

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 frog, / 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 (ghosts) 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's Banquo walks at the end of the line. Macbeth demands to know the meaning of this final vision, but the witches perform a magic dance and then disappear. Lennox enters and tells Macbeth that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth resolves to send murderers to capture Fife castle and to kill Macduff's wife and five.

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 Edward'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