

MACBETH (SUMARY & ANALYSIS – ACT 2 SCENE 1)

Summary

Banquo and his son Fleance walk in the torch-lit hall of Macbeth's castle. Fleance says that it is after midnight, and his father responds that although he is tired, he wishes to stay awake because his sleep has lately inspired "cursed thoughts". Macbeth enters, and Banquo is surprised to see him still up. Banquo says that the king is asleep and mentions that he had a dream about the "three weird sisters." When Banquo suggests that the witches have revealed "some truth" to Macbeth, Macbeth claims that he has not thought of them at all since their encounter in the woods. He and Banquo agree to discuss the witches' prophecies at a later time. Banquo and Fleance leave, and suddenly, in the darkened hall, Macbeth has a vision of a dagger floating in the air before him, its handle pointing toward his hand and its tip aiming him toward Duncan. Macbeth tries to grasp the weapon and fails. He wonders whether what he sees is real or a "dagger of the mind, a false creation / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain". Continuing to gaze upon the dagger, he thinks he sees blood on the blade, then abruptly decides that the vision is just a manifestation of his unease over killing Duncan. The night around him seems thick with horror and witchcraft, but Macbeth stiffens and resolves to do his bloody work. A bell tolls—Lady Macbeth's signal that the chamberlains are asleep—and Macbeth strides toward Duncan's chamber.

Analysis

The opening dialogue sets the scene: It is past midnight, the moon has set, and the "candles" of heaven — the stars — cannot be seen. Symbolically, the airy lightness that greeted Duncan's arrival at the castle in Act I has completely vanished, to be replaced by brooding darkness.

In this opening scene of Act II, as in the later Porter scene, the audience feels momentarily suspended from the action but in no way removed from the intensity of emotion as the innocent Banquo and his son pass the time of night. The moment at which Banquo so very nearly draws his sword on a potential intruder (actually Macbeth) is a master-stroke of dramatic irony: Banquo has no idea of what the audience knows.

Macbeth Act 2 Scene 1 Study Guide Answers

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