

ACT III SCENE IV. The same. Hall in the palace.

A banquet prepared. Enter MACBETH, LADY MACBETH, ROSS, LENNOX, Lords, and Attendants

MACBETH

You know your own degrees; sit down: at first  
And last the hearty welcome.

Lords

Thanks to your majesty.

MACBETH

Ourself will mingle with society,  
And play the humble host.  
Our hostess keeps her state, but in best time  
We will require her welcome.

LADY MACBETH

Pronounce it for me, sir, to all our friends;  
For my heart speaks they are welcome.

The appearance of the first murderer at this precise moment directly juxtaposes Lady Macbeth's line: "Pronounce it for me, sir, to all our friends; For my heart speaks they are welcome.". This is ironic, as Lady Macbeth states that all the guests are welcome, and directly after, a murderer appears, linking to the circumstances that both Duncan and Banquo were in; they were both at first 'welcomed' and were 'guests', and now both are dead.

First Murderer appears at the door

MACBETH

See, they encounter thee with their hearts' thanks.  
Both sides are even: here I'll sit i' the midst:  
Be large in mirth; anon we'll drink a measure

The table round.

Approaching the door

There's blood on thy face.

First Murderer

'Tis Banquo's then.

The blood is symbolic of the Murderer's (and Macbeth's) guilt. It also links to the theme of appearances V reality, the guilt of the murderer can clearly be seen by the audience, unlike Macbeth who remains innocent in the eyes of his guests but is in fact as guilty as the murderer himself.

MACBETH

'Tis better thee without than he within.

Is he dispatch'd?

First Murderer

My lord, his throat is cut; that I did for him.

MACBETH

Thou art the best o' the cut-throats: yet he's good

That did the like for Fleance: if thou didst it,

Thou art the nonpareil.

First Murderer

Most royal sir,

Fleance is 'scaped.

Macbeth uses similes to explain his previous feelings of confidence when he believed both Banquo and Fleance to be dead. This is no longer the case, the harsh alliterative 'c's showing reflecting his anxiety and anger.

MACBETH

Then comes my fit again: I had else been perfect,

Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,

As broad and general as the casing air:

But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in

To saucy doubts and fears. But Banquo's safe?

Macbeth continues his previous metaphor, again suggesting that Banquo is the "serpent" (the greatest threat to his power) but is now dead. He refers to Fleance as "the worm", an animal which often has connotations of insignificance. However, this is ironic as it is Fleance who now becomes the greatest threat to Macbeth and his attempts to thwart the Witches' prophecy.

First Murderer

Ay, my good lord: safe in a ditch he bides,

With twenty trenched gashes on his head;

The least a death to nature.

MACBETH

Thanks for that:

There the grown serpent lies; the worm that's fled

Hath nature that in time will venom breed,

No teeth for the present. Get thee gone: to-morrow

Not only is Banquo himself lying in a trench (ditch) but has twenty "trenched" gashes on his head, the least of which would be fatal. The imagery here is violent and blunt, for this play never shies away from the physical realities of death, even before Macbeth's temptation. Such descriptions would have excited and entertained the Jacobean audience.

We'll hear, ourselves, again.

Exit Murderer

LADY MACBETH

My royal lord,

You do not give the cheer: the feast is sold

That is not often vouch'd, while 'tis a-making,

'Tis given with welcome: to feed were best at home;

From thence the sauce to meat is ceremony;

Meeting were bare without it.

MACBETH

Sweet remembrancer!

Now, good digestion wait on appetite,

And health on both!

LENNOX

May't please your highness sit.

The GHOST OF BANQUO enters, and sits in MACBETH's place

MACBETH

Here had we now our country's honour roof'd,

Were the graced person of our Banquo present;

Who may I rather challenge for unkindness

Than pity for mischance!

ROSS

His absence, sir,

Lays blame upon his promise. Please't your highness

To grace us with your royal company.

Lady Macbeth is very aware of how they must appear outwardly to their guest (link to the theme of appearances v reality). She is concerned that Macbeth's absence from the table will arouse suspicion.

The entrance of a ghost would have shocked and thrilled a Jacobean audience, who believed in supernatural forces such as witchcraft, ghosts and demons.

Macbeth reference to Banquo's "unkindness" for not attending the banquet is deeply ironic. Not only was it Macbeth himself who betrayed Banquo, but Banquo has indeed arrived unnoticed in spectral form.

