MACBETH SYNOPIS

The play begins with three witches on a lonely heath. They are waiting for Macbeth. They set the sinister mood for the whole play with the words “Fair is foul and foul is fair.” When the gentle, respected King Duncan appears on stage in the next scene, he learns that Macbeth, Thane (lord) of Glamis, has won brilliant victories over rebel troops and invading Norwegians. Duncan is overjoyed and decides to give the “worthy gentleman” the additional title of Thane of Cawdor. The scene then shifts back to the witches:

“A drum, a drum!
Macbeth doth come.”

Macbeth enters with his friend Banquo: they are traveling back from the battlefield together. Suddenly, they come across the three Weird Sisters. The first witch greets Macbeth by his title, Thane of Glamis. But then the second witch greets him as Thane of Cawdor, while the third cries out: “All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!”

Macbeth is startled. Are they prophesying that he will be Thane of Cawdor and king of Scotland? Before disappearing, the witches tell Banquo that although he won’t be king himself, his descendants will be. At this point the Earl of Ross enters and gives Macbeth the news that Duncan has made him Thane of Cawdor. The first prophecy has come true! The seeds of Macbeth’s dark ambition are sown.

When Macbeth arrives home, his wife fans this ambition. She skillfully persuades him to fulfill the second prophecy. King Duncan is due to stay at their castle that night. Macbeth must murder him, she urges, and then seize the throne for himself. After a fierce fight with his conscience, Macbeth gives in. He will kill Duncan as he sleeps.

Even before the murder, Macbeth is deeply troubled. On his way to the king’s bedchamber, he imagines that he sees the murder weapon: “Is this a dagger which I see before me ....?” It proves to be merely a vision. Later, when he has killed Duncan, he believes he hears a voice calling: “Sleep no more! Macbeth doth murder sleep.”

He is so shaken that he forgets part of the plan – to smear Duncan’s sleeping servants with blood, and leave their daggers in Duncan’s room, to make them look guilty of the crime. Lady Macbeth upbraids Macbeth for his weakness. She takes the daggers back to the bedchamber herself. At this moment, the scene changes. A knocking at the castle gate wakes the porter from his drunken sleep. His clowning helps the audience to relax after the tension of the murder. He imagines himself the keeper of the gates of Hell, welcoming in well-known characters, both real and fictitious. But the knocking continues, and when the porter opens the gate, he meets the lords Macduff and Lennox. Macduff has come to wake the king. He discovers Duncan’s murder with the cry” “Oh horror, horror, horror!”
In the ensuing chaos Duncan’s sons, Donalbain and Malcolm, decide to flee abroad. This unwise move gives the impression that they are to blame, and Macbeth is chosen as their father’s successor. The witches’ second prophecy has come true.

But Macbeth does not rest easy. Remembering the wiches’ other prophecy, that Banquo’s family would one day rule over Scotland, Macbeth hires killers to murder Banquo and his son Fleance. Unlike Duncan, Banquo is killed on stage. The mutilated corpse is left lying in a pool of blood. Fleance manages to escape. One murderer comments “We have lost, Best half of our affair ...”

The following scene is the banquet which takes place in Macbeth’s castle. Pages bring on a long table and several chairs, and the musicians in the gallery play soothing airs. Just when all seems to be going well, the murderers enter and tell Macbeth of Banquo’s death and Fleance’s escape. At the news, the king’s anxiety returns. He does his best to appear normal, but all of a sudden a ghastly apparition slides onto the stage. It is the ghost of Banquo, his face white and his wounds gaping horribly. The ghost sits down at the head of the table, in the place that has been reserved for Macbeth. At first Macbeth thinks the ghost is some sort of cruel practical joke by his courtiers. When he realizes that only he can see the phantom, he screams at it to go away. His dinner guests stare at him in bewildered horror. Lady Macbeth makes excuses for her husband and hurriedly ushers the dinner guests out.

By this time, Macbeth’s ruthless ness is becoming clear to everyone. He decides that he may as well give up pretending to be virtuous and decides to continue his campaign of tyranny and slaughter:
“i am in blood
Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er.”

Macduff is next on his list!

Macbeth visits the witches again, to see if they have any more prophecies. They warn him to beware of Macduff. They tell him that no man born of a woman will be able to harm him, and that he will remain king until Birnam Wood comes to Dunisnane Hill, where Macbeth has his castle. “That will never be,” he says, knowing these things are impossible. Finally, he asks whether it is true that Banquo’s descendants will be kings of Scotland. By way of reply, the witches show him a procession of eight kings, all of whom look like Banquo./ The last holds up a magic mirror to the audience. This is a symbol of many more kings of the same line.

The bloodshed continues. Macduff flees to join Malcom in England, leaving behind his wife and children, who are murdered by Macbeth’s henchmen. The stabbing of Macduff’s little son is quite horrid!

Safely over the border, Macduff is welcomed by Malcom, Duncan’s son, but it is a while before Malcolm is convinced that he is not Macbeth’s spy. The scene is full of wordy argument, and drags on for a long time. In the end, however, after Macduff is informed of the dreadful fate of his family, Malcom accepts him. They join forces and prepare to launch their attack.
The pace of the play now picks up rapidly. Short scenes follow each other in quick succession. Macbeth is a like a cornered animal. His wife, tormented by the memory of what she had done, walks in her sleep, washing her hands in a vain attempt to rid them of Duncan’s blood, “Here’s the smell of blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh! Oh! Oh!”

Shortly afterwards, Lady Macbeth dies. In a despairing soliloquy, Macbeth describes life, “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, Creeps in this petty pace from day to day “Til the last syllable of recorded time And all our yesterdays have lighted fools The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle, Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, And then is heard no more; it is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.”

As his army marches towards Dunsinane, Malcolm orders his soldiers to cut down branches from Birnam Wood to cover the army’s advance. Thus one of the witches’ prophecies is fulfilled. Battle is joined. In the course of the fight, Macbeth meets Macduff. Macduff was taken from his dead mother’s womb by a surgeon, so was not born of woman – hence the second prophecy is fulfilled. Macbeth and Macduff fight – Macduff kills Macbeth. He presents Malcolm with the tyrants’s severed head, and all the nobles hail Malcolm as king of Scotland. Malcolm thanks his supporters for their help, trumpets sound for the last time and the play comes to a triumphant end.

Phew – pathos, pity and fear purged!! Da di da
Divine Right of Kings returned
Fate?
Tragedy