

The Story of Macbeth

Macbeth and his Lady live in the castle of Dunsinane, surrounded by Birnum Wood. Macbeth and his friend Banquo, brave and noble generals, put down a rebellion against King Duncan, led by Macdonwald and the Thane of Cawdor. As they go to meet with the King – who has heard of their success from a bloody Captain – they encounter three strange women, who hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland, then declare that Banquo shall beget a line of kings, though he will not himself wear the crown. Macbeth is immediately met by Ross and Angus who bring news that Macbeth, already Thane of Glamis, has been rewarded by Duncan with the additional lands and title of the Thane of Cawdor. The generals meet up with the King, who seems to thwart Macbeth’s fated hopes by naming his eldest son Malcolm as official heir to the throne. Duncan announces that the entire court will travel on to Dunsinane to celebrate with a great feast. Macbeth writes to his Lady of all the strange and wonderful news and, upon returning home, learns she is resolute in a horrific plan: they will that night kill Duncan as he sleeps as a guest in their home. When, during the celebratory banquet, Macbeth has second thoughts, Lady Macbeth challenges his manhood and his love and spurs him on to carry out the dark deed.

Banquo and Macbeth meet in the dark night and remember the strange prophesies. As Macbeth contemplates the night’s work, he sees a dagger floating in the air before him, drawing him on to act. Lady Macbeth has drugged the king’s bodyguards, and Macbeth stabs and kills the king. But when he returns with the bloody daggers his courage fails him and his wife must return to the scene of the crime to replace them. The guilty pair are startled by a loud knocking and retire to bed as a drunken Porter opens the door to Macduff and Lennox who have come to wake the king. When they go to see him they discover the murder; Macbeth – in a fit of passion, he claims – kills the drugged and sleeping guards and as the gathered lords try to solve the mystery, Lady Macbeth faints, and must be looked after. King Duncan’s sons, not trusting their own safety, decide to flee to foreign friends. Later Ross, who is traveling to Macbeth’s coronation at Scone, and Macduff, going home to Fife, meet an Old Nurse who talks of many strange and unnatural occurrences.

Macbeth and his Lady, now King and Queen, invite Banquo to a celebratory dinner, and Macbeth learns that Banquo and his son Fleance will spend the afternoon riding in the country. Hoping to secure the throne for his own descendants, Macbeth hires a pair of murderers to kill the two as they return that evening. In his growing paranoia, he refuses to divulge his plot to his curious wife. The murderers waylay and kill Banquo; however, Fleance flees to safety. At the evening’s grand banquet, Macbeth wonders aloud why Banquo has not appeared and is startled when the bloody ghost of his former friend, invisible to all others, sits at the dinner table. The alarmed guests are sent home as Lady Macbeth encourages her husband to heal his troubled soul with sleep. Unrest is spreading through the kingdom; Macduff has been declared a traitor and Malcolm is in England, with many hoping he will return and claim his rightful throne.

Macbeth’s troubled mind causes him to visit the weyward women once again to learn the future. They tell him to beware of Macduff; that no man of woman born will ever harm him; and that he is safe until Birnum Wood comes to Dunsinane. But then a vision of Banquo’s heirs, all wearing crowns, appears. At Macduff’s castle in Fife, a worried Ross warns Lady Macduff of her danger. She must explain to her young child that her father is a traitor. Murderers arrive, and brutally kill Lady Macduff and all her children. Macduff meanwhile has gone to see Malcolm in England, where Malcolm tests his loyalty. When news of the tragic murders reach him, Macduff is heartbroken and pledges to fight with Malcolm against Macbeth.

Back at Dunsinane, the Nurse and Gentlewoman witness Lady Macbeth sleepwalking and speaking of Duncan’s murder. The English army is approaching as Macbeth learns that his wife has died. The English army, disguising their approach, has cut boughs from Birnum Wood. When Macbeth hears this news, he begins to understand the duplicity of the witches’ prophesies. During the ensuing attack, Macbeth slays Young Siward and again feels invincible. Macduff finds Macbeth and engages him in battle and Macbeth learns that Macduff was cut from his mother’s womb – not born, as it were, of woman. Macduff slays Macbeth and Malcolm reclaims the crown as his own. A heavy peace descends on a ravished land.



Costume Sketch by Abra Berman