Depending on directorial choices, the audience can either see Banquo or not see Banquo. Some productions have made Banquo "invisible," making the actor playing Macbeth react to empty air. Just as in the dagger scene, a director has to ask whether to make these unnatural/supernatural elements visible.

This is loaded imagery and internal reflection. It emphasises that Macbeth does not belong in the seat of the King, having gained his title nefariously and by going against the will of God. It could be suggested that at this point, Macbeth is still yet to notice the Ghost of Banquo. This delayed response would help to build tension for the Jacobean audience, as they are waiting for such a reaction.

MACBETH

The table's full.

LENNOX

Here is a place reserved, sir.

It becomes apparent that Macbeth is the only person on stage who can see the Ghost of Banquo.

MACBETH

Where?

LENNOX

Here, my good lord. What is't that moves your highness?

MACBETH

Which of you have done this?

Macbeth believes that he is being tricked and becomes defensive. His first reaction is to blame others, rather than facing the Ghostly form of Banquo.

Lords

What, my good lord?

Macbeth attempts to justify his actions by telling the ghost that he did not commit the murder. He feels that this alleviates of guilt and/or blame, although the audience would know that according to their Christian beliefs, this is not the case.

Macbeth uses the imperative "never", speaking directly to the ghost, the adjective "gory" implying that Macbeth is haunted by the brutality of Banquo's murder. He is referring to The Ghost of Banquo shaking his head, suggesting that Macbeth feels judged and personally targeted.

MACBETH

Thou canst not say I did it: never shake

Thy gory locks at me.

ROSS

Gentlemen, rise: his highness is not well.

LADY MACBETH

Sit, worthy friends: my lord is often thus,

And hath been from his youth: pray you, keep seat;

The fit is momentary; upon a thought

He will again be well: if much you note him,

You shall offend him and extend his passion:

Feed, and regard him not. Are you a man?

This is an aside spoken directly to Macbeth. Lady Macbeth belittles Macbeth by questioning his masculinity, again subverting traditional Jacobean gender roles by presenting herself as a dominant party in the relationship.

Lady Macbeth takes charge of the situation, attempting to normalise Macbeth's strange behaviour by suggesting this is a common occurrence. She also states that Macbeth will be offended if they comment upon his behaviour. This shows that Lady Macbeth is not only resourceful, but extremely manipulative.

Macbeth's response is hyperbolic, meant to express the shocking and horrific nature of the Ghost of Banquo. He tells his wife that he is indeed a man, as he is able to look at something that would "appal" the Devil – clearly, he believes that what he is seeing is so terrible that the Devil himself would be afraid.

MACBETH

Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that

Which might appal the devil.

Link to A2S2 – "the sleeping and the dead are but as pictures". The fact that Lady Macbeth is constantly bringing up the idea that pictures (and hallucinations) are harmless foreshadows the instrument of her demise.

LADY MACBETH

O proper stuff!

This is the very painting of your fear:

This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said,

Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts,

Impostors to true fear, would well become

A woman's story at a winter's fire,

Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!

Why do you make such faces? When all's done,

You look but on a stool.

Use of rhetorical questions – she is mocking Macbeth's facial expression.

Lady Macbeth continues to question Macbeth's masculinity – suggesting that what he is seeing is like a ghost story that an old woman would tell. As before, gender and gender roles are used here to motivate Macbeth; Lady Macbeth can be reliably counted on to use his fear of the feminine (or his fear of being feminized) in order to take action.

MACBETH

Prithee, see there! behold! look! lo!

how say you?

Why, what care I? If thou canst nod, speak too.

If charnel-houses and our graves must send

Those that we bury back, our monuments

Shall be the maws of kites.

Macbeth's use of short, exclamatory and rhetorical questions shows his heightened fear and anxiety.

Macbeth is musing that if the dead can be bought back then gravestones are meaningless.

GHOST OF BANQUO vanishes

LADY MACBETH

What, quite unmann'd in folly?

She's asking if his foolishness has taken away his manliness; yet again she is asserting her dominance and control over Macbeth by emasculating him.

MACBETH

If I stand here, I saw him.

LADY MACBETH

Fie, for shame!

Lady Macbeth is ashamed of his behaviour, which he sees as both embarrassing and worrying. She is concerned that Macbeth is newly crowned and that his behaviour gives a negative impression of his ability to rule.

