

## Power and Ambition

- Shakespeare links having ambition with evil and committing evil deeds. Some people think that Lady Macbeth encourages Macbeth to murder King Duncan because of her own ambition. At the start of the play, Macbeth does not seem to be ambitious. When he is given the title, 'Thane of Cawdor', he is surprised. Lady Macbeth thinks Macbeth does have ambition, but he is too good, gentle and kind to go after what he wants: 'Thou wouldst be great, / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it' (1,5). At the time the play was set, people believed in heaven and hell. Once Macbeth has damned himself by killing King Duncan, nothing he can do will save his mortal soul – his punishment by God has already been decided!
- After the death of King Duncan, Macbeth cannot cope with what he has done (perhaps his religious guilt comes into play here). He becomes more and more paranoid. The price of fulfilling his ambition was not worth it: 'As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have' (5,3). Macbeth's ambition changes his life from good to horrific and causes his death. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth make huge errors in judgement as they allow their greedy desire for power to overtake them. Therefore, the tragic mood of the play starts as soon as Macbeth meets the witches in Act 1 and gets worse until he eventually dies in Act 5.
- Although Banquo is often seen as a purely good figure, he also is ambitious as shown when he responds forcefully to the witches 'If you can look into the seeds of time, and say which grain will grow and which will not, Speak then to me'. This displays that he is also ambitious for himself and wants to find out what the future might hold, and this ambition is also Banquo's hamartia because he 'dreamt last night of the three weird sisters' - Shakespeare is saying that all good men can be destroyed by their ambition.

## The supernatural

A key supernatural event is when Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo. He is the only one who can see the ghost. We could argue that this hallucination is a symptom of Macbeth's mind becoming more and more unbalanced because of the guilt he feels, as well as the overwhelming amount of power he suddenly has. Macbeth has visions throughout the play, such as the dagger before he kills King Duncan, 'Is this a dagger which I see before me' (2,1). These could be psychological (of the mind) or they could be premonitions (feelings that something bad is going to happen) and Macbeth is experiencing the supernatural. Because he has interacted with the witches, the audience might think that he has made himself vulnerable to evil. Contact with the supernatural seems to cause the events of the play. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth only hatch the plan to kill King Duncan because the witches tell Macbeth that he will be the king one day – we could argue that, without the witches, none of the events of the play would have happened.

## Masculinity and Cruelty

- Macbeth behaves like a fearless warrior at the start of the play. The Captain tells King Duncan about his bravery in battle. They expected men to behave with honour, which meant fighting for their king. Men were also supposed to be fearless. However, Macbeth starts to be viewed as an evil character when he goes against this idea of the honourable man. He lies to Banquo (his best friend), which is dishonourable. He brings his friend and leader (King Duncan) into his home and then kills him. He also goes against fighting rules when he kills Duncan. He waits for the king to fall asleep and kills him whilst he is defenceless. This also goes against honour because Duncan trusted Macbeth to keep him safe whilst he was a guest in his home, but Macbeth goes against this. Macbeth also shows his lack of traditional masculinity when he allows women to control and manipulate him. The witches tell him he will be king, so he starts to plot against King Duncan. Lady Macbeth tells him he will be a coward and a weak man if he does not kill the king, and so he kills King Duncan.
- Lady Macbeth wishes that she could be more masculine. She wants to be masculine to have the qualities that people thought belonged to men. Through Lady Macbeth's desperation to become more manly, she links the idea very close to cruelty, saying 'to the tow top-full of direst cruelty' and 'take my milk for gall', showing that not only does she want to be stripped of her feminine gender, but wants to be cruel. Through this, Shakespeare may be hinting at the deep sense of patriarchy at the time, that in order for women to have power, they are forced to behave in cruel and unnatural ways and are therefore rejected by society.
- Shakespeare caters for King James (who would likely have been part of the audience) by manipulating the lessons of masculinity within the play. When Malcom (the heir to the throne) says to Macduff 'Dispute it like a man' (after his family had been murdered), Macduff responds 'I shall do so. But I must also feel it as a man'. Malcom learns this lesson from the masculine role model of Macduff and passes it on when responding to Siward's lack of feeling at his son's death 'He's worth more sorrow And that I'll spend for him'.

