

WHAT HAPPENS IN ACT III, MACBETH

Scene I At the palace, Banquo, alone, gives voice to his thoughts - Macbeth has everything the witches promised, but Banquo suspects Macbeth was Duncan's murderer. He muses that perhaps the witches' prophecy may come true for him, too, and that he will be the father of kings. Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and several courtiers come in. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth tell Banquo that he will be their chief guest at the banquet that evening. Macbeth tells Banquo of affairs of state on which he would have asked Banquo's advice if Banquo were not going out for a long ride that afternoon. He complains that Malcolm and Donalbain are in England and Ireland, apparently spreading rumours of some sort. When the others leave, Macbeth asks the servant to show in two men waiting to see him. While he is alone, Macbeth reveals his state of mind. He is uneasy about Banquo and sees him as a threat. Also, it rankles that he has committed murder, has sold his soul to the devil, actually, in order that Banquo's descendants, not his own, will reign in Scotland. The murderers come in, and Macbeth talks to them about Banquo. He convinces them that he is an enemy to them and to Macbeth himself. But Macbeth cannot banish Banquo without bringing others' disapproval upon himself. Thus, he needs the murderers. They must kill Banquo and Fleance that very night; he will give them specific instructions as to time and place later.



Questions and Answers Act III Scene I

1. *Paraphrase the soliloquy of Banquo, and that of Macbeth.*

Banquo's brief soliloquy reveals his mind: he distrusts Macbeth, and he is personally interested in the promises made to himself by the witches.

Macbeth says that he feels unsafe; he fears the daring, wise and valiant Banquo, for Banquo, he suspects, is interested in the kingship for his sons; if they become kings then he, Macbeth, has done all this evil for nothing, and has lost his soul for Banquo's heirs! Never! Never! He will challenge Fate itself, and fight to the end.

2. *Retell the story of Macbeth's proceeding against Banquo; the cause, the opportunity, the agents and the practical details.*

Macbeth knows that Banquo and his son, Fleance, will be out riding that afternoon, and will not return until after dark. Macbeth brings in two murderers. We learn that in a previous meeting he had convinced them that Banquo was the man who brought them to misfortune and held them there. Now he sifts them to see whether they are really determined. They are. They are given their commission - to kill Banquo that evening and Fleance with him. It must be done soon after dark, at some distance from the palace; he, Macbeth, must not be incriminated. He dare not, he said, alienate certain friends - he must actually weep for poor Banquo whom he has slain. He concludes, almost jauntily, commending Banquo's soul to heaven, if it is fit for that place. Banquo remains a good man, but in the eyes of some, slightly tarnished. Is he too much interested in the promise to his sons? He plainly suspects Macbeth now and it is likely that he did also on the night of the murder. Why then, did he not do something to alert others? To protect the king? For his silence, whether induced by fear, or by lack of will, or self-interest, he must die.



Scene II Lady Macbeth sends a servant to tell Macbeth she wishes to speak to him. In a brief soliloquy, she reveals that her new status as queen has brought her no contentment since she and Macbeth gained status by "destruction." When Macbeth comes in, she chides him for keeping too much to himself and brooding. She says that what's done must be forgotten. Macbeth says, metaphorically, that they have not succeeded in making their position secure and that it would be better to be dead than to live in fear. Lady Macbeth tells him to put on a cheerful appearance for the night's banquet. He tells her to do the same and to be especially attentive to Banquo, whose friendship they need. He then suggests that Banquo and his son are a threat and hints of a dark deed to be done, but does not tell his wife exactly what he has in mind.

Questions and Answers Act III Scene II

Describe the mental and emotional state of the Macbeths as revealed in this scene, and the attitude to each other of husband and wife.

In this brief scene, we come near to pitying Macbeth, but only because we realize that "the way of the sinner is hard". Macbeth is filled with fear, is almost envious of Duncan, and is tossed by horrible dreams. Full of scorpions is his mind and this stirs our pity even though he, himself, bred those same scorpions. He is almost kind, affectionate towards his "dearest partner of greatness". And he is still the poet, and the man of imagination. But he is resolved to go on with his evil, protected by the evil things of night and its black agents. He thinks, foolish man, that he can make himself secure by doing more evil deeds.

Lady Macbeth has become a sad, disappointed woman. "We have gained nothing; we have lost all". She is deserted by her husband, and troubled by his "sorry fancies". Kindly, however, she tries to cheer his drooping spirits, and to counsel him. She is evidently aghast at his headlong eloquence and poetic flight, for he says, "Thou marvellest at my words."

Scene III A third murderer, a stranger, joins the other two, saying Macbeth sent him. It is just after sunset when Banquo and Fleance appear. The murderers attack and kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes.

