

Act II Scene IV Outside Macbeth's castle

Enter ROSS and an old Man

Old Man

Threescore and ten I can remember well:
Within the volume of which time I have seen
Hours dreadful and things strange; but this sore night
Hath trifled former knowings.

Threescore and ten is seventy years. In Jacobean England it was extraordinarily rare for anyone to reach such an age and could imply that the Old Man has wisdom and knowledge.

The Old Man is extremely old (for his time period) and yet, he has never seen anything more horrible than what has just transpired. This emphasizes the seriousness of the situation.

ROSS

Ah, good father,
Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock, 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp:
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,
When living light should kiss it?

The "traveling lamp" is referring to the sun, he is saying that it is strange that despite being daytime, it is dark. This links to the idea of Duncan's death being unnatural and that this has impacted upon the natural world.

'heavens' is the sky and, when personified, the gods; it is also the canopy over the stage at the Globe Theatre (symbolically adorned with sky and stars), and thus related to 'act' and 'stage'

Old Man

'Tis unnatural,
Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,
A falcon, towering in her pride of place,
Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.

Light is used throughout the play as symbol of goodness. These lines show how everything pure and holy, in this case, the sun, that chases the dark thoughts away, is not present to fix all of the unholy occurrences. The 'light' is also symbolic of King Duncan.

These lines are deeply symbolic, the falcon, King Duncan, was unseated and killed by the owl, Macbeth. The symbolism of the nocturnal owl killing the strong falcon mimics that of Macbeth's soaring ambition breaking the natural law of order of things by killing King Duncan.

ROSS

And Duncan's horses--a thing most strange and certain--
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make
War with mankind.

The horses' change in behaviour is another reflection of the disruption of the natural order.

The horses have started to behave very unnaturally, apparently cannibalizing each other. Cannibalism is the extreme of wildness and unnaturalness, furthering the theme of the natural vs. the unnatural.

Old Man

'Tis said they eat each other.

ROSS

They did so, to the amazement of mine eyes
That look'd upon't. Here comes the good Macduff.

Enter MACDUFF

How goes the world, sir, now?

MACDUFF

Why, see you not?

ROSS

Is't known who did this more than bloody deed?

MACDUFF

Those that Macbeth hath slain.

A reference to the two guards that Macbeth murdered. This is an example of dramatic irony.

ROSS

Alas, the day!
What good could they pretend?

MACDUFF

They were suborn'd:
Malcolm and Donalbain, the king's two sons,
Are stol'n away and fled; which puts upon them
Suspicion of the deed.

Malcolm and Donalbain have fled, meaning that they are now suspected of the murder of the king.

ROSS

'Gainst nature still!
Thriftless ambition, that wilt ravin up
Thine own life's means! Then 'tis most like
The sovereignty will fall upon Macbeth.

Ross suspects that the two sons killed their father out of "thriftless ambition". This is ironic as it was Macbeth who murdered out of ambition, and yet it is Macbeth who will become king.

MACDUFF

He is already named, and gone to Scone
To be invested.

Scone – an abbey just north of Perth which housed the sacred stone on which the Scottish kings were crowned.

ROSS

Where is Duncan's body?

MACDUFF

Carried to Colmekill,
The sacred storehouse of his predecessors,
And guardian of their bones.

Colmekill is a Scottish island and was the traditional burial place of Scottish kings.

By refusing this burial to Macbeth at the end of the play, Duncan is shown to be the more pious and rightful king, and the audience, including King James I, is given a powerful deterrent against unseating a king.

ROSS

Will you to Scone?

MACDUFF

No, cousin, I'll to Fife.

This is one of the first hints that we are given that Macduff may suspect Macbeth of some wrongdoing. Despite being his friend and fellow soldier, he does not go to see Macbeth crowned and instead intends to go home to Fife. This is an example of foreshadowing.

ROSS

Well, I will thither.

MACDUFF

The old robes refer to King Duncan and the new robes to Macbeth. Macduff is worried that the new leadership won't be as good as the former leadership because everyone in Scotland will be affected by how the new king handles his power.

Well, may you see things well done there: adieu!
Lest our old robes sit easier than our new!

ROSS

Farewell, father.

Old Man

God's benison go with you; and with those
That would make good of bad, and friends of foes!

Exeunt

This echoes the Witches' line of "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." The Old Man is related to wisdom similar of the supernatural, however, his mentions of 'God' and his emphasis of Duncan's death as a tragedy, depicts him to be a pious man, unlike the witches who draw their knowledge and power from evil.