Macbeth: What happens in the play?

Scotland is at war. Macbeth and Banquo are generals of the King Duncan. They succeed in defeating the invading armies.

Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches on the heath. They prophesy three things: that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor; that Macbeth will then become king and that Banquo’s sons will be kings.

Macbeth does not believe the witches until he hears news from Duncan that he is to be given the title of Thane of Cawdor. He arranges to have dinner with the king the next night. He writes a letter to his wife Lady Macbeth to tell her the good news. She is very keen for him to become king.

When Macbeth arrives home Lady Macbeth persuades him that he must kill King Duncan that night. He is very unsure and has terrifying visions, however when night comes he drugs the King’s attendants and stabs the king.

The next morning the attendants are blamed for the death of the King and Macbeth becomes king. King Duncan’s sons, Donalbain and Malcolm, are scared they will be killed too and leave. Macbeth is scared that the witches prophecy (Banquo’s sons will become kings) will come true. He arranges to have them killed, but Fleance escapes. Macbeth is furious and terrified.

Macbeth’s mental state is deteriorating and he sees a vision of Banquo’s ghost at a feast. Macbeth’s subjects become suspicious and mistrust him.

Macbeth and his wife are in turmoil. He goes to see the witches and they prophesy three more things that reassure him for the time being: that no man born of woman can harm him; that he will only be defeated when trees walk, but to beware of Macduff.

Macbeth believes the witches’ prophecies and arranges for Macduff’s family to be brutally murdered.

When Macduff finds out he is furious and joins forces with King Duncan’s son Malcolm. Together they plan to defeat Macbeth. Meanwhile Lady Macbeth is wracked with guilt and mentally unstable. She sleep walks and jumps out of a window.

Macbeth is distraught but believes he is safe in his castle. After all the witches told him that no man born of woman can harm him and he won’t be defeated until trees walk. However the prophecies are fulfilled when he sees that the advancing army is using trees as shields. He then meets Macduff in battle, who tells him that he was not born of woman (his mother had a caesarean section) and subsequently kills him.