

SCENE II. A camp near Forres.

Alarum within. Enter DUNCAN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN, LENNOX, with Attendants, meeting a bleeding Sergeant

Duncan is implying that since the Captain is bloody, he may have been in the battle himself, and possibly knows the latest news about the revolt. Blood is also a major motif in Macbeth, and there is some foreshadowing/irony in the fact that these are Duncan's first words in the play.

DUNCAN

What bloody man is that? He can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
The newest state.

MALCOLM

This is the sergeant

Who like a good and hardy soldier fought
'Gainst my captivity. Hail, brave friend!

Malcolm is praising the Captain for his brave acts in the battle. The Captain did something heroic to save Malcolm from being captured and is now invited to tell his tale to the King himself. It is clear that courage and loyalty are highly valued by King Duncan and his son.

The battle was very close for a very long time, and the side that would eventually become victorious was hard to predict. He uses a simile to show the difficulties that the men faced.

Say to the king the knowledge of the broil
As thou didst leave it.

Sergeant

Doubtful it stood;

As two spent swimmers, that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald--

This use of alliteration highlights the Sergeant's disdain for Macdonwald – a Scottish traitor who has been fighting with the enemy forces.

Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature

Do swarm upon him--from the western isles

The captain describes Macbeth as "brave" and reveals that Macbeth is a hero on the battlefield, worthy of the praise given to him. This is the second time that the audience have heard of Macbeth (the first time being in Act 1 Scene 1). The captain's speech sets Macbeth up to become the tragic hero of the play.

Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied;
And fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,
Show'd like a rebel's whore: but all's too weak:
For brave Macbeth--well he deserves that name--

A second reference to the motif of blood – this description acts as a contrast to later scenes.

Macbeth is shown to be laughing or mocking fate. This is ironic, as it foreshadows Macbeth's downfall following the Witches' prophesies.

Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave;

Simile: like the servant of courage itself ("valor's minion"), Macbeth hacked his way through the battle until he faced Macdonwald ("slave" here means "villain").

Macbeth's killing of the traitor is gruesome and vivid – we are told that Macbeth sliced him open and then placed his head on a spike. This both shows Macbeth as fearless, brutal warrior, but is also deeply ironic as Macbeth himself suffers the fate of beheading at the end of the play.

Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

"cousin" is used for any members of an extended family but also, as here, of a nobleman of his own court. It is clear from this expression that Duncan both trusts and respects Macbeth.

DUNCAN

O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!

This reference to shipwrecks is significant as King James 1st believed that Witches caused him to almost lose his life at sea.

Sergeant

As whence the sun 'gins his reflection
Shipwrecking storms and direful thunders break,

So from that spring whence comfort seem'd to come
Discomfort swells. Mark, king of Scotland, mark:
No sooner justice had with valour arm'd
Compell'd these skipping kerns to trust their heels,
But the Norweyan lord surveying vantage,
With furbish'd arms and new supplies of men
Began a fresh assault.

DUNCAN

Dismay'd not this

Our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?

Sergeant

Yes;

As sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion.

If I say sooth, I must report they were

As cannons overcharged with double cracks, so they

Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe:

Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,

Or memorise another Golgotha,

I cannot tell.

But I am faint, my gashes cry for help.

DUNCAN

So well thy words become thee as thy wounds;

They smack of honour both. Go get him surgeons.

Exit Sergeant, attended

Who comes here?

Enter ROSS

MALCOLM

The worthy thane of Ross.

LENNOX

What a haste looks through his eyes! So should he look

That seems to speak things strange.

ROSS

God save the king!

The Captain means: "this dismayed them about as much as sparrows dismay eagles or hares dismay lions."

They seemed to want to spill so much of their opponents' blood they could bathe in it or make the site of the battle as memorable as Golgotha, the place where Jesus was crucified. The mention of Golgotha, the site where Jesus was crucified, also foreshadows Duncan's death, a character who is characterised by his Christian beliefs and attitudes.

He says that they fought even harder against the Norwegians than their previous challenge. They tried twice as hard and re-loaded the canons with double ammunition.

DUNCAN

Whence camest thou, worthy thane?

ROSS

From Fife, great king;

Where the Norwegian banners flout the sky

And fan our people cold. Norway himself,

With terrible numbers,

Assisted by that most disloyal traitor

The thane of Cawdor, began a dismal conflict;

Till that Bellona's bridegroom, lapp'd in proof,

Confronted him with self-comparisons,

Point against point rebellious, arm 'gainst arm.

Curbing his lavish spirit: and, to conclude,

The victory fell on us.

DUNCAN

Great happiness!

ROSS

That now

Sweno, the Norways' king, craves composition:

Nor would we deign him burial of his men

Till he disbursed at Saint Colme's inch

Ten thousand dollars to our general use.

DUNCAN

No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive

Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death,

And with his former title greet Macbeth.

ROSS

I'll see it done.

DUNCAN

What he hath lost noble Macbeth hath won.

Exeunt

Although the King of Norway was well-outfitted with support, Macbeth stood his ground, as if he was the Ancient Roman Goddess of War's (Bellona's) husband.

We are told that Macbeth has inherited the Thane of Cawdor's title for his bravery and courage in battle. This will later prove to be deeply ironic as Macbeth himself also becomes traitorous.

This links to the Witches in Act 1 Scene 1, "When the battle's lost and won". This foreshadows how the Witches' prophesy directly links to Macbeth, and how they will be able to continually predict Macbeth's future actions.