

ACT V SCENE V. Dunsinane. Within the castle.

Enter MACBETH, SEYTON, and Soldiers, with drum and colours

The castle is under heavy siege; Macbeth's troops are crying out that the enemy keeps coming. For now, though, Macbeth is confident that he can withstand the assault. Contrast the resolute "Hang out our banners" with the much more dire "Ring the alarm bell!" at scene's end.

MACBETH  
 Hang out our banners on the outward walls;  
 The cry is still 'They come!' our castle's strength  
 Will laugh a siege to scorn: here let them lie  
 Till famine and the ague eat them up:  
 Were they not forced with those that should be ours,  
 We might have met them dareful, beard to beard,  
 And beat them backward home.

Macbeth uses hyperbole to show his confidence that they will be victorious in battle. He states that the attackers will die of hunger before they breach the wall of the castle

A cry of women within  
 What is that noise?

It is clear that Macbeth has become blind to his own sins, he is bitterly angry that he is fighting against troops that should be "ours".

SEYTON

It is the cry of women, my good lord.

Linked to the theme of gender. Here we are presented with the stereotypical gender roles in Jacobean society – men are bravely fighting against the attackers and women are shown to be the weaker, more emotional sex.

Macbeth has done such vile things that a cry in the night can hardly move him at all. He claims to be almost beyond fear through his use of metaphor.

Exit

MACBETH

I have almost forgot the taste of fears;  
 The time has been, my senses would have cool'd  
 To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair  
 Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
 As life were in't: I have supp'd full with horrors;  
 Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts  
 Cannot once start me.

The Jacobean audience are reminded of Macbeth's previous behaviour and by extension how his character has developed throughout the play. His reference to a "dismal treatise" (a ghost story) is a specific reminder of his behaviour towards the Ghost of Banquo in contrast to his current feelings of fearlessness and arrogance.

Macbeth has committed so much slaughter that he's now incapable of being startled by bloody or dire events. Ross's description of Macbeth's combat heroics in A1S3 foreshadows this psychological state: "Nothing afeard of what thyself didst make, strange images of death."

Re-enter SEYTON

Wherefore was that cry?

SEYTON

The queen, my lord, is dead.

The rhythmic, childlike repetition mirrors the idea the words express: the relentless and absurd passage of time. The compulsive repetition also expresses Macbeth's growing madness.

The meaning of this phrase is ambiguous, Macbeth may be saying, "My wife should've died later" or she "deserved more time," when there "would have been a time for such a word" (i.e., news of her death). Or "should" here may take the sense of "would," i.e., "My wife would have died [at some point] hereafter anyway; this news would have come eventually."

MACBETH

She should have died hereafter;  
 There would have been a time for such a word.  
 To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
 To the last syllable of recorded time,  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.

Macbeth suggests that as humans we make a great clamour about ourselves; we philosophize and pontificate about "the meaning of life," but we are doomed to find out there is none.

The metaphor begun in the previous lines comes to fruition here. Macbeth speaks directly of "life," dismissing it as a walking, or strutting, shadow—an insecure nothing, a minor actor who overacts his way through the play but is not memorable and exits never to be heard from again.

Enter a Messenger

Thou comest to use thy tongue; thy story quickly.

The messenger “frets” his brief time upon the stage, much as in Macbeth’s metaphor above.

Messenger  
Gracious my lord,  
I should report that which I say I saw,  
But know not how to do it.

The woods are moving towards them in the sense that their attackers are camouflaged as trees and branches. Once again, the Witches’ prophecy has come true, albeit in an unexpected fashion. This creates a moment of tension on stage and is an example of dramatic irony.

MACBETH  
Well, say, sir.

Messenger  
As I did stand my watch upon the hill,  
I look’d toward Birnam, and anon, methought,  
The wood began to move.

Macbeth’s furious response suggests that he is not, as he claims above, incapable of fear. The message is further confirmation that the Witches’ prophecies are right—his reign is doomed—and his outrage contains more than a hint of terror.

MACBETH  
Liar and slave!

Messenger  
Let me endure your wrath, if’t be not so:  
Within this three mile may you see it coming;  
I say, a moving grove.

Hanging from a tree evokes a kind of crucifixion—ironic, since Macbeth is pretty much the opposite of a Christian martyr. (He has sacrificed others’ lives for his own gain, not his own for theirs.)

MACBETH  
If thou speak’st false,  
Upon the next tree shalt thou hang alive,  
Till famine cling thee: if thy speech be sooth,  
I care not if thou dost for me as much.  
I pull in resolution, and begin  
To doubt the equivocation of the fiend  
That lies like truth: ‘Fear not, till Birnam wood  
Do come to Dunsinane:’ and now a wood  
Comes toward Dunsinane. Arm, arm, and out!  
If this which he avouches does appear,  
There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here.  
I gin to be awaery of the sun,  
And wish the estate o’ the world were now undone.  
Ring the alarum-bell! Blow, wind! come, wrack!  
At least we’ll die with harness on our back.

Macbeth is beginning to lose courage and to doubt what the Witches prophesied for him. Equivocation, especially in its social ramifications, is a major element of Macbeth. In Jacobean England, equivocating was then considered a crime, associated with deceit and plotting.

Macbeth has begun to accept what is certain to happen. However, he resolves to go out with a bang as he dies. He is sick of the sun, the world, life itself—and his diseased, apocalyptic imagination seems to want to take it all down with him. The “estate of the world” implies the existing order, or perhaps simply the existence, of the world. Macbeth’s wish is ambiguous: is he hoping—in a final, desperate curse—that chaos will descend on the world, or that the world will simply end?

Exeunt  
The alarum-bell will sound the alarm to defend the castle. It is also an outward manifestation of Macbeth’s private alarm as this crucial scene closes.

Along with the three rhyming couplets drawing the scene towards an end, for which this line provides the full stop, its image provides something of a retort to Macbeth’s nihilistic soliloquy which left him (and all humanity) with literally “nothing”: no purpose but to insanely walk towards a meaningless death. In harness, Macbeth feels some little comfort returning to his role as a brave soldier.