

SCENE II. The same.

Lady Macbeth's opening words introduce a new level of emotional intensity. Fear of failure has been replaced with fear of discovery, and even though she describes herself as drunk with boldness and on fire with passion, she is easily alarmed by the smallest noises and movements.

Enter LADY MACBETH

LADY MACBETH

That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold;

What hath quenched them hath given me fire.

Hark! Peace!

It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal bellman,

Which gives the stern'st good-night. He is about it:

The doors are open; and the surfeited grooms  
Do mock their charge with snores: I have drugg'd

their possets,

That death and nature do contend about them,

Whether they live or die.

MACBETH

[Within] Who's there? what, ho!

LADY MACBETH

Alack, I am afraid they have awaked,

And 'tis not done. The attempt and not the deed

Confounds us. Hark! I laid their daggers ready;

He could not miss 'em. Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done't.

Enter MACBETH

My husband!

MACBETH

I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?

LADY MACBETH

I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.

Did not you speak?

MACBETH

When?

LADY MACBETH

Now.

MACBETH

The owl was said to trick other birds into falling in hunters' traps and therefore acts as a symbol of cunning and malevolence.

The cry of a screech owl was also thought to announce a death, and a "fatal bellman" was a night watchman who rang a bell to call a prisoner to his hanging. Lady Macbeth is glad to hear the cry of the screech owl, as it means that Macbeth has successfully murdered Duncan.

At this point, Lady Macbeth is extremely anxious, fearing that Macbeth has been discovered by the guards who may have "awaked" and found Macbeth in the middle of a murder attempt – but without having had time to commit the actual "deed." An event like this would completely disrupt ("confound") the Macbeths' plan.

A posset was a drink made of hot milk curdled with ale, wine, or other alcohol and typically flavoured with spices. Lady Macbeth's poisoning of milk (something stereotypically linked to motherhood and femininity) is a metaphor for her rejection of her sex.

Lady Macbeth's feelings of anxiety would have increased the tension of the scene for the audience, who, like Lady Macbeth, are unaware of the outcome of Macbeth's task.

Once again, Lady Macbeth tells us what she would do – much as she informed Macbeth that she would murder her own child. Macbeth is a man if action, and we are left to question if Lady Macbeth indeed could have committed the act herself.

Macbeth refrains from mentioning the "deed" directly due to the enormity of his actions and the consequences that they will have.

The quick-fire dialogue and fragmented line structure in this part of the scene denote a sense of frightened urgency in both characters. This is in direct contrast with the long, drawn out speeches that each character has used in the past.

As I descended?

LADY MACBETH

Ay.

MACBETH

Hark!

Who lies i' the second chamber?

LADY MACBETH

Donalbain.

MACBETH

This is a sorry sight.

Looking on his hands

LADY MACBETH

A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight.

MACBETH

There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried

'Murder!'

That they did wake each other: I stood and heard them:

But they did say their prayers, and address'd them

Again to sleep.

LADY MACBETH

There are two lodged together.

MACBETH

One cried 'God bless us!' and 'Amen' the other;

As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.

Listening their fear, I could not say 'Amen,'

When they did say 'God bless us!'

LADY MACBETH

Consider it not so deeply.

MACBETH

But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?

I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'

Stuck in my throat.

LADY MACBETH

This moment shows how Macbeth, even after committing treason, still retains some degree of remorse or horror at his own actions.

Lady Macbeth's words are bitter and instantly dismissive. This could be evidence of her callous nature, or of her awareness that they have committed themselves to their fate and that nothing can be done to change this.

The guards are innocent and so dutifully say their prayers and sleep peacefully, whereas Macbeth is being condemned for his sins against God. Regicide was considered the ultimate sin as it disrupted the great chain of being and natural order.

Macbeth is the executioner of Duncan – and so his hands, like those of a hangman, are bloody (symbolic of guilt).

If a person could not say a prayer (e.g. "amen"), it was a sign that they were bewitched. Symbolically, Macbeth is unable to receive a blessing: he is damned to hell for his murderous transgression.

Macbeth uses a metaphor to emphasize his inability to say the blessing – something which he finds distressing as it marks him as outside of God's love and protection.

Unlike Macbeth, Lady Macbeth seems unaffected by the Murder and directs her husband to not think about it so much. Her nonchalance is proven to be ironic, as it is ultimately she who suffers greatly and is tormented by her guilt.

An example of foreshadowing (Lady Macbeth's own madness – Act 5 Scene 1.)

Another example of hallucinations – link to the supernatural.

Macbeth muses that restful, undisturbed sleep is for the innocent, such as King Duncan whom he murdered whilst sleeping in his bed. Unlike Duncan, Macbeth understands that he can no longer sleep well due his crimes.

