

SCENE III. A heath near Forres.

Pathetic fallacy - throughout the play the human, natural, and supernatural worlds parallel one another. Thunder, lightning, and dangerous or unusual weather ushers in immoral actions by humans. This scene especially foreshadows the evil to come.

Thunder. Enter the three Witches

First Witch

Where hast thou been, sister?

Second Witch

Killing swine.

Third Witch

Sister, where thou?

First Witch

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,

And munch'd, and munch'd, and munch'd:--

'Give me,' quoth I:

'Aroint thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries.

Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the Tiger:

But in a sieve I'll thither sail,

And, like a rat without a tail,

I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

Second Witch

I'll give thee a wind.

First Witch

Thou'rt kind.

Third Witch

And I another.

First Witch

I myself have all the other,

And the very ports they blow,

All the quarters that they know

I' the shipman's card.

I will drain him dry as hay:

Sleep shall neither night nor day

Hang upon his pent-house lid;

He shall live a man forbid:

Weary se'nights nine times nine

Shall he dwindle, peak and pine:

Though his bark cannot be lost,

Yet it shall be tempest-tost.

The Second Witch has been out killing a pig, possibly to use it in a dark-magic ritual. In Jacobean England, witches were believed to use parts of animals as ingredients in their spells. If a pig was found dead, the fear was that witchcraft would be to blame

The witch is speaking about a sailor who has travelled to Aleppo (a Syrian city). The sailor's wife has offended the witch and she plans to punish her by causing harm to her husband. She says she will travel there in a "sieve". Whether the Witch means a literal or figurative sieve, the point is that she'll be sailing on an impossible vessel, one that could never stay afloat without magic.

The second witch offers to help the first by controlling the wind to help her with her journey. Witches were believed to have powers over the natural world and the weather, which they could then use to cause harm to mortals.

This is significant as King James believed that witches caused the storm that almost resulted in his death.

The witch boasts that she has control of all the other winds, their locations, and all their possible directions.

She plans to "drain him dry" meaning to suck the life out of him and cause him to lose sleep. This is significant as lack of sleep was often seen as a result of guilt or of supernatural interference. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth suffer sleeplessness themselves after acting upon the prophesies of the Witches.

Note that the witch speaks in rhyme. This would highlight to the audience that the Witches are malevolent, supernatural characters.

The powers of the Witches do seem to have limitations as we are told that they cannot destroy the ship ("bark"), but they can cause his journey to be miserable.

Witches were known to be messengers of the Devil, sent to test humanity. Recounted in this scene is an example of the trials to test humanity, where the first Witch demanded to share the woman's food, to which she was supposed to share. By refusing to share, this exemplified the woman's greed and selfishness, therefore failing the trial.

The witch indirectly punishes the woman by causing strife and misery to her husband's journey out at sea.

Look what I have.

Second Witch

Show me, show me.

First Witch

Here I have a pilot's thumb,
Wreck'd as homeward he did come.

Drum within

Third Witch

A drum, a drum!

Macbeth doth come.

ALL

The weird sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about:

Thrice to thine and thrice to mine
And thrice again, to make up nine.

Peace! the charm's wound up.

Enter MACBETH and BANQUO

MACBETH

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

BANQUO

How far is't call'd to Forres? What are these

So wither'd and so wild in their attire,

That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,

And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught

That man may question? You seem to understand me,

By each at once her chappy finger laying

Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,

And yet your beards forbid me to interpret

That you are so.

MACBETH

Speak, if you can: what are you?

First Witch

All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!

The use of the drum emphasizes Macbeth's military credentials and his high ranks. His arrival is punctuated by a round of drumming, highlighting his entrance as significant to the audience.

The three sisters dance in a circle until they have turned around 9 times (3 times for each sister). The number three relates to both Pagan and Christian beliefs. Three represents the triad: father, mother and child; birth, life and death; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The Three Witches could also be seen as symbolic of the three fates in mythology.

"Weird" is a synonym for mystical. By calling these sisters "weird," Shakespeare is not only describing their odd appearance, but also how they are able to see the future and work with supernatural powers.

This echoes the Witches' line in Act 1 Scene 1 – "Fair is foul and foul is fair". For Macbeth, the day is both "foul" and "fair" because it has brought a bloody battle on the one hand, and a Scottish victory (and personal glory) on the other. His use of duplicity also suggests to the audience that Macbeth may not be what he seems.

Banquo is confused of what sex the witches are: he thinks that their general appearance resembles that of a woman, but they have beards, which throws off his judgement. The appearances of the witches go against stereotypical Jacobean gender norms of women (beautiful, subservient and meek) and therefore are presented as more physically masculine.

Banquo's questions reinforce the unearthly appearance and ambiguous reality of the witches. He wonders whether the Witches exist in some supernatural state that prevents them from hearing him and responding to his questions.

Here, the first witch states that Macbeth is the thane of Glamis, but the other two witches are referring to what Macbeth will eventually become in the future. This is an example of dramatic irony as, from Act 1 Scene 2, the audience are already aware that Macbeth has been given the title of Thane of Cawdor.