The motif of blood is recurring throughout the play, symbolising guilt and foreshadowing death.

MACBETH

Blood hath been shed ere now, i' the olden time,  
Ere human statute purged the gentle weal;  
Ay, and since too, murders have been perform'd  
Too terrible for the ear: the times have been,  
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,  
And there an end; but now they rise again,  
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,  
And push us from our stools: this is more strange  
Than such a murder is.

The murder is an unnatural deed emphasising how terrible the deaths of Banquo and Duncan are. He clearly believes that the sins he has committed have caused him to see the supernatural / ghostly form of Banquo.

Macbeth comments upon the abnormality of events – this links back to the disruption of the natural order and its effects upon the natural world. Macbeth's actions have caused several strange and unusual events to occur, including the arrival of the Ghost of Banquo.

LADY MACBETH

My worthy lord,  
Your noble friends do lack you.

MACBETH

I do forget.

Do not muse at me, my most worthy friends,  
I have a strange infirmity, which is nothing  
To those that know me. Come, love and health to all;  
Then I'll sit down. Give me some wine; fill full.  
I drink to the general joy o' the whole table,  
And to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss;  
Would he were here! to all, and him, we thirst,  
And all to all.

Macbeth attempts to remain control of the situation, using terms of endearment to mask his strange behaviour moments before.

Like his wife, Macbeth explains his behaviour as symptoms of an illness that should be overlooked.

Macbeth surprisingly speaks of Banquo again, knowing that the last time that he did so the Ghost arrived and took his seat at the table. Macbeth is clearly preoccupied with his guilt and fears, and his speech foreshadows the second entrance of the Ghost.

Lords

Our duties, and the pledge.

Re-enter GHOST OF BANQUO

When Macbeth mentions Banquo in his last line, this triggers the ghost to reappear. It is unclear whether this is a hallucination of Macbeth due to the immense stress Macbeth is under, or if it is a creation caused by supernatural powers.

Here we see Macbeth's use of an imperative: "Avaunt!" which implies that he is taking advantage of his power and attempting to use it against the Ghost, commanding it to leave. Furthermore, we see the use of morbid imagery to describe the Ghost of Banquo as "marrowless" and "cold". These adjectives have connotations of death and bring about the theme of murder and violence.

MACBETH  
Avaunt! and quit my sight! let the earth hide thee!  
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;  
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes  
Which thou dost glare with!

Macbeth's erratic behaviour is unsettling to Lady Macbeth, she is not only concerned with how his behaviour will affect how others see him (link to the theme of appearances v reality), but that he will say something incriminating regarding the murder of King Duncan. She again attempts to reassure the others that his behaviour is common and not to be noticed.

LADY MACBETH  
Think of this, good peers,  
But as a thing of custom: 'tis no other;  
Only it spoils the pleasure of the time.

Macbeth uses animal imagery to express his fear. He references animals which have connotations of power, brutality and ferocity, suggesting that he would rather be faced with one of these than with the Ghost of Banquo. This expresses the extent of Macbeth's guilt and paranoia as he is forced to confront the result of his ambition and violence.

MACBETH  
What man dare, I dare:  
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,  
The arm'd rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;  
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves  
Shall never tremble: or be alive again,  
And dare me to the desert with thy sword;  
If trembling I inhabit then, protest me  
The baby of a girl. Hence, horrible shadow!

He uses the words "horrible shadow" and "unreal mockery" to address the ghost. Shakespeare's choice of diction in this quote demonstrates how darkness (shadow) can be used to demonstrate something mysterious, something that a character wants to conceal – even more in this case since Macbeth is trying to hide Banquo's death from the others (since they believe that Banquo is only late and not dead).

Unreal mockery, hence!

Again, this links to the theme of gender roles – with the Ghost of Banquo gone Macbeth feels that he is now truly a man as he is without fear.

GHOST OF BANQUO vanishes

Why, so: being gone,  
I am a man again. Pray you, sit still.

Lady Macbeth's words are accusatory, she blames Macbeth for creating a scene in front of their guests and is ashamed of his behaviour.

LADY MACBETH  
You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting,  
With most admired disorder.

Macbeth asks his wife why she is not afraid of the ghost – he does not understand that he is the only one that can see the ghost. Macbeth regards himself as a fearless warrior. He is astonished that something that terrifies him does not affect his wife.

