

ACT IV SCENE II. Fife. Macduff's castle.

Lady Macduff is the wife of Lord Macduff, the thane of Fife, and the mother of an unnamed son and other children. Her appearance in the play is brief.

She notes that although Macduff has not acted against the king, his beliefs and fears mark him (and by extension, his family) as traitors. This is ironic as was Macbeth himself who betrayed King Duncan.

Enter LADY MACDUFF, her Son, and ROSS

LADY MACDUFF

What had he done, to make him fly the land?

The start of a semantic field, linking to birds. This indicates that Macduff has taken the freedom of his people through his tyrannical rule. Lady Macduff accuses her husband of escaping and becoming a coward.

ROSS

You must have patience, madam.

LADY MACDUFF

He had none:

His flight was madness: when our actions do not,
Our fears do make us traitors.

ROSS

You know not

Whether it was his wisdom or his fear.

LADY MACDUFF

Wisdom! to leave his wife, to leave his babes,

His mansion and his titles in a place

From whence himself does fly? He loves us not;

He wants the natural touch: for the poor wren,

The most diminutive of birds, will fight,

Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.

All is the fear and nothing is the love;

As little is the wisdom, where the flight

So runs against all reason.

Lady Macduff feels abandoned by her husband. "Wisdom" is retorted ironically, as she clearly questions the wisdom of his actions.

Lady Macduff feels betrayed by Macduff, as he has left her and her child and ran away to England. She feels like Macduff loves his country more than he loves his family.

The wren leaves the nest to fight the owl, leaving her chicks vulnerable. In the same way, Macduff has left his "nest" to fight Macbeth (the "owl"), leaving Lady Macduff and her children vulnerable to attack. In this metaphor, Macbeth is shown to be the "owl", a bird traditionally linked to stealth and evil.

ROSS

My dearest coz,

I pray you, school yourself: but for your husband,

He is noble, wise, judicious, and best knows

The fits o' the season. I dare not speak

Ross begs Lady Macduff to trust in her husband's decisions (as would have been expected of a wife in Jacobean England.) He presents Macduff as a noble and just character.

Here it seems that Ross is warning Lady Macduff about the events that are about to take place, however he does not say this explicitly. References to time are an important aspect of the play. As time passes, events become more intense and consequences more significant. Time seems to pass more quickly as the play progresses, and this adds to the tension as the play moves towards its final climax.

much further;
But cruel are the times, when we are traitors
And do not know ourselves, when we hold rumour
From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,
But float upon a wild and violent sea
Each way and move. I take my leave of you:
Shall not be long but I'll be here again:
Things at the worst will cease, or else climb upward
To what they were before. My pretty cousin,
Blessing upon you!

LADY MACDUFF

Father'd he is, and yet he's fatherless.

ROSS

I am so much a fool, should I stay longer,
It would be my disgrace and your discomfort:
I take my leave at once.

Exit

LADY MACDUFF

Sirrah, your father's dead;
And what will you do now? How will you live?

Son

As birds do, mother.

LADY MACDUFF

What, with worms and flies?

Son

With what I get, I mean; and so do they.

An example of pathetic fallacy, relating to the chaos of state in Scotland. Under Macbeth's reign, Scotland's pandemonium is comparable to that of a violent sea.

References food chain, birds being predators of worms and flies. Reinforces the importance of the Great Chain of Being and God's hierarchy.

LADY MACDUFF

Lady Macduff includes different types of traps for birds in her reply – lime (sticky substance that would catch the bird’s feet), pitfall (a hole in the ground covered with sticks and leaves to conceal it) and gin (a snare for game birds). This foreshadows their impending death, and also their inability to escape this.

Poor bird! thou'ldst never fear the net nor lime,
The pitfall nor the gin.

Son

Why should I, mother? Poor birds they are not set for.
My father is not dead, for all your saying.

LADY MACDUFF

Yes, he is dead; how wilt thou do for a father?

Son

Nay, how will you do for a husband?

LADY MACDUFF

Why, I can buy me twenty at any market.

Son

Then you'll buy 'em to sell again.

LADY MACDUFF

Thou speak'st with all thy wit: and yet, i' faith,
With wit enough for thee.

Son

Was my father a traitor, mother?

LADY MACDUFF

Ay, that he was.

Son

What is a traitor?

The son either misunderstands or deliberately puns on his mother’s use of the word “Poor”. She of course means “unfortunate”, his retort means “Nobody wants to catch low-quality birds so they don’t have to fear traps”. This kind of misunderstanding/ word play continues throughout the scene. This acts as comic relief to enlighten/relieve the tension of the scene.

