

ACT IV SCENE III. England. Before the King's palace.

Malcolm is seeking darkness (like Macbeth) but he does so to mourn terrible acts against himself and Scotland. Macbeth sought the dark in order to commit those terrible acts. This is contrasting the two kings, one is heartfelt and cares for Scotland and the people whilst the other seeks only to gain power for himself.

Enter MALCOLM and MACDUFF

MALCOLM

Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there  
Weep our sad bosoms empty.

Much like Macbeth in A1S2, Macduff is presented as a brave and valiant warrior. He does not wish to mourn, but to fight.

MACDUFF

Let us rather  
Hold fast the mortal sword, and like good men  
Bestride our down-fall'n birthdom: each new morn  
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows  
Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds  
As if it felt with Scotland and yell'd out  
Like syllable of dolour.

Macduff's description of Scotland communicates the country's chaos, disorder, and suffering. Under Macbeth's tyrannical reign, the citizens of Scotland suffer immeasurable hardships, and Macduff wishes to restore Scotland to its former glory.

Malcolm uses a metaphor to express his feelings of hatred and scorn for Macbeth. He cannot bear speaking his name aloud as his causes him to become enraged.

MALCOLM

What I believe I'll wail,  
What know believe, and what I can redress,  
As I shall find the time to friend, I will.  
What you have spoke, it may be so perchance.  
This tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues,  
Was once thought honest: you have loved him well.  
He hath not touch'd you yet. I am young;  
but something  
You may deserve of him through me, and wisdom  
To offer up a weak poor innocent lamb  
To appease an angry god.

Macbeth uses a second metaphor, in which Macbeth is the "angry god" and he is the "innocent lamb". The reference to the "lamb" is an allusion to the Bible, as Lamb of God is a title for Jesus that appears in the Gospel of John, suggesting that Malcolm is innocent, pure, even god-like himself.

Malcolm expresses his view that power has the ability to corrupt any man, as we have seen with Macbeth.

MACDUFF

I am not treacherous.

MALCOLM

But Macbeth is.  
A good and virtuous nature may recoil  
In an imperial charge. But I shall crave  
your pardon;

In this line, Malcolm expresses his wisdom. He understands that you cannot judge a person's morality and intentions from looks alone, and that men often hide their evil natures behind false smiles. This links directly to the theme of appearances v reality and suggests that Malcolm is far more perceptive than his father.

That which you are my thoughts cannot transpose:  
Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell;  
Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace,  
Yet grace must still look so.

Shakespeare is referencing Lucifer, who is another who was corrupted by power. Lucifer was the brightest angel before he betrayed God, he was also corrupted by ambition and power.

MACDUFF

I have lost my hopes.

MALCOLM

Perchance even there where I did find my doubts.  
Why in that rawness left you wife and child,  
Those precious motives, those strong knots of love,  
Without leave-taking? I pray you,  
Let not my jealousies be your dishonours,  
But mine own safeties. You may be rightly just,  
Whatever I shall think.

Macduff is concerned that he will not be able to convince Malcolm to fight against Macbeth and take back the throne. He is in despair, and his chief concern is the suffering that Scotland and his people will experience while Macbeth remains on the throne. Macduff shows his patriotism and dedication to his country by lamenting the fate he is afraid it will be left to suffer.

Malcolm questions Macduff's decision to leave his wife and child. This is an example of dramatic irony and would create tension for the Jacobean audience.

MACDUFF

Bleed, bleed, poor country!  
Great tyranny! lay thou thy basis sure,  
For goodness dare not cheque thee: wear thou  
thy wrongs;  
The title is affeer'd! Fare thee well, lord:  
I would not be the villain that thou think'st

Malcolm uses personification to emphasise the negative impact that Macbeth's rule has had on the country. The phrase "each new day" suggests that Macbeth has become unstoppable in his destruction, and that all of Scotland is suffering due to his tyranny.

Malcolm professes he thinks he could overthrow Macbeth if he had to, he thinks he has the support and says the English have pledged him thousands of troops. Shakespeare shows cooperation and friendship between England and Scotland as James I (a Scottish king of England) had recently been crowned. This would please the king as it indirectly supports his rule.