Banquo says to Macbeth that he should not be surprised or afraid on listening to these predictions as they sound fair (meaning good, fortuitous). There is also an implication that Macbeth 'starts', because the Witches have given voice to his most private desires.

This links back to the idea of the three Greek deities – the original weird sisters. Their names translate to Past, Present and Future. Here, the First Witch tells of Macbeth's title in the Past, the Second Witch mentions Macbeth's present title (although he doesn't know this, yet the audience do) and the Third Witch predicts his future title.

Banquo's question cuts to the heart of the distinction between appearance vs. reality, outward "show" and inner "truth," that lies at the thematic centre of the play.

Banquo asks the witches to speak to him and predict his own future. This could imply that perhaps there is a hidden element of darkness beneath the surface of Banquo's character; however, he is able to contain it, unlike Macbeth.

Second Witch
 All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!

Third Witch
 All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!

BANQUO
 Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear
 Things that do sound so fair? 'I' the name of truth,
 Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
 Which outwardly ye show? My noble partner
 You greet with present grace and great prediction
 Of noble having and of royal hope,
 That he seems rapt withal: to me you speak not.
 If you can look into the seeds of time,
 And say which grain will grow and which will not,
 Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
 Your favours nor your hate.

First Witch

Hail!

Second Witch

Hail!

Third Witch

Hail!

First Witch

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

Second Witch

Not so happy, yet much happier.

Third Witch

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:

So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

First Witch

Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

MACBETH

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:

By Sinel's death I know I am thane of Glamis;

But how of Cawdor? the thane of Cawdor lives,

A prosperous gentleman; and to be king

Again, the witches use ambiguous, duplicitous language to describe Banquo's future. "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater" hints that Banquo will never rise as far as Macbeth, yet his reputation will never sink so low, either. "Not so happy, yet much happier" is similarly double-edged. Banquo will die a violent death, but he'll be spared the psychological hell Macbeth experiences by the end of the play.

This line is significant as if Banquo's children will be kings, we can infer that Macbeth's won't be. Macbeth makes this same assumption, and it is this which motivates some of his later, bloodthirsty actions as he desperately tries to thwart the Witches' predictions.

Macbeth implores the Witches to tell him more and wishes to know details of their prophecies. This is one of our first hints that Macbeth may be more ambitious than originally presented. Macbeth's use of imperatives highlights his feelings of desperation.

Stands not within the prospect of belief,
No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence
You owe this strange intelligence? or why
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
With such prophetic greeting? Speak, I charge you.

Witches vanish

BANQUO

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them. Whither are they vanish'd?

MACBETH

Into the air; and what seem'd corporal melted
As breath into the wind. Would they had stay'd!

Macbeth uses a simile to illustrate the supernatural exit of the Witches, he describes this as "breath into the wind". He goes on to say that he wishes that they could have stayed, the use of the exclamatory sentence yet another sign of his desperation and dissatisfaction.

Banquo questions the reality of what they have seen and heard. Unlike Macbeth, who seems to be focused entirely on their predictions of the future, Banquo comments upon the strangeness of the situation. He suggests that they have taken drugs which could have caused them to lose "reason".

BANQUO

Were such things here as we do speak about?

Or have we eaten on the insane root

That takes the reason prisoner?

MACBETH

Your children shall be kings.

Despite being told that he shall be "King", Macbeth unusually mentions the Witches' prophesy to Banquo rather than his own. This could suggest that Macbeth is already aware that this could present him with a problem.

BANQUO

You shall be king.

MACBETH

And thane of Cawdor too: went it not so?

BANQUO

To the selfsame tune and words. Who's here?

The term "selfsame" means "exactly the same as before." Banquo (subtly) notes how Macbeth repeats the Witches' prophecies almost exactly as they did: already there are signs that the Witches are beginning to take over his mind.

Enter ROSS and ANGUS

ROSS

The king hath happily received, Macbeth,

The news of thy success; and when he reads

Thy personal venture in the rebels' fight,

His wonders and his praises do contend

Which should be thine or his: silenced with that,

In viewing o'er the rest o' the selfsame day,

He finds thee in the stout Norweyan ranks,

Nothing afeard of what thyself didst make,

The idea that there is a blurring between Macbeth's actions and the Duncan's actions is foreshadowing of Macbeth's succession to the throne. In addition, Ross is exaggerating for effect—but with the unconscious irony that Macbeth ends up being highly unworthy of the king's praises.

Another ominous description of Macbeth's ruthlessness. Macbeth is unafraid of the devastation he rains down on the Norwegian troops.

Strange images of death. As thick as hail

Came post with post; and every one did bear

Thy praises in his kingdom's great defence,

And pour'd them down before him.

ANGUS

We are sent

To give thee from our royal master thanks;

Only to herald thee into his sight,

Not pay thee.