MACBETH  
Can such things be,  
And overcome us like a summer's cloud,  
Without our special wonder? You make me strange  
Even to the disposition that I owe,  
When now I think you can behold such sights,  
And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,  
When mine is blanched with fear.

Macbeth is the only one in the room who can see the ghost of Banquo, and understandably Ross questions him on what he is seeing. This creates suspense as the audience know the other Lords at the banquet are now suspicious of Macbeth's behaviour.

ROSS  
What sights, my lord?

Again, subverting traditional gender roles, Lady Macbeth gains control of the situation and commands the guests to leave quickly. She is clearly concerned about what her husband might reveal. In Jacobean England, the killing of a King (regicide) would have been one of the greatest sins against God and punishable by death.

LADY MACBETH  
I pray you, speak not; he grows worse and worse;  
Question enrages him. At once, good night:  
Stand not upon the order of your going,  
But go at once.

LENNOX  
Good night; and better health  
Attend his majesty!

LADY MACBETH  
A kind good night to all!  
Exeunt all but MACBETH and LADY MACBETH

An augur is a religious official who would observe natural signs, especially the behaviour of birds, interpreting these as an indication of divine approval or disapproval of a proposed action. "maggot-pies" is a paradox, as these are two normal and natural things that are no longer good and have been tainted. A "chough" and a "rook" are both birds of the crow family. Shakespeare often uses members of the crow family to conjure up a sense of foreboding as these birds were traditionally linked to death.

MACBETH  
It will have blood; they say, blood will have blood:  
Stones have been known to move and trees to speak;  
Augurs and understood relations have  
By magot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth  
The secret'st man of blood. What is the night?

Violence breeds violence. Those who kill to gain power often have to kill to maintain it, because murder makes enemies. As the rest of the passage suggests, Macbeth understands this on a practical level but also feels it with a superstitious dread.



Macbeth is concerned that Macduff did not attend the banquet. This is our first hint that Macbeth could begin to view him as an enemy or as a threat to his position as King, building suspense for the Jacobean audience.

Macbeth keeps a spy in Macduff's house. This suggests that he is becoming increasingly paranoid about his position.

Rather than happening upon them, Macbeth intends to seek out the Witches in order to gain more knowledge. In Jacobean England Witches were seen as dangerous agents of the Devil whose sole purpose was to cause chaos within the mortal world. The fact that Macbeth chooses to visit them shows us not only the influence that evil now has over Macbeth, but his desperation.

Macbeth's final words are ominous, he suspects that his strange behaviour is simply due to not being used to committing murder. "Young" suggests that he feels that these effects will lessen over time, signifying that he intends to continue killing. This would have created suspense and interest for the Jacobean audience.

LADY MACBETH

Almost at odds with morning, which is which.

MACBETH

How say'st thou, that Macduff denies his person

At our great bidding?

LADY MACBETH

Did you send to him, sir?

MACBETH

I hear it by the way; but I will send:

There's not a one of them but in his house

I keep a servant fee'd. I will to-morrow,

And betimes I will, to the weird sisters:

More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know,

By the worst means, the worst. For mine own good,

All causes shall give way: I am in blood

Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o'er:

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;

Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

LADY MACBETH

You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

MACBETH

Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse

Is the initiate fear that wants hard use:

We are yet but young in deed.

Exeunt

A key theme of Macbeth is the battle between good and evil. These two are commonly distinguished with the use of pathetic fallacy. Day and night (or light and dark) are presented as opposing forces in Macbeth. Characters such as Banquo, described as "a light" (3.2), and Macduff or Malcolm, who are only seen in scenes set at daytime, are representative of the light of day, and therefore, the hope of Scotland. In contrast, Macbeth, who possesses "black and deep desires" (1.4), and Lady Macbeth, who enforces dark imagery of "the dunest smoke of Hell" and "the blanket of dark" (1.5) are representative of the dark night that is corrupting Scotland. The use of the word "almost" foreshadows that these two opposing forces will come together in conflict in future.

Dreams, sleep and lack of sleep are a common motif throughout the play, symbolising guilt. Characters who are plagued with guilt or who have committed sins are unable to rest. This is juxtaposed with King Duncan, presented as a symbol of purity, who was able to sleep peacefully.