Although this could suggest a weak relationship between Lady Macduff and Macduff (as it is a relationship built on wealth), the tone is playful which could suggest an even closer relationship that first implied.

This line links to the failed assassination attempt of King James, the reigning monarch of the time (The Gunpowder Plot). Shakespeare is deliberately making Macduff’s son ask this question in order to explain to the Jacobean audience King James' idea of the nature of a traitor, in which the embodiment of a traitor is Macbeth. In addition, he also highlights the consequences of being a traitor, as they “must be hanged”.

She does not know if he was a traitor to the country, but she certainly regards him as a traitor against the family, as evident in her conversation with Ross earlier in the scene (“when our actions do not, our fears do make us traitors”).

LADY MACDUFF

Why, one that swears and lies.

This amplifies the consequences of treachery, as well as portrays that Lady Macbeth – the mastermind of the plan to commit regicide – is equally as guilty as Macbeth, despite Lady Macbeth physically not committing a crime.

Son

And be all traitors that do so?

LADY MACDUFF

Every one that does so is a traitor and must be hanged.

Son

And must they all be hanged that swear and lie?

LADY MACDUFF

Every one.

Son

Who must hang them?

LADY MACDUFF

Why, the honest men.

Son

Then the liars and swearers are fools,
for there are liars and swearers enow to beat
the honest men and hang up them.

This conversation gives an innocent perception of tyranny and the order Macbeth has created, corrupting nature and innocence.

Similarly, the conversation foreshadows the battle between Macduff and Macbeth, respectively symbolising good and evil, honest men and liars.

LADY MACDUFF

Now, God help thee, poor monkey!

But how wilt thou do for a father?

Son

If he were dead, you'd weep for
him: if you would not, it were a good sign
that I should quickly have a new father.

LADY MACDUFF

Poor prattler, how thou talk'st!

Enter a Messenger

Messenger

Bless you, fair dame! I am not to you known,
Though in your state of honour I am perfect.

I doubt some danger does approach you nearly:

If you will take a homely man's advice,
Be not found here; hence, with your little ones.

To fright you thus, methinks, I am too savage;

To do worse to you were fell cruelty,
Which is too nigh your person. **Heaven preserve you!**

I dare abide no longer.

Exit

The "deep damnation" (1.7) of "devilish Macbeth" (4.3) is enhanced by his contrast with holy people and sinful action. Typically, before their deaths, Macbeth's victims are given heavenly or innocent descriptions. For example, before the death of Duncan he is described as innocent "like a naked new-born babe" (1.7). The language Lady Macduff uses, such as describing herself as a "poor wren" in contrast to the evil "owl" Macbeth, suggests their purity in comparison to him and enhances the sinful appearance of Macbeth.

LADY MACDUFF

Whither should I fly?

I have done no harm. **But I remember now**
I am in this earthly world; where to do harm
is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly: why then, alas,

Do I put up that womanly defence,
To say I have done no harm?

Enter Murderers

What are these faces?

First Murderer

Where is your husband?

The parallelism in "to do harm is often laudable, to do good sometime a counted dangerous folly" reminds the reader of the Witches' words: "fair is foul and foul is fair".

LADY MACDUFF

I hope, in no place so unsanctified
Where such as thou mayst find him.

First Murderer

He's a traitor.

This has been amended from "shag-eared" – it was stereotypical of curs and convicted villains to have their ears slit.

Either descriptions are used to make the murderers seem ugly or deformed, and therefore, conform to the stereotypical villainous appearance.

Son

Thou liest, thou shag-hair'd villain!

This relates to the conversation between the mother and son when the son learns that liars must be hanged by the honest men.

First Murderer

What, you egg!

The son is described as an "egg" by his murderer, further emphasising on his youth before his imminent death.

Stabbing him

This echoes Banquo's final lines to Fleance. This shows the son to be honourable and courageous (like Banquo). The son is more moral than Macbeth, supposedly a mighty warrior. Also, the sons of the house would be the ones to carry on the family name. By killing Macduff's son(s), Macbeth is (as far as we know) killing Macduff's bloodline which, considering Banquo's prophecy and Jacobean culture, is a fate worse than death.

The adjective "young" likewise emphasises his innocence.

Young fry of treachery!

Son

He has kill'd me, mother:

Run away, I pray you!

Macduff's Son finally dies from the stab wounds afflicted by the First Murderer. This would be shown on stage, unlike Duncan's death, to display the brutality of Macbeth.

Dies

Exit LADY MACDUFF, crying 'Murder!' Exeunt Murderers, following her