

ACT IV SCENE I. A cavern. In the middle, a boiling cauldron.

Pathetic fallacy. The Witches' appearance upon the stage is always punctuated by thunder. This highlights their evil and ominous nature, as well as heightening the suspense and fear felt by the Jacobean audience.

A harprier may refer to a harpy, which is a Greek and Latin mythological creature with a woman's head and body, a bird's wings, and excessively large, sharp claws. It can also be an insult referring to a nasty or unbearable woman. The first two Witches named real animals, but this third one mentions a mythical beast. Metaphorically this symbolizes that the witches transcend the natural realm.

The Witches' "Double, double" chant is one of the iconic moments of Macbeth. According to Marian Gleason, these lines are part of the Witches' prophetic speech: "Although realizing that Macbeth's troubles are multiple, readers rarely realize that they are also double. Yet repeated instances of double toil, double trouble prove this line quite as precise as the witches' other predictions." (The English Journal, Oct. 1967, pp. 1005-1006)

The Witches' chant is one obvious example of repetition. There's a larger message conveyed in these differing repetitive manoeuvres. Macbeth is a human and is therefore stuck in repetitions, namely bound to time (days, weeks, months). Even while he wants the free will to take action against the natural course of events in his life, his actions have consequences that he must eventually face up to. This links directly to the theme of fate v free will.

Thunder. Enter the three Witches

First Witch

Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

Second Witch

Thrice and once the hedge-pig whined.

Third Witch

Harpier cries 'Tis time, 'tis time.

First Witch

Round about the cauldron go;

In the poison'd entrails throw.

Toad, that under cold stone

Days and nights has thirty-one

Swelter'd venom sleeping got,

Boil thou first i' the charmed pot.

ALL

Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.

Second Witch

Fillet of a fenny snake,

In the cauldron boil and bake;

Eye of newt and toe of frog,

Wool of bat and tongue of dog,

Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,

Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,

For a charm of powerful trouble,

Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

ALL

Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Because they can perform magic (they come into this scene naming real animals which they will transform into a spell), the Witches appear unbound by the laws of nature – they are like the Fates of ancient Greece. They represent the supernatural.

Shakespeare presents the audience with the stereotypical vision of Witches, moving together around a cauldron and casting a spell. Their continued use of rhyming couplets causes their words to become melodic, almost like a chant, and highlights their supernatural nature.

The Witches use items from the natural world for unnatural ends. They take nature apart, using pieces of animals, and turn it upside down. The precision of the rhyme emphasizes their art—their spell is a creative act. Many of the animals that they use are often linked to the supernatural and witchcraft, such as bats and frogs. This would have been recognisable to the Jacobean audience and confirmed what they already believed about Witches – that they were dangerous and unnatural.

Dragon scales were said to hold great power by many pagan religions in the 14th and 15th Centuries.

Wolves were often linked to the supernatural and have connotations of power and ferocity.

Third Witch

Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,

Witches' mummy, maw and gulf

Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark,

Root of hemlock digg'd i' the dark,

Liver of blaspheming Jew,

Gall of goat, and slips of yew

Silver'd in the moon's eclipse,

Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,

Finger of birth-strangled babe

Ditch-deliver'd by a drab,

Make the gruel thick and slab:

Add thereto a tiger's chaudron,

Anti-Semitism was prevalent in Jacobean England.

In this case gall refers to bile. The yew tree has many meanings in mythology, including some associated with death.

**Chaudron means entrails.

A baby who was birth-strangled was killed immediately following birth and before baptism, thus supposedly making it damned like the unbaptized Turk, Tartar and Jews.

For the ingredients of our cauldron.

ALL

Double, double toil and trouble;

Fire burn and cauldron bubble.

Second Witch

Cool it with a baboon's blood,

Then the charm is firm and good.

Use of alliteration. This helps the Witches' chant to have a musical, eerie tone.

Enter HECATE to the other three Witches

HECATE

O well done! I commend your pains;

And every one shall share i' the gains;

And now about the cauldron sing,

Live elves and fairies in a ring,

Enchanting all that you put in.

Music and a song: 'Black spirits'

Hecate refers to magical creatures, such as "elves and fairies". This demonstrates how the Witches are set apart from humans and the natural world.

HECATE retires

The “pricking” is a physical stimulus – The Witches can sense with their bodies that something “wicked” will happen soon. It also suggests that Macbeth and the Witches have an invisible connection which implies that Macbeth is dominated by supernatural forces.

The phrase “something wicked” refers to Macbeth – once noble warrior who lost all divine qualities of humans (The great chain of being) and is now defined by his evil deeds.

