

# MACBETH STUDY GUIDE

## ACT FIVE

### Macbeth Act V, Scene i Summary

- Back in Scotland, at Macbeth's castle in Dunsinane, a doctor waits with one of Lady Macbeth's gentlewomen. The two keep watch for Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, which the gentlewoman reported began once Macbeth left to prepare the house for battle. The gentlewoman refuses to tell the doctor what else she's seen or heard during Lady Macbeth's nightly strolls.
- Lady Macbeth shows up walking (make that sleepwalking). She carries a candle, and the gentlewoman notes she insists on always having a light about her. They proceed to watch Lady Macbeth ramble through a tortured speech, at once trying to clean her hands of an imaginary spot (that would be blood, don't you think?) and chiding her invisible husband to be brave at what must be done. All the hand wringing and her question, "Who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?" leave little doubt as to what vexes the lady. (This is also where we get the famous line, "Out, damned spot!")
- In her sleep, she further assures her invisible husband that Banquo, being now dead, cannot trouble them. She goes back and forth in her speech between strength and self-pity – "what's done cannot be undone." The doctor diagnoses Lady Macbeth with a heavy heart and says he can do nothing to help her.
- Then the doctor says he's heard a lot of nasty little rumors that are floating around and says it sounds like Lady Macbeth probably needs help from the divine (a priest or God), not a doctor.

### Macbeth Act V, Scene ii Summary

- Scottish noblemen, including Lennox, Menteth, Cathness and Angus converge in the country near Dunsinane, where Macbeth keeps his castle. We learn from Menteth that on their heels is the English army, led by Malcolm, his Uncle Siward, and Macduff. They'll all meet up near Birnam Wood. (Sound familiar?) We learn that Donalbain is not with his brother and that a great many young men have taken up arms with the English army.
- Cathness informs the group that the tyrant King is hell-bent on protecting Dunsinane, and though

Macbeth is thought mad by some, and valiant by others, it's quickly becoming clear that his actions are in his own interests and not the nation's. Everyone agrees that Macbeth's a lousy king and needs to go. They all agree to fight wholeheartedly for Scotland.

### Macbeth Act V, Scene iii Summary

- Macbeth is at his castle with the doctor and his attendants, and seems charged for battle. He is confidently bombastic – sure that he can't be defeated because of the sisters' new prophecy. He can't imagine Birnam Wood moving to march on Dunsinane, nor that any man could not be of-woman-born. Macbeth contends that with this knowledge, his heart is doubtless and fearless.
- Just then, a messenger enters with the doubtful and fearful news that there are ten thousand somethings marching to Dunsinane.
- Macbeth guesses that the somethings are geese. Seriously.
- The messenger says no, good try, but actually they're men coming to kill you.
- The messenger is much abused.
- Macbeth then thinks on himself. He says he has lived long enough; it is clear he will not have a peaceful old age, but rather will have fight to the last (which might be very soon).
- Macbeth confirms the news of the approaching army, as well as the lack of geese, via his servant Seyton, and then decides to don his armor to face them head on. He then asks the doctor about his Lady.
- The doctor reports she isn't sick so much as she is plagued by ill fantasies. Macbeth suggests that the doctor cure her, sooner rather than later.
- The doctor replies that the woman's got to fix herself.
- Macbeth attends to the battle again, and asks whether the doctor has the means to purge the English from the countryside of Scotland. The only sensible one in the lot, the doctor, says no amount of money could convince him to stay near the madhouse of Dunsinane.

### Macbeth Act V, Scene iv Summary

- Malcolm, Siward, and Macduff meet with Menteth, Cathness and Angus, Lennox, and Ross at Birnam Wood. A plan is hatched to have soldiers cut down some branches to hide themselves under during the march to Dunsinane.

- Many of Macbeth's men have deserted him, and it's clear that those still siding with Macbeth don't believe in the cause. Still, Macbeth is so set in his certainty of victory that he is willing to let them march right up to Dunsinane, thinking the castle (and he) is protected from harm by the witches' prophecy. At this point, it might be wise to review that prophecy.

## Macbeth Act V, Scene v Summary

- Macbeth (still at Dunsinane) insists that banners be hung outside the castle.
- Many of his former forces are now fighting against him on the English side, making it difficult for him to meet the army in a glorious blaze. He does not despair though, as Dunsinane is so fortified that he imagines the enemy army will die of hunger and sickness before he ever even needs to leave the castle. In other words, he's going to wait this one out.
- In the meantime, a shrieking of women tells Macbeth that his wife is dead – it's suicide. Macbeth here launches into one of Shakespeare's (and literature's) best known and oft-quoted speeches, beginning "She should have died hereafter," meaning one of two things: she would've died eventually so she might as well have died today or, she should have died later because I'm super busy defending the castle right now. (As an aside, Macbeth's statement in this scene that "Life's but a walking shadow [...] a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury" is maybe the first occurrence of Existentialist thought in literature—it's also the basis of William Faulkner's famous work, *The Sound and the Fury*.)
- Macbeth is quickly distracted by the news that a "grove" of trees seem to be moving towards Dunsinane, which is all around bad news, since said "grove" is likely Birnam Wood. Macbeth, realizing the prophecy was as twisted as the prophets, decides to go out and face the army, leaving his fortress. He admits he is weary of the sun anyway, and if one must go down, best to go down fighting.

