



# What Happens in *Macbeth*

## A Tragedy by William Shakespeare

*Shakespeare's language is complex, and it can be difficult to follow the story from reading the play alone. We hope this simple description of what happens in the play will make it easier as you dive into the delights of Shakespeare's text.*

Three unusual characters who call themselves 'weird sisters' share their plans to meet with Macbeth after a battle. On the battlefield, the Scottish monarch Duncan hears a report of how the generals Macbeth and Banquo have fought bravely to defeat a rebellion. Before returning to Duncan's camp, Macbeth and Banquo encounter the Weird Sisters, three unusual characters who predict Macbeth will first be Thane of Cawdor, and then the future monarch.

Before vanishing, the Weird Sisters also predict that Banquo's descendants will be monarchs. Ross and Lennox arrive with news that Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor, apparently fulfilling the first of the Weird Sisters' prophecies. Duncan greets Macbeth with great affection and praise but names Malcolm next in line to the throne. (Malcolm is Duncan's eldest child.) This creates an obstacle in Macbeth's pursuit of the crown. Duncan announces a plan to spend the night at Macbeth's castle, and Macbeth leaves to share the news with Lady Macbeth so they can get their home ready before their guests arrive.

Lady Macbeth hears of the prophecies through a letter from Macbeth, who then arrives home with news of Duncan's visit. The two devise a plan to murder Duncan while the monarch is their guest that night. When Macbeth expresses some doubt, Lady Macbeth insists that they proceed. Macbeth murders Duncan, and Lady Macbeth makes it appear that it was Duncan's own guards who were responsible. The next morning Macduff arrives with Lennox to call on Duncan as commanded, but instead finds Duncan murdered. Duncan's children, Malcolm and Donalbain, fear for their safety and flee. Macbeth is crowned as the new monarch.

Macbeth is not entirely happy in this new position. It bothers Macbeth that the Weird Sisters foretold that Banquo's descendants – not Macbeth's – would be royalty. At the same time, Banquo is starting to wonder if Macbeth may have been responsible for Duncan's murder, and this suspicion poses a threat to Macbeth.

Macbeth hires murderers to kill Banquo and Banquo's child Fleance; they succeed with Banquo, but Fleance escapes. That evening, during a celebratory feast, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost among the guests at the table and becomes deeply distressed, ruining the celebration. Macbeth returns to the Weird Sisters to hear more prophecies. They use magic to conjure apparitions that give Macbeth ambiguous advice: 1) Macbeth should fear Macduff, 2) no one born of woman can hurt Macbeth, and 3) that Macbeth will never be vanquished until the forest called Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane castle.

Meanwhile, Macduff travels to England to convince Malcolm to invade Scotland and take the throne from Macbeth. Ross joins them with news that Macbeth has had murderers kill Macduff's entire family. Back in Scotland, a doctor and a bystander observe Lady Macbeth sleepwalking, talking about Duncan's murder, and complaining of having bloody hands.

As the invading army approaches Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane, Malcolm orders the soldiers to carry tree branches to hide their numbers. This, of course, gives the appearance that Birnam Wood is moving toward Dunsinane. Macbeth hears news that Lady Macbeth has died, presumably by suicide. On the battlefield, Macbeth faces Macduff and brags of the Weird Sisters' prophecy that 'none of woman born shall harm Macbeth'. We find out that Macduff was delivered through a Caesarean birth. So Macduff was not, technically, born of a woman (by a very narrow definition of the word 'born'). Macbeth refuses to surrender and is killed by Macduff. The soldiers hail Malcolm as their new monarch.



## Questions for you to consider

- What sort of setting do you imagine for the play? Think about time, place, and stylistic qualities.
- Choose a character you find especially interesting. What part of their story do you want to explore? How do you imagine the character feels about the different events in the story?
- What did you find surprising about the events in the play? Which parts would you find most interesting to see on stage? Which events would you want to bring to life?

## A note about our style

We've adopted two key approaches when describing the events of the play. First, we've eliminated as much of the gendered language as possible. We'd like everyone to have the freedom to identify with any character that interests them. Second, we've done our best to simply describe the events, without offering an interpretation of how characters might be feeling. Again, we want to provide room for your interpretations.

To learn more about the characters in the play, see our Discovery Zone resource, *Who's Who in Macbeth*