Macduff makes a stark claim here, which reveals the severity of bitterness and dislike that even some of Macbeth's counterparts have for him. His use of alliteration adds a tone of harsh bitterness to his words.

His words echo those Macbeth has heard from the apparitions – Macbeth has indeed become "bloody", and Malcolm begins to list the various sins that Macbeth is guilty of.

Macduff's loyalty, despite Malcolm's claims of his own wicked nature, is both shocking and amicable. He attempts to persuade Malcolm that his shortcomings should not prevent him from taking what is rightfully his and that any vices may be overcome.

For the whole space that's in the tyrant's grasp,  
And the rich East to boot.

MALCOLM

Be not offended:

I speak not as in absolute fear of you.

I think our country sinks beneath the yoke;  
It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gash

Is added to her wounds: I think withal  
There would be hands uplifted in my right;  
And here from gracious England have I offer

Of goodly thousands: but, for all this,  
When I shall tread upon the tyrant's head,  
Or wear it on my sword, yet my poor country  
Shall have more vices than it had before,  
More suffer and more sundry ways than ever,  
By him that shall succeed.

Macduff uses hyperbole to express his loyalty and morality to Malcolm.

We see that Malcolm struggles with the consequences of what such an action would do. His words are meant to lead Macduff to discuss his (Malcolm's) own ability to rule in an attempt to test his loyalties.

MACDUFF

What should he be?

MALCOLM

It is myself I mean: in whom I know  
All the particulars of vice so grafted  
That, when they shall be open'd, black Macbeth  
Will seem as pure as snow, and the poor state  
Esteem him as a lamb, being compared  
With my confineless harms.

Malcolm appears self-reflective in admitting that he would make a poor leader. He states that if all his "vices" were laid bare for the people to see, even Macbeth would look good in comparison. He fears that taking power for himself would reveal an evil nature in him. This presents Malcolm's fine statesmanship as he is able to subtly manipulate Macduff. This is also an example of noble duplicity which juxtaposes Macbeth's ill-intended duplicity.

MACDUFF

Not in the legions

Of horrid hell can come a devil more damn'd  
In evils to top Macbeth.

MALCOLM

I grant him bloody,  
Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful,  
Sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin  
That has a name: but there's no bottom, none,  
In my voluptuousness: your wives, your daughters,  
Your matrons and your maids, could not fill up  
The cistern of my lust, and my desire  
All continent impediments would o'erbear  
That did oppose my will: better Macbeth  
Than such an one to reign.

As his previous words about his own (fictional) nature do not sway Macduff in his support, Malcolm lists one personal trait that would make it almost impossible to rule: his sexual desires. As he puts it even close friends "daughters, wives, and old women" would not be safe or satisfy his lust. He believes that this trait of his would overreach all lines and bounds. This is designed to shock both Macduff and the Jacobean audience.

MACDUFF

Boundless intemperance

In nature is a tyranny; it hath been  
The untimely emptying of the happy throne  
And fall of many kings. But fear not yet  
To take upon you what is yours: you may  
Convey your pleasures in a spacious plenty,  
And yet seem cold, the time you may so hoodwink.  
We have willing dames enough: there cannot be  
That vulture in you, to devour so many  
As will to greatness dedicate themselves,  
Finding it so inclined.

MALCOLM

With this there grows  
In my most ill-composed affection such  
A stanchless avarice that, were I king,

I should cut off the nobles for their lands,  
Desire his jewels and this other's house:  
And my more-having would be as a sauce  
To make me hunger more; that I should forge  
Quarrels unjust against the good and loyal,  
Destroying them for wealth.

Having previously spoken about the sin of lust, Malcolm now discusses the sin of greed. He suggests that, as king, he would "hunger" for wealth.

Again, Macduff replies by suggesting that his (Malcolm's) green can be managed, and that he could still be a good and noble King despite this.

MACDUFF

This avarice

Sticks deeper, grows with more pernicious root  
Than summer-seeming lust, and it hath been  
The sword of our slain kings: yet do not fear;  
Scotland hath foisons to fill up your will,  
Of your mere own: all these are portable,  
With other graces weigh'd.