Second Witch

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

Open, locks,
Whoever knocks!

Enter MACBETH

The Macbeth that enters this scene is ridden with greed and anxiety. Unlike their previous meetings, Macbeth has now chosen to seek the Witches out himself.

MACBETH

How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!

What is't you do?

Macbeth is authoritative and hostile when he initially speaks to the Witches. He refers to them as “black”, a colour traditionally linked with darkness and evil. His use of “midnight” is also a reference to the Jacobean belief that the Devil operated during the night and that witches were more powerful at this time.

It cannot be described. It does not exist in language, in time, in humanity. It surpasses nature, human nature. The witches operate in a realm that cannot even be communicated to Macbeth.

ALL

A deed without a name.

In an ironic twist of phrase, Macbeth tries to conjure the Witches to his will. The imperative “answer me” suggests that he believes himself able to control the Witches.

MACBETH

I conjure you, by that which you profess,

Howe'er you come to know it, answer me:

Though you untie the winds and let them fight

Against the churches; though the yesty waves

In this passage Macbeth demands the Witches answer him, even at the price of total apocalypse. The Jacobean audience would have believed that Witches had the powers to control nature and the elements. We know from A1S3 that the Witches control the winds. The image of winds “fight[ing] against the churches” suggests a battle between religion or established order and the forces of chaos and evil.

Confound and swallow navigation up;

Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;

Though castles topple on their warders' heads;

Though palaces and pyramids do slope

Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure

This line shows us the extent of Macbeth’s ambition – he wants to build/conquer mighty architectural feats. It also foreshadows the falling of his own castle. In fact, this whole monologue from Macbeth could be seen as him subconsciously foreshadowing his own demise

Of nature's germens tumble all together,

Even till destruction sicken; answer me

To what I ask you.

First Witch

Speak.

Second Witch

Demand.

The Witches use imperatives such as “speak” and “demand” to assert their dominance over Macbeth in this scene. They, like their apparitions, refuse to be commanded by mankind.

Third Witch

We'll answer.

First Witch

Say, if thou'dst rather hear it from our mouths,

Or from our masters?

Macbeth is very cavalier, he wants to "see" the Fates, he wants to see the future. Macbeth is not content hearing the answers from the Witches (perhaps a symptom of his growing paranoia and sense of power), but instead demands to speak to the "masters" directly.

MACBETH

Call 'em; let me see 'em.

The Witches continue adding ingredients to the potion – blood from a cow that has eaten nine of her young and the sweat from a murderer. These ingredients are deliberately gruesome to shock the Jacobean audience and to impress upon them the unnatural, evil nature of the Witches.

First Witch

Pour in sow's blood, that hath eaten

Her nine farrow; grease that's sweaten

From the murderer's gibbet throw

Into the flame.

ALL

Come, high or low;

Thyself and office deftly show!

Macbeth is no longer shocked or fearful when being presented by the supernatural. He continues to use imperatives to demand that his questions are answered.

Thunder. First Apparition: an armed Head

MACBETH

Tell me, thou unknown power,--

The apparition repeats Macbeth's name three times. It is important to note that the number three is significant throughout the play – Macbeth meets three Witches, he sends three murderers to execute Banquo and he is presented with three apparitions. The number three can be linked to the holy trinity (the Father the Son and The Holy Spirit). Shakespeare turns this link to Christianity on its head, with the number three often being used to symbolise or foreshadow evil within the play.

First Witch

He knows thy thought:

Hear his speech, but say thou nought.

Macbeth's fears are confirmed, the Witches play upon Macbeth's fears in order to gain his trust. Macduff is the archetype of the avenging hero, not simply out for revenge but with a good and holy intention. He is the discoverer of Duncan's body and the subsequent callous murder of his wife and children spurs him toward his desire to take revenge upon the tyrannical Macbeth.

First Apparition

Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! beware Macduff;

Beware the thane of Fife. Dismiss me. Enough.

Descends

MACBETH

Here, we see evidence of Macbeth greed. He is not satisfied with his warning and wants to hear more.

Whate'er thou art, for thy good caution, thanks;
Thou hast harp'd my fear aright: **but one word more,--**

The bloody child has a range of symbolic possibilities: most obviously (and threateningly for Macbeth), it represents the infant Macduff, who was "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd", i.e., was delivered through Caesarean section, resulting in the death of his mother.

First Witch

He will not be commanded: here's another,
More potent than the first.

We can also see it as representing Banquo's son, Fleance, who emerged from his encounter with Macbeth's assassins bloodied but alive- it can also represent the line of children who will descend from Fleance and sit on the throne.

