

# ‘Macbeth’: key quotes, themes and context in one!

1. ‘Is this a dagger which I see before me [...] Thou marshall’st me the way that I was going’

Macbeth – Act 2: Scene 1, just before Macbeth murders Duncan.

**Themes: Fate/Fortune, Appearance vs Reality, Nature vs Supernatural, Ambition**

*Marshall’st = direct/guide*

2. ‘All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter’

Witch, Act 1: Scene 3

**Themes: Fate/Fortune, Nature vs Supernatural, Ambition**

This is the third greeting the witches give Macbeth:

*‘All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis’* (Macbeth’s current title)

*‘All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor’* (at this point the audience knows that Macbeth has been given this title by King Duncan – but Macbeth does not yet know this).

*‘All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter.’*

- **Shakespeare’s audience, including King James I, believed in the evil power of witches and witchcraft.**
- **James I had written a book called ‘Daemonology’ – about black magic and witches; Shakespeare used this as a source**

3. ‘Chill it with a baboon’s blood, then the charm is firm and good’

## Witch, Act 4 Scene 1

### Themes: Fate/Fortune, Nature & the Supernatural, Evil/darkness vs grace light

The witches have assembled to meet Macbeth, who enters shortly after this line. Their cauldron creates apparitions (ghosts) that Macbeth sees; these first reassure him as he thinks he can't be killed – but then he sees Banquo's descendants and despairs).

- Baboons in Shakespeare's time were seen to be evil and lustful
- Most of Shakespeare's audience, including King James I, believed in witchcraft (see 'all hail' slide).

### 4. 'I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself'

## Macbeth – Act 1: Scene 7

### Themes: Free will, ambition

Translation: There is no justification for killing Duncan (he is my king, my guest and has been generous to me). The only thing motivating me is ambition, which makes people rush ahead of themselves toward disaster.

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'O'erleaps' means 'overleaps' or leaps over.

- Shakespeare uses horse metaphors here ('spur', 'vaulting') – this would have appealed to James I and to his court

### 5. 'Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it'

## Lady Macbeth Act 1: Scene 5

### Themes: Appearance vs Reality, Evil/Darkness vs Grace/Light

- Hide your true (evil) intentions: Metaphor plus biblical links (serpent represents the devil both in Old Testament and New Testament)

### 6. 'Stars hide your fires/let light not see my black and deep desires'

## Macbeth Act 1, Scene 4

### Themes: ambition, evil/darkness vs grace/light

- Personification. Macbeth says this to himself ('*aside*') after he finds out that Malcolm has been selected as the next king (he must 'fall down' – e.g. give up, or else 'o'erleap' Malcolm – e.g. find another way to become king)

### 7. 'Fair is foul and foul is fair'

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## Witches Act 1, Scene 1

### Themes: Appearance vs Reality, Nature and the Supernatural, Evil/Darkness vs Grace/Light

Just before this line (opening lines of play)

*When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning or in rain*

*When the hurly-burly's done/ When the battle's lost, and won [...]*

(they plot to meet with Macbeth)

- Paradox = contradiction in terms (fair/foul). This is the first scene of the play – and it puts forward the key themes of contrasts.

8. **'Come you spirits [...] unsex me here and fill me from the crown to the toe topful of direst cruelty'**

Lady Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 5

**Themes: appearance vs reality, nature vs supernatural, evil/darkness vs grace/light, gender roles**

Here Lady Macbeth, without consulting her husband, immediately decides that she will do whatever it takes to make Macbeth King – to propel him forward and nurture his success.

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- **Women in the 16th and 17th century had no legal rights and were supposed to be submissive – e.g. do what their husbands/fathers wanted due to anxieties surrounding their nature (that they were naturally disobedient and unruly – needing to be tamed/controlled by their male counterparts).**
- **Lady Macbeth's ambition and ruthlessness initially is much more 'manlike' (she would have been played by a man).**
- **Lady Macbeth's transgressive behaviour and defying gender norms would not necessarily have been 'shocking' to Jacobean audiences as Shakespeare had written MANY play featuring strong women (see: Juliet defying her father's wishes and marrying in secret!). Instead this portrait of revised womanhood would have been terrifying for audiences, playing in to deep set fears of female power.**

- Shakespeare draws on a history of woman who challenge male expectations of who or what women should be – he was deeply progressive!

## 9. 'Come to my woman's breasts and take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers'

Lady Macbeth, Act 1: Scene 5

**Themes: Nature and the supernatural, evil/darkness vs grace/light gender roles**

'Gall' = bile, a bitter fluid; '*murdering ministers*' = agents of evil. Lady Macbeth is asking to have everything womanly taken away so that she can turn to the 'blanket of dark' (in same speech)

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## 10. 'Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake thy gory locks at me'

Macbeth, Act 3, Scene 4

**Themes: Appearance vs Reality, Evil/darkness vs Grace/Light, Guilt & Madness**

Macbeth says this after he sees the ghost of Banquo sitting in the chair reserved for Macbeth, almost immediately after the murders tell him that they have killed Banquo ('*safe in a ditch he bides, with twenty trenched gashes on his head*').

- '*Gory locks*' = bloody hair
- Remember James I (the actual king) descended from a Banquo, who is portrayed here flatteringly in the play as heroic:
- Banquo doubted witches' prophecies

- He prays to God (vs Macbeth who was unable to say the word 'Amen' after murdering Duncan)
- He is loyal to King Duncan

## **11. 'Methought I heard a voice cry Sleep no more; Macbeth does murder sleep'**

Macbeth, Act 2: Scene 2

**Themes: guilt and madness; evil/darkness vs grace/light**

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- Macbeth murdered not only his king (anointed by God – divine right of kings and the chain of being): Duncan was also his guest, he had been generous to Macbeth – and he was asleep when he was murdered, showing a lack of courage on Macbeth's part.
- Macbeth feels guilty — and also vulnerable as he too could be killed in his sleep.

## **12. 'Out, damned spot! Out, I say! [...] Hell is murky'**

Lady Macbeth, Act 5: Scene 1

**Themes: Guilt & madness, evil/darkness vs grace/light, gender, appearance vs reality**

- Lady Macbeth is trying to wash (imaginary) blood off her hands – a symbol of her guilt/madness. In Act 2, Scene 2, just after Macbeth killed Duncan, there are other references to blood on hands:

*'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand'*  
(Macbeth)

*'My hands are of your colour, but I shame to wear a heart so white'* (Lady Macbeth) – shows that she changes over the course of the play