

# PLOT SUMMARY OF *MACBETH*

The rule of good King Duncan has been saved from rebel forces: his loyal warlords, Macbeth and Banquo, have triumphed in battle over an invading army, and the traitorous Thane of Cawdor is among the prisoners. Returning home, Macbeth and Banquo encounter three witches, who deliver a series of prophecies: Macbeth will inherit the Thane of Cawdor's title and will become king; Banquo will father a dynasty of kings, though will never himself be king.

Duncan orders the execution of the captured Thane of Cawdor, bestowing that title on Macbeth – and this fulfilment of the first of the witches' prophecies stirs Macbeth's ambition. He confides in his wife, Lady Macbeth, who persuades him to murder Duncan as he sleeps.

When Duncan's body is discovered, Macbeth kills the dead king's bodyguards, and Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee in fear of their lives. Now crowned king, Macbeth acts to prevent Banquo's descendants becoming kings. Banquo is brutally killed in an ambush – but his son, Fleance, escapes.

Tormented by a vision of Banquo's bloody ghost, Macbeth seeks out the three witches, who seem to offer

reassurance: Macbeth, they say, cannot be harmed by anyone "of woman born", and can rest secure until the great forest of Birnam Wood "come to Dunsinane". Feeling himself immune, Macbeth dispatches assassins to murder the family of Macduff (one of Duncan's warlords), who has fled to join forces with Malcolm.

News of his family's slaughter is brought to Macduff during an interview with Malcolm. United in their grief, they march with their armies to overthrow Macbeth. Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth's guilt has driven her to insanity and suicide. Macbeth staves off despair by remembering the witches' prophecy... until the impossible news arrives that Birnam Wood is approaching Dunsinane: Malcolm's armies have camouflaged themselves with its branches.

In the ensuing battle, Macbeth fights valiantly – until he encounters Macduff, who declares that he is not "of woman born": his birth was by Caesarean section.

Macbeth has been misled by the witches. He is slain and beheaded by Macduff. Malcolm is proclaimed king. And, as Shakespeare's first audiences would have known, Fleance's descendants included their own royal family. And our own.

