Summary of the plot

1. Macbeth and Banquo are generals in the army of Duncan, King of Scotland. They have just defeated an army of Norwegian invaders and Scottish rebels. They meet three witches, who greet Macbeth as thane of Cawdor and 'king hereafter'. The witches tell Banquo that although he will not be king himself, he will be the father of many kings. The witches vanish, and news comes that Duncan has made Macbeth thane of Cawdor, in place of the former thane, who has proved to be a traitor.

   Macbeth writes to tell Lady Macbeth of his adventures and the witches' prophecies about his future, and about the new title Duncan has given him. She starts to plan Duncan's death.

2. Duncan decides to spend the night at Macbeth's castle. Macbeth's own ambition, and the fact that the witches' prophecy came true, lead him to give in to his wife's persuasion and to kill the sleeping king. The king's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, are suspected, and run away, and Macbeth is crowned king.

3. Macbeth determines to defeat the witches' prophecy concerning Banquo's children. He therefore tries to have Banquo and his son Fleance killed while they are out riding, but Fleance escapes.

   The ghost of the murdered Banquo appears at Macbeth's banquet to haunt him, and he decides to consult the witches again. They tell him to beware of Macduff, thane of Fife, that no one born of woman can harm him, and that he will never be defeated until Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane. He therefore believes that fate is on his side.

4. On learning that Macduff has gone to England, to raise an army to come back and fight him, Macbeth kills Lady Macduff and her children. Lady Macbeth goes mad and dies, and Macbeth is alone. The attacking army led by Malcolm and Macduff cut branches from the trees in Birnam Wood and use them as camouflage as they walk to Dunsinane — so that it looks as though the wood itself is moving, as the prophecy foretold. Macbeth goes to fight Macduff, who reveals that he was not born in the normal way but by Caesarean section (i.e. 'untimely ripped' from the womb) — thus the last prophecy comes true. Macduff kills Macbeth and Malcolm becomes King of Scotland.