Here Malcolm makes a list of the ideal qualities of a king. King James wrote a book called the 'Basilikon Doron' which included general guidelines to follow to be an efficient monarch, here Shakespeare shows loyalty to King James by expressing the same views.

MALCOLM

But I have none: the king-becoming graces,  
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,  
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,  
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude,  
I have no relish of them, but abound  
In the division of each several crime,  
Acting it many ways. Nay, had I power, I should  
Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,

"Milk" has connotations of innocence and purity, something which Malcolm confesses he will corrupt by pouring them into "hell". This links to the words previously spoken by Lady Macbeth.

Uproar the universal peace, confound  
All unity on earth.

MACDUFF

O Scotland, Scotland!

MALCOLM

If such a one be fit to govern, speak:  
I am as I have spoken.

Macduff juxtaposes Malcolm's description of himself with that of his parents, with Duncan's virtuous image being continued through his description as a "most sainted king". His mother is also described as godly, a stark contrast to the current queen, Lady Macbeth, who disregarded Christian values in order to gain power.

MACDUFF

Fit to govern!

No, not to live. O nation miserable,  
With an untitled tyrant bloody-scepter'd,  
When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again,  
Since that the truest issue of thy throne  
By his own interdiction stands accursed,  
And does blaspheme his breed? Thy royal father  
Was a most sainted king: the queen that bore thee,  
Oftener upon her knees than on her feet,  
Died every day she lived. Fare thee well!  
These evils thou repeat'st upon thyself  
Have banish'd me from Scotland. O my breast,  
Thy hope ends here!

Macduff reveals his sincere love for his country through his desire to see a good and honourable man as its king. He does not lament for himself, rather for his country as he believes that there is no man now left fit to rule. The image of a bloody sceptre is significant, suggesting that the sceptre (symbolic of kingship) has been corrupted by evil.

'Child of integrity' is a metaphor of innocence and goodness. Malcolm expresses that he can know trust Macduff in regard to affairs with Macbeth. A 'child' is was seen the purest form of innocence, and Macduff's passion for Scotland is clearly something that Malcolm feels should be protected and not destroyed.

MALCOLM

Macduff, this noble passion,  
Child of integrity, hath from my soul  
Wiped the black scruples, reconciled my thoughts  
To thy good truth and honour. Devilish Macbeth  
By many of these trains hath sought to win me  
Into his power, and modest wisdom plucks me  
From over-credulous haste: but God above  
Deal between thee and me! for even now  
I put myself to thy direction, and  
Unspeak mine own detraction, here abjure  
The taints and blames I laid upon myself,  
For strangers to my nature. I am yet

Macduff's continued use of short, exclamatory sentences highlight his feelings of hopelessness and anger.

'The royal touch' (also known as the King's touch) was a form of laying on of hands, whereby French and English monarchs touched their subjects, regardless of social classes, with the intent to cure them of various diseases and conditions. This is often applied to people suffering from tuberculous cervical lymphadenitis. The disease rarely resulted in death and often went into remission on its own, giving the impression that the monarch's touch cured it. The claimed power was most notably exercised by monarchs who sought to demonstrate the legitimacy of their reign by showing that they were truly chosen by God himself.

Unknown to woman, never was forsworn,  
Scarcely have coveted what was mine own,  
At no time broke my faith, would not betray  
The devil to his fellow and delight  
No less in truth than life: my first false speaking  
Was this upon myself: what I am truly,  
Is thine and my poor country's to command:  
Whither indeed, before thy here-approach,  
Old Siward, with ten thousand warlike men,  
Already at a point, was setting forth.  
Now we'll together; and the chance of goodness  
Be like our warranted quarrel! Why are you silent?

Malcolm's admission that his previous statements were false would create a sense of deep relief for both Macduff and the Jacobean audience. His statement that he is "unknown to women" (meaning that he remains a virgin) is used to symbolise his innocence and purity.

MACDUFF

Such welcome and unwelcome things at once  
'Tis hard to reconcile.

Enter a Doctor

MALCOLM

Well; more anon.--Comes the king forth, I pray you?

Doctor

Ay, sir; there are a crew of wretched souls  
That stay his cure: their malady convinces  
The great assay of art; but at his touch--  
Such sanctity hath heaven given his hand--  
They presently amend.

MALCOLM

I thank you, doctor.

