing to fear.
- Though he has no need to kill Macduff now, he pledges to do it anyway – you know, just in case.
- The third apparition is a child wearing a crown with a tree in his hand. The child promises that Macbeth won't be conquered until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane. This seems about as unlikely as Macduff not being born of a woman.
- Given all of this, Macbeth feels safe that he won't be conquered in the upcoming war. But again, to be on the safe side, he still asks if Banquo's children will ever rule the kingdom.
- He is warned to ask no more questions.
- He demands to be answered anyway.
- Macbeth is *not* pleased when he's shown a line of eight kings, the last of which holds a mirror that

- reflects on many more such kings. One of the kings in the mirror happens to be holding two orbs.
- Time for a History Snack: King James I of England (a.k.a. King James VI of Scotland) traced his lineage back to Banquo and, at his coronation ceremony in England (1603) James held two orbs (one representing England and one representing Scotland). Quite a coincidence, don't you think?
- The apparitions disappear and the witches tease Macbeth for looking horrible when he saw his future destruction. The witches do yet another song and dance routine and they vanish.
- Enter Lennox to find a perplexed Macbeth. Lennox tells Macbeth the news that Macduff has *definitely* run away to England, presumably to get some help for a rebellion.
- Get your highlighter out because this next bit is important: Macbeth says that from now on, he's going to act immediately on whatever thought enters his mind: "From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand." In other words, no more thinking and contemplating about the pros and cons of being bad – he's just to do whatever the heck he feels like doing.
- Starting with... wiping out Macduff's entire family, especially his kids, since Macbeth doesn't ever want to see any little Macduffs running around.

Macbeth Act IV, Scene ii Summary

- At Fife, in Macduff's castle, Lady Macduff is lamenting to Ross that her husband has run away, which, even if he wasn't a traitor, makes him look like a traitor. Also, abandoning his family with no defense is pretty lame. Ross assures her that her husband has his reasons.
- Lady Macduff then has a funny bit of banter with her young son about how his father is dead. Before she can go to market to buy a new husband, a messenger enters advising her to flee with her children, as danger is fast approaching.
- Thinking she has done no wrong, she sees no reason to leave, though she notes in these times one need do no harm to come to harm. A murderer enters, claiming Macduff is a traitor. Macduff's son retorts, is stabbed, and then dies, leaving the murderers to pursue his mother, Lady Macduff.

Macbeth Act IV, Scene iii Summary

- Near King Edward's palace in England, Malcolm and Macduff discuss what to do about Scotland's plight under the tyrannous Macbeth. Malcolm suggests finding a nice shady spot where they can cry their eyes out. Macduff says he's got a better idea – he suggests that they whip out our swords and fight like "men" against the good-for-nothing Macbeth.
- Malcolm says that's a good idea but he worries Macduff might have something to gain by turning on him, (Malcolm) and betraying him to Macbeth. Besides, Macduff doesn't seem like a loyal guy these days, having abandoned his family back in Scotland and all.
- Macduff says he's loyal and trustworthy.
- Still, Malcolm's a little paranoid so he decides to test Macduff by suggesting that even he, Malcolm, might make a poor king, were they to defeat Macbeth. Scotland would suffer, he says, under his own bad habits. Malcolm claims to have an impossible lust that would only get worse as he devoured all of the maidens of Scotland.
- Macduff at first insists there are plenty of maidens in Scotland, and Malcolm would be satisfied.
- Malcolm presses further about how bad he would be as king, and Macduff finally despairs that Scotland apparently is going to be in trouble either way.
- Malcolm then relents because he sees Macduff is truly devoted to Scotland, not to a political alliance. Malcolm then admits that not only is he not lustful, he's never even "known" a woman.
- Macduff and Malcolm are allied in the cause of taking Scotland back from Macbeth, and they have an army of ten thousand Englishmen at their backs, ready to fight and kill.
- Then a doctor shows up (rather unexpectedly) and talks about how King Edward is tending to a crew of poor souls afflicted by a nasty disease called "scrofula," which the King heals with his touch. It's implied that it's helpful to have a genuine king, as he gets his power from God and can do cool stuff like cure diseases and rule with an iron fist.
- We interrupt this program for a History Snack: Scrofula (what we now know is a form of tuberculosis that affects the lymph nodes and skin) was also called the "King's Evil" and it was thought to be cured by a little something called the "Royal Touch," a kind of laying on of hands ceremony that was performed by monarchs in France and England as far back as the middle ages. The healing ceremony was supposedly started in England by King Edward the Confessor (who's a swell king in *Macbeth*). In a book called *The Royal Touch*, historian Marc Bloch writes that King James I (who sat on the throne when *Macbeth* was first written and performed) wasn't exactly thrilled about performing this ceremony – he thought it was superstitious – but he did it anyway.
- Then Ross, a Scottish nobleman, appears in England and has a chat with Malcolm and Macduff about how Scotland is in a bad way. Macduff asks after his family, and Ross initially says they are unmolested by the tyrant Macbeth. He adds that if Macduff were to return, Scotland might gather and take up arms against Macbeth. Malcolm promises when they finally arrive in Scotland, ten thousand English soldiers will come, too.
- Ross then announces he has some bad news, actually. Macduff offers to guess at it, but before he does Ross blurts out that, contrary to what he said before, Macduff's family has been gruesomely murdered.
- Macduff despairs and blames himself for leaving. Malcolm recommends that Macduff take his own advice and begin murdering out of revenge instead of crying. Macduff vows to slay Macbeth, committing to action instead of thought.