Macbeth Act IV Plot Summary

Scene 1
In a dark cavern, a bubbling **caldron** hisses and spits, and the three **witches** suddenly appear onstage. They circle the cauldron, chanting spells and adding bizarre ingredients to their stew—“eye of **newt** and toe of **frogs** / Wool of **bat** and tongue of **dog**” (IV.i.14–15). Hecate materializes and compliments the witches on their work. One of the witches then chants: “By the pricking of my **thumbs**, / Something **wicked** this way comes” (IV.i.61–62). In fulfillment of the witch’s prediction, **Macbeth** enters. He asks the witches to reveal the truth of their prophecies to him. To answer his questions, they summon horrible **apparitions** (gus) each of which offers a prediction to allay Macbeth’s fears. First, a floating **head** warns him to beware **Macduff**; Macbeth says that he has already guessed as much. Then a **bloody** **child** appears and tells him that “none of **women** born / shall harm **Macbeth**” (IV.i.96–97). Next, a crowned **child** holding a **tree** tells him that he is safe until **Birnam** wood moves to **Dunsinane** Hill. Finally, a procession of eight crowned **kings** walks by, the last carrying a **mirror**. **Banquo** walks at the end of the line. **Macbeth** demands to know the meaning of this final vision, but the witches perform a **dance** and then **disappear**. **Lennox** enters and reveals that **Macduff** has fled to **England**. Macbeth resolves to send murderers to capture **Fife** castle and to kill Macduff’s **wife** and **son**.

Scene 2
At Macduff’s castle, **Lady Macduff** accosts Ross, demanding to know why her husband has fled. She feels betrayed. **Ross** insists that she trust her husband’s judgment and then regretfully departs. Once he is gone, Lady Macduff tells her **son** that his father is **dead** but the little boy perceptively argues that he is not. Suddenly, a **messenger** hurries in, warning Lady Macduff that she is in danger and urging her to flee. Lady Macduff protests, arguing that she has done no **harm**. A group of **murderers** then enters. When one of them denounces Macduff, Macduff’s son calls the murderer a **villain**, and the murderer stabs him. **Lady Macduff** turns and runs, and the pack of killers chases after her.

Scene 3
Outside King **Edwards**’s palace, Malcolm speaks with **Macduff**, telling him that he does not trust him since he has left his family in **Scotland** and may be secretly working for **Macbeth**. To determine whether Macduff is trustworthy, **Malcolm** rambles on about his own vices. He admits that he wonders whether he is fit to be king, since he claims to be lustful, **greedy**, and violent. At first, **Macduff** politely disagrees with his future king, but eventually