Thunder. Second Apparition: A bloody Child

Finally, since the apparition advises Macbeth to be "bloody, bold and resolute", we can interpret a foreshadowing of Macduff's murdered son.

Second Apparition

Again, Macbeth is addressed three times by the Apparition.

Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!

This seems like a composed one-liner from Macbeth, but it also reveals his desperation to absorb whatever information the Witches' apparitions give him. His reply displays a comic arrogance.

MACBETH

Had I three ears, I'd hear thee.

This statement foreshadows the later events of the play by stating that Macbeth should be "bloody". The deaths that will follow and his descent into tyranny are clear evidence that Macbeth has indeed become a "bloody" king. There is also the statement to be "bold". Previously we have seen Macbeth begin as being hesitant, needing the encouragement and leadership of Lady Macbeth. As the play progresses, we see Macbeth become more of a tyrant, making cruel acts almost dismissively. This last description falls under the category of "resolute", that he needs to take determined and meaningful actions for himself.

Second Apparition

Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn

This prediction is later revealed to be a half-truth, designed to lead Macbeth into a false sense of security, something which will later prove to be the root of his downfall.

The power of man, for none of woman born

Shall harm Macbeth.

Descends

The prediction has led Macbeth to feel arrogant and believe that he is invincible. He now no longer feels that Macduff is a threat, as shown by his use of a rhetorical question.

MACBETH

Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?

Macbeth's paranoia and desperation to maintain his power means that he does not want to take any chances with Macduff and plans to kill him anyway.

But yet I'll make assurance double sure,

And take a bond of fate: thou shalt not live;

Reference to A2S2 - 'a heart so white'. We see here how much Macbeth has changed. He no longer needs Lady Macbeth to "prick the sides" of his intent.

That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies,

And sleep in spite of thunder.

This is a reference to the use of pathetic fallacy ("thunder") at the entrance of the Witches. Macbeth plans to take back his ability to sleep despite his sins - Macbeth demonstrates an existentialist outlook as he decides to try and take fate into his own hands.

Thunder. Third Apparition: a Child crowned, with a tree in his hand

This could be a reference to the prophesy given to Banquo (that he will sire a line of kings- his "issue"). The tree foreshadows Malcolm's plan to use the forest as camouflage for the troops.

What is this

That rises like the issue of a king,
And wears upon his baby-brow the round

And top of sovereignty?

ALL

Listen, but speak not to't.

Third Apparition

Be lion-mettled, proud; and take no care

Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are:

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until

Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill

Shall come against him.

Descends

MACBETH

That will never be

Who can impress the forest, bid the tree

Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements! good!

Rebellion's head, rise never till the wood

Of Birnam rise, and our high-placed Macbeth

Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath

To time and mortal custom. Yet my heart

Throbs to know one thing: tell me, if your art

Can tell so much: shall Banquo's issue ever

Reign in this kingdom?

ALL

Seek to know no more.

MACBETH

I will be satisfied: deny me this,

And an eternal curse fall on you! Let me know.

Why sinks that cauldron? and what noise is this?

A person's mettle is a measure of their resolve. Macbeth is advised to become like a lion- strong, brave and fierce. This again increases his feelings of arrogance and encourages recklessness.

The apparition further encourages Macbeth's sense of security. He is presented with a seemingly impossible idea, that the forest would move to a different location. The idea of the forest coming "against him" reflects the idea that the natural order has been disrupted, in this image we see the natural world physically coming into conflict with the source of this unbalance - Macbeth himself.

The word "impress" here carries numerous meanings. On the one hand, Macbeth can't envisage a whole forest moving up a hill, so he believes this prophecy means his rule is safe. More significantly, the word "impress" similarly means "conscript," as in to "impress into military service." The more theoretical question here, then, is "who can impose a human will onto nature?" - who can tether nature to his/her command? And this fundamental question could be seen to be one of basic motifs of Shakespeare's play.

The structure of this scene as a whole is very significant. The short, monosyllabic sentence that the Weird Sisters share convey their equanimity as opposed to the desperation of Macbeth as he yearns to be enlightened about his fate.

Macbeth's focus still remains on the prophecy given to Banquo. This shows that his goal is not just to retain his power, but to ensure that he alone sires the royal line.

Macbeth's offensive exclamation shows his true dissatisfaction with the knowledge the Witches have imparted. The Witches have inspired psychological turmoil within Macbeth as he yearns to know more, despite his awareness of the Witches' capabilities. It is ironic that Macbeth threatens to "curse" the Witches and this indicates to the Jacobean audience just how far he has fallen since his initial presentation as a brave soldier.