Questions and Answers Act III Scene III

1. *What makes this scene dramatic?*

The murderers crouching in the dark and waiting, the mysterious third murderer, the sounds of horses' hoofs and approaching voices, the entrance of Fleance and Banquo, the torch, the sudden attack, a man slain, Fleance escaping the sudden darkness, and the speed in which all is done.

2. *Was Macbeth the third murderer?*

Yes - his knowledge of everything - the place, the time, the instructions; his disquiet at the light being put out and Fleance escaping.

No - he is already at the banquet; he asks the murderer if Banquo is slain, and he is suddenly shaken by the news that Fleance has escaped. Macbeth had plenty of other henchmen to do this deed, and to spy upon the other two murderers.

Scene IV The banquet begins with Macbeth greeting his guests. The murderers appear at the door, and Macbeth speaks to them. Discovering that only Banquo was killed, he is at first gravely troubled, then rationalizes that Fleance is no threat at present. Banquo's ghost appears to Macbeth, sitting in the seat he was going to occupy. On seeing the ghost, Macbeth acts so strangely that the lords are alarmed. Lady Macbeth reassures them, saying he has had such fits since childhood. In asides to Macbeth, she tries to calm him and succeeds until the ghost appears a second time. Macbeth's words then are so strange that the guests leave. Macbeth then comments to his wife about Macduff's failure to attend the banquet and says he will talk to the witches again to learn the future.



Questions and Answers Act III Scene IV

1. *Why is the escape of Fleance (along with the banquet scene) considered the climax, or turning point, of the play?*

Macbeth's fortune has been in the ascendant up to this point - he is king of Scotland. Fleance's escape and the return of Banquo's ghost so shatter him that he arouses the suspicions of the Scottish nobles, and resolves in desperation to seek the evil knowledge of the witches. They lure him on to destruction in Act Four.

2. *What deterioration in character (personality, will) does Macbeth undergo in this scene?*

Macbeth seems in this scene to have "gone to pieces". When he learns that Fleance has escaped he says, "There comes my fit again." and "I am bound in by doubts and fears." The fit grow worse as the scene advances. He had once seen a dagger leading him to Duncan - now he sees a ghost, Banquo's ghost. Ignoring his company, he addresses the ghost vehemently, and "breaks up the table" with most amazing misbehaviour. In vain, we suspect, does he - and Lady Macbeth - refer to it as an ailment from his youth. The lords will know when they learn tomorrow of Banquo's death why their king behaved so strangely. His attempts at gaiety are shallow and unconvincing. Macbeth seems to have lost his courage completely; when the lords depart he is the victim of deep fears. The dead may rise to wreak vengeance. In Macbeth's loss of self-control, in his hysteria, his fear, we see the dissolution of character. When he informs the queen that he has a spy in every castle, we know that he cannot trust the lords, nor they him. When he announces that he will consult the witches, "the worst means", as he says, we feel that his state is desperate, and when he states that he must wade through his "river of blood", we know his doom is sealed. His deterioration is well begun - it will grow rapidly worse.



3. *Contrast the behaviour of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in this scene.*

She is the strong one here, while he is weak. She puts on a bold front, appears self-possessed, resourceful and discreet; gives one-half of her attention to her husband in his trouble, and one-half to her guests in their amazement. He, on the other hand, is unnerved, hysterical, absorbed in the presence of Banquo, forgetful of his guests, and overcome with fear until the ghost and the guests are gone. When the two are alone, Lady Macbeth has a last kind and comforting word for her husband, "A good sleep is all you need." The cure, says he, is to go yet deeper into blood.

Scene V This scene is an addition to the play, not Shakespeare's. Hecate, goddess of the infernal regions, tells the witches that spirits will appear to Macbeth and confuse him.



Questions and Answers Act III Scene V

What has this scene given us?

This scene has given us the determination of the witches to ruin Macbeth, and the means by which they will do it. Hecate, queen of the witches, lectures them because they have had dealings with Macbeth, and this without consulting her. She bids them be ready to meet her in the morning. By a magical drop distilled from the moon, **they will fill Macbeth with overweening confidence**, and lead him on to his undoing.

Scene VI Lennox and another lord discuss recent events. Lennox is suspicious that Macbeth was Duncan's murderer and the engineer of Banquo's murder. The other lord reports that Malcolm is raising an army in England to challenge Macbeth and that Macduff has gone to England to help him. Both fear for Macduff's safety since he refused Macbeth's summons.



Questions and Answers Act III Scene VI

Judging from the contents of scenes five and six, what future awaits Macbeth?

A future fraught with great danger!! The witches are plotting to deceive him; the Scots are against him, so too, we may conclude, are the English in an alliance with Malcolm and Macduff.