Exit Doctor

MACDUFF

What's the disease he means?

MALCOLM

'Tis call'd the evil:

A most miraculous work in this good king;  
Which often, since my here-remain in England,  
I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven,  
Himself best knows: but strangely-visited people,  
All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,  
The mere despair of surgery, he cures,  
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,  
Put on with holy prayers: and 'tis spoken,  
To the succeeding royalty he leaves  
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue,  
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,  
And sundry blessings hang about his throne,  
That speak him full of grace.

Malcolm explains that his (the English King's) ability to cure the sick shows that his is indeed chosen by God, something which references the Divine Right of Kings; the belief that the King is God's mandate.

Enter ROSS

MACDUFF

See, who comes here?

MALCOLM

My countryman; but yet I know him not.

MACDUFF

My ever-gentle cousin, welcome hither.

Ross echoes Macduff's sentiments from earlier in this scene - the situation in Scotland is so terrible that it is a dangerous place for its citizens. With a monarch like Macbeth there is no protection or safety; violence and death are everywhere. Additionally, a "mother country" is the country one was born in. Scotland is no longer the place where they were born; now, it is only the place where they will die.

MALCOLM  
I know him now. Good God, betimes remove  
The means that makes us strangers!

ROSS  
Sir, amen.

MACDUFF  
Stands Scotland where it did?

ROSS  
Alas, poor country!  
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot  
Be call'd our mother, but our grave; where nothing,  
But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;  
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air  
Are made, not mark'd; where violent sorrow seems  
A modern ecstasy; the dead man's knell  
Is there scarce ask'd for who; and good men's lives  
Expire before the flowers in their caps,  
Dying or ere they sicken.

The triplet "sighs and groans and shrieks" gives a semantic field of despair and agony, hence accentuating Macbeth's corrupted, dystopian-like rule.

The word "knell" is used again (first seen in A2S1 to signal to death of King Duncan). A knell is the solemn ringing of a church bell to announce someone's death, suggesting that Scotland is dying under the rule of Macbeth.

Ross replies that bad news now comes so often that by the time is it told, it is no longer the "newest". This use of hyperbole highlights the dire nature of Scotland and the numerous tragedies occurring.

MACDUFF  
O, relation  
Too nice, and yet too true!

MALCOLM  
What's the newest grief?

ROSS  
That of an hour's age doth hiss the speaker:  
Each minute teems a new one.

MACDUFF  
How does my wife?

ROSS  
Why, well.

MACDUFF  
And all my children?

Use of dramatic irony. Ross is clearly reluctant to tell Macduff about the murder of his family. This both shows Ross as a considerate character, but also creates suspense for the audience as they are aware that the truth must be told.

This is an example of equivocation (the use of ambiguous language to conceal the truth), Ross deliberately uses the phrase "at peace" to conceal the truth from Macduff.

ROSS  
Well too.

MACDUFF  
The tyrant has not batter'd at their peace?

ROSS  
No; they were well at peace when I did leave 'em.

MACDUFF  
But not a niggard of your speech: how goes't?

ROSS  
When I came hither to transport the tidings,  
Which I have heavily borne, there ran a rumour  
Of many worthy fellows that were out;  
Which was to my belief witness'd the rather,  
For that I saw the tyrant's power a-foot:  
Now is the time of help; your eye in Scotland  
Would create soldiers, make our women fight,

Ross subverts stereotypical gender roles by suggesting that support for Malcolm runs so deep that even women (thought in Jacobean England to be the weaker sex) would fight for him.

To doff their dire distresses.

MALCOLM

Be't their comfort

We are coming thither: gracious England hath  
Lent us good Siward and ten thousand men;  
An older and a better soldier none  
That Christendom gives out.

ROSS

Would I could answer

This comfort with the like! But I have words  
That would be howl'd out in the desert air,  
Where hearing should not latch them.

His use of hyperbole here expresses the severity of the news that he brings.

MACDUFF

What concern they?

The general cause? or is it a fee-grief  
Due to some single breast?

Macduff's use of short, direct questions in quick succession expresses his fear and concern.

ROSS

No mind that's honest

But in it shares some woe; though the main part  
Pertains to you alone.