A hautboy is a musical pipe

Hautboys

First Witch

Show!

Second Witch

Show!

Third Witch

Show!

This couplet is empowered by the Witches' use of trochaic tetrameter to make it seem almost like an adverse incantation.

ALL

Show his eyes, and grieve his heart;

Come like shadows, so depart!

A show of Eight Kings, the last with a glass in his hand; GHOST OF BANQUO following

The vision of the eight kings is used to illustrate an omen concerning the succession of the crown.

MACBETH

Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo: down!

Thy crown does sear mine eye-balls. And thy hair,

Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first.

A third is like the former. Filthy hags!

Why do you show me this? A fourth! Start, eyes!

What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?

Another yet! A seventh! I'll see no more:

And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass

Which shows me many more; and some I see

That two-fold balls and treble scepters carry:

Horrible sight! Now, I see, 'tis true;

For the blood-bolter'd Banquo smiles upon me,

And points at them for his.

Macbeth uses a metaphor to express the effect that the vision of Banquo wearing a crown has upon him. Furthermore, his use of exclamatory sentences also expresses his feelings of anger and shock.

Macbeth's growing feelings of anger and loss of control and reflected by his use of short, exclamatory and rhetorical questions. He is clearly bitterly disappointed.

The vision of Banquo is seen to be mocking Macbeth, showing him (and the audience) that his attempts to interfere with fate by having Banquo killed has been futile. This links directly to the theme of fate v free will and the overall question asked throughout the play – are we truly masters of our own fate or are our actions governed by fate? And therefore, were the events of the play inevitable or the result of Macbeth's own free will?

Apparitions vanish

What, is this so?

The fact that the Witches question Macbeth about his confusion is linked to their own abilities to look into the future (something the Jacobean audience would believe that a witch had the power to do) – it seems that they always knew and accept that this will be the case, unlike mortal Macbeth who attempts to change his fate.

First Witch

Ay, sir, all this is so: but why

Stands Macbeth thus amazedly?

Come, sisters, cheer we up his sprites,

And show the best of our delights:

I'll charm the air to give a sound,

While you perform your antic round:

That this great king may kindly say,

Our duties did his welcome pay.

The words of the first Witch are deeply ironic.

Music. The witches dance and then vanish, with HECATE

MACBETH

Where are they? Gone? Let this pernicious hour

Stand aye accursed in the calendar!

Come in, without there!

Enter LENNOX

LENNOX

What's your grace's will?

MACBETH

Saw you the weird sisters?

LENNOX

No, my lord.

MACBETH

Came they not by you?

LENNOX

No, indeed, my lord.

Irony is shown here – Macbeth clearly trusts the Witches’ prophecies throughout the play, from the motivation to murder Duncan, to the realisation of doom upon learning Macduff is not of woman born. Therefore, Macbeth essentially damning himself, consistent with his worries of eternal damnation when contemplating regicide.

MACBETH

Infected be the air whereon they ride;

And damn'd all those that trust them! I did hear

The galloping of horse: who was't came by?

LENNOX

'Tis two or three, my lord, that bring you word

Macduff is fled to England.

This shows Macbeth’s ill wishes for the Witches as they have not quenched his thirst for knowledge on the future. Literal meaning of the line: Let the air they fly in be turbulent and disturbed so that they have an uncomfortable journey.

MACBETH

Fled to England!

LENNOX

Ay, my good lord.

MACBETH

Time, thou anticipatest my dread exploits:

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook

Unless the deed go with it; from this moment

The very firstlings of my heart shall be

The firstlings of my hand. And even now,

To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:

The castle of Macduff I will surprise;

Seize upon Fife; give to the edge o' the sword

His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls

That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;

This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.

But no more sights!--Where are these gentlemen?

Come, bring me where they are.

Exeunt

Macbeth states that he will act as soon as his mind thinks of an action. He has clearly taken the apparition’s commands to be “bloody” and to “take no care” to heart. He does not intend to consider his actions due to his feelings of authority and confidence.

This line shows character development and a contrast between this murder and the murder of King Duncan. Unlike his murder of Duncan, he does not wish to consider her actions or leave any time to talk himself out of doing the “deed”, instead he wishes to act impulsively and without thought of the consequences. This change is a result of Macbeth’s growing ambition and desperation.

Here, we see the lengths that Macbeth is willing to go to silence his enemies and maintain his control. His orders of kill “his wife, his babes” are a reflection of his own insecurities regarding the murder of Banquo and Fleance. It seems he is no longer willing to take any more chances and is content to command an execution of a whole household.