Here, Macbeth imagines sleep as an antidote to life's cares and tribulations. Sleep is personified, as is care, Macbeth imagining it as wearing ragged clothes which sleep repairs. The benefits of sleep stand in stark contrast to the cries of the voice in the night that Macbeth "will sleep no more". There are echoes here of the Witches' incantations. If sleep brings peace, then no sleep will bring torment and suffering.

These deeds must not be thought  
After these ways; so, it will make us mad.

MACBETH

Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!

Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep,  
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,  
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,  
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,  
Chief nourisher in life's feast,--

LADY MACBETH

What do you mean?

MACBETH

Still it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house:

'Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor  
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.'

LADY MACBETH

Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy thane,

You do unbend your noble strength, to think  
So brainsickly of things. Go get some water,  
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.

Lady Macbeth appears impatient with Macbeth as she suggests to him to simply "Get some water." Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth use water throughout the play as a metaphor for their desire to remove sin, guilt and blame. Water in the Christian Church is used in baptism—something which can wash away the sins of a person.

Macbeth's anxiety is reaching fever pitch, and his language echoes his distress, as he repeats the phrase (anaphora). In Macbeth's mind, these words have become a kind of dreadful incantation that speak to the horror and sacrilege of the act he has just committed. He lists his titles progressively, evoking the Witches' prophecy.

Although mental health was little understood in the Jacobean era, it was recognized mental illness was a condition that could arise from great stress and could be affected when tested by extreme circumstances. Lady Macbeth feels that Macbeth's fixation will lead to mental illness – again this is ironic as it is she who succumbs to mental illness due to stress and guilt.

Why did you bring these daggers from the place?

They must lie there: go carry them; and smear  
The sleepy grooms with blood.

Lady Macbeth's use of imperatives show the balance of power within the relationship.

MACBETH

I'll go no more:

I am afraid to think what I have done;

Look on't again I dare not.

LADY MACBETH

Infirm of purpose!

Lady Macbeth again belittles Macbeth for his fear.

Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead

Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood

That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,

I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal;

For it must seem their guilt.

Lady Macbeth disparages her husband's masculinity and appears to have little sympathy or remorse for her part in the murder of the rightful King and the framing of the two innocent guards. Her reference to the fears of "childhood" demean Macbeth's feelings of apprehension.

The knocking here creates further tension as it cuts through the claustrophobic and uneasy atmosphere. It also sets up the following scene, in which the ominous knocking turns comic via the perspective of the drunken Porter.

Blood, specifically Duncan's blood, serves as the symbol of Macbeth's guilt. Panicking after the murder, he uses a hyperbole to express his feeling that all great Neptune's ocean cannot cleanse him—that there is enough blood on his hands to turn the green sea red. (Neptune is the Roman god of the sea.) In other words, he imagines the guilt will stay with him until his death. Again, there is a link here between water and the theme of Christianity.

She imagines that washing her hands will easily cleanse her of guilt. She is overly flippant with her comments, in juxtaposition with Macbeth who feels that he will never be free of the guilt that he feels.

'To know', here, means to be conscious of. Macbeth would rather be unconscious (or asleep) than be awake and aware of what he did. Note the paradox, 'to know' and 'not know': Macbeth in having 'murder'd sleep' is unable to sleep himself and as such unable to unburden his conscience; he is forced to 'know' his guilt.

Macbeth's final words are bitter and deeply ironic, as we are aware that Duncan is dead by Macbeth's own hand. The scene ends with Macbeth expressing overwhelming guilt and repentance, seeming to regret his actions.

Exit. Knocking within

MACBETH

Whence is that knocking?

How is't with me, when every noise appals me?

What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes.

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas in incarnadine,

Making the green one red.

Re-enter LADY MACBETH

LADY MACBETH

My hands are of your colour; but I shame

To wear a heart so white.

Knocking within

I hear a knocking

At the south entry: retire we to our chamber;

A little water clears us of this deed:

How easy is it, then! Your constancy

Hath left you unattended.

Knocking within

Hark! more knocking.

Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us,

And show us to be watchers. Be not lost

So poorly in your thoughts.

MACBETH

To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.

Knocking within

Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!

Exeunt

The guilty Macbeth imagines that the unknown "hands" knocking at the door are punishing him for his crime by plucking his eyes out. (In fact, the person knocking—Macduff—will kill him at the end of the play.) This reference to blindness is metaphorical as Macbeth is blinded by his own ambition, and yet is still blind to the equivocation and manipulation of the Witches throughout the play, something which eventually leads to his downfall.

This is a very demeaning comment and comparison on several levels. White is the colour of a flag of surrender, and the colour of cowardice, suggesting that she believes that despite his brave actions, Macbeth's feelings betray his cowardly nature. She owns that her hands are just as red/guilty as his, but she would be ashamed to have such a pure/cowardly heart to go with them.

Literally, this refers to the sound of Macduff's knocking at the castle door. Metaphorically, it is the sound of Macbeth's heart pounding within his chest. In other words, his conscience is troubled. The knocking could also be seen to be the knocking of justice, or of vengeance.