Rather than telling Macduff outright, Ross continues to hesitate by telling Macduff that the news that he has is about him alone. Again, the audience are left to wait for the news that they are aware is coming, increasing the atmosphere of tension.

MACDUFF

If it be mine,

Keep it not from me, quickly let me have it.

ROSS

Let not your ears despise my tongue for ever,  
Which shall possess them with the heaviest sound  
That ever yet they heard.

MACDUFF

Hum! I guess at it.

ROSS

Your castle is surprised; your wife and babes  
Savagely slaughter'd: to relate the manner,  
Were, on the quarry of these murder'd deer,  
To add the death of you.

Sibilance emphasises the adverb 'savagely' which conveys how brutal and ruthless this murder was.

The audience are left to wonder how the family were killed, as Ross refuses to give Macduff explicit details to spare him the pain of knowing.

MALCOLM

Merciful heaven!

What, man! ne'er pull your hat upon your brows;  
Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak  
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break.

At moments of stress, Macduff typically finds it difficult to speak, and Malcolm's lines indicate that this is the case here: as he often does, Shakespeare gives "embedded stage directions" to his actors in the dialogue. Here, for instance, we assume that Macduff is so affected by the news that he cannot reply.

MACDUFF

My children too?

Questioning Ross displays his utter disbelief towards the situation. The use of short sentences here also suggests that he is unable to put his grief into words.

ROSS

Wife, children, servants, all  
That could be found.

MACDUFF

And I must be from thence!  
My wife kill'd too?

ROSS

I have said.

Malcolm immediately seeks to take advantage of the situation by weaponizing Macduff's grief and rage and turning it against Macbeth. The semantic field of illness is continued, with Malcolm suggesting that violent action would "cure" Macduff's grief.

Malcolm is trying to manipulate Macduff's grief for his own means by mentioning his masculinity. As a man in Jacobean England, Macduff would have been expected to remain strong and respond with violence in order to avenge the death of his family.

Here Macduff bridges the gap between individuals and gender stereotypes. Macduff has no shame or reluctance to "feel it as a man," understanding that it is entirely right and proper as a human being, a husband, and a father to feel grief and sorrow on the death of his entire family.

Malcolm's final line reflects the ongoing symbolism of light/dark as a representation of the theme of good v evil. The "long night" is a reference to Macbeth's reign of evil and the metaphorical darkness he has brought to Scotland.

MALCOLM  
Be comforted:  
Let's make us medicines of our great revenge,  
To cure this deadly grief.

MACDUFF  
He has no children. All my pretty ones?  
Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?  
What, all my pretty chickens and their dam  
At one fell swoop?

MALCOLM  
Dispute it like a man.

MACDUFF  
I shall do so;  
But I must also feel it as a man:  
I cannot but remember such things were,  
That were most precious to me. Did heaven look on,  
And would not take their part? Sinful Macduff,  
They were all struck for thee! naught that I am,  
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,  
Fell slaughter on their souls. Heaven rest them now!

MALCOLM  
Be this the whetstone of your sword: let grief  
Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it.

MACDUFF  
O, I could play the woman with mine eyes  
And braggart with my tongue! But, gentle heavens,  
Cut short all intermission; front to front  
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;  
Within my sword's length set him; if he 'scape,  
Heaven forgive him too!

MALCOLM  
This tune goes manly.  
Come, go we to the king; our power is ready;  
Our lack is nothing but our leave; Macbeth  
Is ripe for shaking, and the powers above  
Put on their instruments. Receive what cheer you may:  
The night is long that never finds the day.

Exeunt

Macbeth has been referred to as a kite throughout the play and now he's a 'hell-kite'. Macbeth has transcended nature and become a corruption of nature.

The repetition of 'all?' exaggerates his disbelief – the interrogative sentence demanding answers, conveying a sense of desperation. 'Pretty chickens' is a reference to the ongoing bird motif in the play, and 'chickens' (a metaphor) connotes vulnerability and weakness. Enjambment is also used here to portray Macduff's overflowing emotions.

Macduff ultimately conforms to Jacobean expectations of masculinity, demanding revenge upon Macbeth and expressing his desire to murder him himself. This foreshadows their ultimate conflict and Macbeth's demise.