## Macbeth Act V, Scene vi Summary

- Malcolm, Siward and Macduff land their army (covered with branches from Birnam Wood) outside Dunsinane. Siward will lead the battle with his son, and Malcolm and Macduff will take the rear and manage everything else.

- The soldiers drop their "leafy screens," the alarms sound, and the battle for Scotland begins.

## Macbeth Act V, Scene vii Summary

- Macbeth appears on stage and compares himself to a bear in a bear-baiting contest (i.e. he's in a serious jam).
- History Snack: Bear-baiting is a blood sport that involves chaining a bear to a stake and setting a pack of dogs on it. Elizabethans thought this was great fun – bear-baiting arenas were located in the same neighborhoods as the theaters (just in case anyone wanted to take in a play and then top off their day of fun with a little animal cruelty).
- Then Young Siward enters – when he sees Macbeth, he demands to know his name.

Macbeth's response? I'm "Macbeth" and you better be scared right now.

- They fight and Young Siward is slain. Macbeth talks some evil smack over the dead body, which goes something like this: Your swords and weapons can't touch me because you're "of woman born."

## Macbeth Act V, Scene viii Summary

- Macduff runs on stage looking for Macbeth (who is no longer on stage) and screams for the evil tyrant Macbeth to come out and show his ugly face.
- Macduff says he's hot to kill Macbeth with his own sword because he'll likely be haunted by his wife and kids if he doesn't. He begs "fortune" to let him find Macbeth so he can stab him in the guts.

## Macbeth Act V, Scene ix Summary

- Malcolm and Siward (the father of the young man Macbeth recently killed) run across the stage looking for Macbeth. Siward says "This way, my lord" and then states some obvious facts for the audience – there's a lot of fighting going on at the castle, the thanes are fighting exceptionally well, and Malcolm's pretty close to victory.

## Macbeth Act V, Scene x Summary

- Macbeth enters the stage alone and says he refuses to "play the Roman fool" (one who would choose noble suicide in the face of defeat –

see *Antony and Cleopatra*). Instead, he will lash out at any living thing he sees, so valueless is life.

- Macduff enters and calls Macbeth a "hell-hound" and Macbeth talks a little trash in return: I already killed your family so you best be steppin' back now unless you want me to have *your* blood on my hands too.
- Macduff is having none of it. They fight, and Macbeth continues to be cocky. He says Macduff hasn't got a chance since he, Macbeth, can't be killed by anyone "of woman born."
- That's funny, says Macduff, because "Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped." Note: That means he was delivered, prematurely, via cesarean section. And yes, Macduff actually refers to himself in the third person here.
- Upon hearing this news, Macbeth curses the "juggling fiends" who knowingly gave him a sense of false security by issuing a twisted prophesy.
- Realizing this, Macbeth says he will fight Macduff no more, yet he will not yield to Malcolm as an ordinary citizen.
- Then he thinks about it and realizes he really has to pick one. Though he knows he is beat by the prophecy, he fights to the last. Macbeth throws up his shield but is slain by Macduff anyway.

serious trouble. And, by the way, it turns out that Lady Macbeth killed herself. Don't worry, though, because King Malcolm's going to fix *everything* in due time. For now, it's time to party – everyone's invited to the coronation ceremony at Scone.

## Macbeth Act V, Scene xi Summary

- Malcolm, Siward, Ross, the thanes and soldiers all assess what's been going down during the battle at the castle. It looks like Siward's son (Young Siward) and Macduff are missing.
- Ross delivers the news that Young Siward was slain by Macbeth. That's OK, says Young Siward's dad, at least he died "like a man." Old Siward goes on to say that if he had a lot of sons, he'd wish all of them could die in battle.
- Things get even better when Macduff shows up with Macbeth's severed head and says hey guys, look what I've got!
- Everyone turns to Malcolm and yells "Hail, King of Scotland." (Hmm. Isn't that how the witches greeted Macbeth back at the beginning of the play?)
- Malcolm hushes everyone and delivers the play's final speech, which goes something like this: All the Scottish thanes will be made earls, as in the English system, making them the first earls in Scottish history. Plus, everyone who had to flee the country because of Macbeth's tyranny can come back home now. But, all those who helped "the dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" are going to be in