ROSS

And, for an earnest of a greater honour,

He bade me, from him, call thee thane of Cawdor:

In which addition, hail, most worthy thane!

For it is thine.

BANQUO

What, can the devil speak true?

MACBETH

The thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me

In borrow'd robes?

ANGUS

Who was the thane lives yet;

But under heavy judgment bears that life

Which he deserves to lose. Whether he was combined

With those of Norway, or did line the rebel

With hidden help and vantage, or that with both

He labour'd in his country's wreck, I know not;

But treasons capital, confess'd and proved,

Have overthrown him.

MACBETH

[Aside] Glamis, and thane of Cawdor!

The greatest is behind.

To ROSS and ANGUS

Thanks for your pains.

To BANQUO

Banquo shows his disbelief at what has just happened. He's amazed that what the witches predicted has so far come true (Macbeth has become Thane of Cawdor), and afraid that this is the Devil's work.

In Jacobean England it was believed that Witches gained their powers through a deal with the Devil.

Macbeth's being dressed "in borrow'd robes" will have major thematic importance in the play, as he takes the throne (and therefore the "robes") of the rightful King.

The greatest achievement, becoming King of Scotland, should, if the Witches aren't lying, occur next. His use of an aside means that Macbeth does not necessarily want the other characters who hear what he has to say.

Macbeth questions Banquo over his feelings regarding the prophecies. This could suggest that Macbeth is attempting to normalise his own feelings of ambition and excitement.

Unlike Macbeth, Banquo is aware of the evil and deceiving nature of Witches and warns him against believing them fully. He suggests that the witches use small amounts of truth ("honest trifles", like their predictions) to deceive people ("betray's"—betray us) on a grand scale. This links to the theme of duality.

Already Macbeth is making, lengthy arguments about what is just, trying to justify his unwavering belief in the Witches.

Macbeth is already thinking about killing Duncan. He's shaken by the thought, but it is the first solution that comes to his mind. The sibilance of 'Shakes so my single state of man' creates a murderous tone that foreshadows Macbeth's future actions.

Macbeth muses that as he has had to do nothing to gain his new title of thane of Cawdor, then he may have to do nothing in order to become King.

Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
When those that gave the thane of Cawdor to me
Promised no less to them?

BANQUO

That trusted home
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
Besides the thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.
Cousins, a word, I pray you.

MACBETH

[Aside] Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme.--I thank you, gentlemen.
Aside

Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,

Against the use of nature? Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,

Shakes so my single state of man that function

Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is

But what is not.

BANQUO

Look, how our partner's rapt.

MACBETH

[Aside] If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

Banquo means that if the Witches' prophecy is to be trusted completely, Macbeth might become King, too. "Enkindle" is an ambiguous verb here, perhaps suggesting that the prophecy will light a metaphorical fire of ambition under Macbeth.

The Witches have been proved right on two counts: they correctly discerned that Macbeth was the thane of Glamis, and now he has inherited the title of the thane of Cawdor. He is hoping that the third and largest truth will come true as well and he would become king of Scotland. Macbeth's lust for power is starting to take hold: he is ignoring Banquo's wise warning completely and focusing solely on the possibility of becoming king.

Macbeth uses a metaphor to emphasise the excitement and fear that he is feeling. This could also echo the "knocking" that he hears later in the play.

Rapt: lost in thought, but with a suggestion of being "spellbound" by the Witches. (Banquo also described Macbeth as "rapt" at the Witches' prophecy above.) This line demonstrates the convention that Shakespearean soliloquies reflect an interior monologue. Banquo and company see Macbeth musing to himself, but not necessarily talking to himself.

Banquo compares Macbeth's new title to new clothes that don't fit well, but says they'll grow in over time. This is yet another metaphorical reference to Macbeth's future actions – the title of 'King' will not fit him as he is not the heir to the throne chosen by God.

This links to the idea of the Divine Right of Kings, the Jacobean belief that God chose the King and that this King then became God's voice upon earth. By killing the King, (committing regicide) a person would be going directly against the wishes of God.

Macbeth turns from addressing the group to addressing Banquo privately. He suggests that they think about what they've seen and, once they've weighed it, discuss it freely with each other. Banquo gladly agrees as he undoubtedly wants to know more about Macbeth's thinking and motives. Macbeth concludes with the ominous: "Till then, enough."

BANQUO

New horrors come upon him,

Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould

But with the aid of use.

MACBETH

[Aside] Come what come may,

Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

BANQUO

Worthy Macbeth, we stay upon your leisure.

MACBETH

Give me your favour: my dull brain was wrought

With things forgotten. Kind gentlemen, your pains

Are register'd where every day I turn

The leaf to read them. Let us toward the king.

Think upon what hath chanced, and, at more time,

The interim having weigh'd it, let us speak

Our free hearts each to other.

BANQUO

Very gladly.

MACBETH

Till then, enough. Come, friends.

Exeunt

Note that Macbeth has begun to speak in rhyming couplets, just like the Witches. This would hint to the audience of his secret, perhaps evil nature.