

SCENE V. Inverness. Macbeth's castle.

Enter LADY MACBETH, reading a letter

LADY MACBETH

'They met me in the day of success: and I have learned by the perfectest report, they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who all-hailed me 'Thane of Cawdor;' by which title, before, these weird sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time, with 'Hail, king that shalt be!' This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell.'

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be

What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature;

It is too full o' the milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,

That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,

And yet wouldst wrongly win: thou'ldst have, great Glamis,

That which cries 'Thus thou must do, if thou have it;

And that which rather thou dost fear to do

Than wishest should be undone.' Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;

And chastise with the valour of my tongue

All that impedes thee from the golden round,

Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem

To have thee crown'd withal.

Enter a Messenger

What is your tidings?

Macbeth is informing his wife that he encountered the Witches after his victory in battle, and that they know more than any mortal could—i.e., they have supernatural knowledge.

"The day of success" refers to the battle Macbeth had just won. The phrase carries a deep irony: the day he meets the Witches is also the beginning of his downfall.

Macbeth admits that he was deeply enraptured, engrossed, transported with emotion. He was rapt in the idea of becoming King.

Macbeth is aware this his becoming King would not only mean "greatness" for himself, but for his wife. It is important to note that, in Jacobean England, a woman's power and status was gained through that of her husband.

Lady Macbeth fears her husband's compassionate nature may blunt his ambition and keep him from doing what is necessary to achieve greatness. She uses "milk" here as a metaphor for the (stereotypically) feminine quality of kindness and nurture – the ironic implication being that Macbeth possesses far more stereotypically feminine qualities (compassion, kindness) than she does.

She here expresses the wish that Macbeth should rush home so that she may encourage him to do what needs to be done to usurp the throne and claim it as his own. The metaphor, 'pour my spirits in thine ear' suggests that she wishes to share her innermost thoughts and desires with her husband. She is keen to tell him about desire for him to become king. 'The valour of my tongue' implies that she wishes to ply him with encouraging words and spur him on into performing a most malicious and immoral act.

This metaphor is used to convey the extent of Macbeth's desperation to know more. The "desire" for more, be it influence, knowledge, or power is a recurring theme throughout the play, and both Macbeth and his wife fall prey to their innermost desires, casting aside their moral conscience in pursuit of their ambitions, leading to their eventual downfall.

Unusually, Macbeth seems to see his wife as an equal. This would have gone against conventional Jacobean beliefs regarding the status of men and women. Women were seen as the weaker sex, subservient to their husbands and bound by their wishes.

Lady Macbeth is immediately confident that these prophecies "shalt" (shall) come to pass. Her words uncannily reflect those of the Witches' prophecy.

She fears that whilst Macbeth has ambition, he does not possess the determination or wickedness to do what needs to be done. This is at odds of our impressions of Macbeth in Act 1 Scene 2, in which he is present as violent and brutal killer.

She believes that Macbeth would not do anything underhanded or deceitful to further his ambition.

"Chastise" meaning reprimand and "valour" meaning bravery. This is example of how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's relationship subverts conventional Jacobean gender roles. Lady Macbeth seems to hold the power and, rather than being subservient to her husband, wishes to reprimand and influence him.

The crown – symbolic of kingship.

Macbeth is a play full of messages and "tidings," from the report of the King's visit in this scene to the report of Macduff's family's slaughter in Act 4 Scene 3 to the report of Lady Macbeth's death in Act 5 Scene 5. These messages help drive the plot and heighten the tense atmosphere of the play.

Messenger

The king comes here to-night.

LADY MACBETH

Thou'rt mad to say it:

Is not thy master with him? who, were't so,
Would have inform'd for preparation.

Messenger

So please you, it is true: our thane is coming:

One of my fellows had the speed of him,
Who, almost dead for breath, had scarcely more
Than would make up his message.

LADY MACBETH

Give him tending;

He brings great news.

Exit Messenger

The 'Raven' is often depicted as a harbinger of death. It is also significant that a group of ravens is called an "unkindness" or "conspiracy,"- mirroring the action of the play.

The use of "my" denotes her masculine role.

She doesn't want to be gentle, soft, sweet-tempered-qualities stereotypically associated with her sex and feels that she must shed her femininity to carry out her plan.

She wishes to feel no guilt for her actions.

'Fell' meanings dangerous or fatal - further reiterating her intentions to commit regicide.

Lady Macbeth calls on the evil spirits to replace her breast milk (used to symbolise maternal, stereotypically feminine characteristics) with 'gall', this being a type of bile used to symbolise evil.

Lady Macbeth wishes to hide her actions from God so that he cannot hinder her from doing what she is planning to do. Lady Macbeth shows an awareness of her deviation from Christianity (the prevalent religion in Jacobean England).

She uses powerful adjectives to flatter and therefore emotionally manipulate her husband.

The raven himself is hoarse

That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan

Under my battlements. Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood;

Stop up the access and passage to remorse,

That no compunctious visitings of nature

Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between

The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,

And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,

Wherever in your sightless substances

You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,

Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,

To cry 'Hold, hold!'

Enter MACBETH

Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!

This is the first clear confirmation to the audience that Lady Macbeth has murderous intentions.

Lady Macbeth uses an imperative to command the "spirits" to help her. She is communing with the supernatural (evil) forces.

This phrase has multiple meanings, firstly, that she does not wish to feel pain (both mental and physical) and is asking to be made stronger. Secondly, that Lady Macbeth wishes to no longer menstruate and therefore be rendered infertile. This would further distance her from Jacobian ideologies regarding the role of woman, namely that their primary role is to produce children.

This links to the symbolism of light/dark throughout the play. Again, Lady Macbeth calls for darkness, not only to reflect the evil nature of her plans, but also to metaphorically 'hide' her actions from others. Ironically, here in Act 1 she calls for darkness, whereas later, in Act 5, she cannot be without a candle or light.

Lady Macbeth's use of harsh alliteration and exclamatory sentences increase the pace of her words. This in turn heightens the tension and reflects her own growing feelings of excitement and anticipation.

Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!

Lady Macbeth's words hauntingly echo the words of the Witches.

Thy letters have transported me beyond

This ignorant present, and I feel now

The future in the instant.

MACBETH

My dearest love,

Duncan comes here to-night.

LADY MACBETH

And when goes hence?

MACBETH

To-morrow, as he purposes.

LADY MACBETH

O, never

Link to the symbolism of light / dark – The sun being symbolic of King Duncan and representative of his power (derived from God – the Divine right of Kings).

Shall sun that morrow see!

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,

Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,

Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,

But be the serpent under't. He that's coming

Must be provided for: and you shall put

Lady Macbeth again uses imperative language. This illustrates the power imbalance in their relationship.

This night's great business into my dispatch;

Which shall to all our nights and days to come

Lady Macbeth's use of a rhyming couplet echoes the Witch's speech and highlights her link to the supernatural (the Spirits).

Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

Link to the theme of appearances v reality. Lady Macbeth instructs her husband to behave outwardly as welcoming, whilst secretly harbouring malicious intentions. The snake represents Macbeth's hidden ambition, and more literally, Lady Macbeth's plan of action. The serpent is traditionally linked to evil and cunning and is also a biblical reference to the story of Genesis in which the Devil disguised himself as a snake to tempt Eve into sin.

MACBETH

We will speak further.

LADY MACBETH

Only look up clear;

To alter favour ever is to fear:

Leave all the rest to me.

Exeunt