## Violence

- The violent imagery describing Macbeth at the start of the play is honourable: his violence on the battlefield is for the king. He is praised and rewarded for killing a treacherous thane, Macdonald: 'Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops / And fixed his head upon our battlements' (1,2). Macbeth shows his courage and strength by cutting his enemy open from his navel to his face. The violent verb 'unseam'd' emphasises how Macbeth opens him up. It all seems very fluid in motion. This implies Macbeth is very strong and is unphased by horrifically killing another man. When Shakespeare was writing, anyone sentenced to death for treason, such as Guy Fawkes after the failed Gunpowder Plot, would be hung, drawn and quartered and their heads would be shown on pikes on Traitor's Gate. This was the gateway prisoners would pass through as they entered the Tower of London. Macduff seems to be displaying it as he asks them to look at it: 'Behold where stands / the usurper's cursed head' (5,9). This moment makes Macbeth's heroism at the start somewhat **ironic** – he was a hero for killing a man who seems to have been a traitor to the king. However, almost immediately after that, he himself becomes a traitor, soon murdering the king and taking over Scotland. This relates back to the witches' statement: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (1,1) – things and people are not always what they seem.
- Lady Macbeth uses very violent imagery to persuade her husband to murder King Duncan. She tells him she would have bashed in the brain of her own baby if she had promised to do it: 'I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked the nipple from his boneless gums, / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn / As you have done to this' (1,7). This would have been very shocking to a Jacobean (during the reign of James I of England) audience. Lady Macbeth is a woman whose main purpose, according to the values of the time, would be to give birth to and nurture children. The verb 'plucked' is simple, but devastating; it's as if she casually removed the baby from the breast and broke the connection between them. In this sense, Lady Macbeth goes against nature by refusing to nurture her own child and, instead, describes the violent image of her murdering it. The adjective 'boneless' reflects how young the child is. He doesn't have teeth in his gums yet. This reminds the audience of how vulnerable the baby is and how Lady Macbeth does not seem to care – again, her careless attitude goes against nature, especially for women at the time the play was set. Finally, the verb 'dashed' is a very aggressive one. It shows how she would have bashed in her baby's head if she had promised to do it. She uses violence to try and show Macbeth how strong her commitment is to anything she promises to do. She is trying to show him he is a coward for going back on the plan. She uses an image of violence against the thing she cares most about – her baby. She does this to show him that she'd do anything to keep her word to him and to make him change his mind. In Lady Macbeth's mind, this violent description shows her husband the extent she'd go to for him and, therefore, how much she loves him.

## Armour, Kingship & The Natural Order

- Macbeth calls for his armour repeatedly in Act 5, Scene 3: 'Give me my armour'. The armour represents his masculine power. When he was a fighter, he had control. He was honoured and people looked up to him.
- From the very start of the play, the natural world seems to be in chaos. The first direction is 'The battlefield: thunder and lightning.' This is **pathetic fallacy**: the environment starts to predict the unnatural changes that are about to happen as the witches enter the stage. Storms have connotations of (are associated with) chaos.
- The unnatural changes also happen in the world of men when someone murders the king. **James I believed in the Divine Right of Kings. This says that God decides who the king is, and that only God has the power to end a King's rule through natural death. If someone murders a king, they challenge the natural order. This has bad repercussions, like the strange weather.**
- In Act 2, Scene 3, Lennox tells Macbeth that the previous night – the night of King Duncan's murder – was 'unruly'. People are predicting that bad things will happen. 'Some say, the earth / Was feverous and did shake'. This personification shows that Earth itself is sick with the events happening in the world of men. The murder hasn't even been talked about at this point. This could be a message to the audience that people who take part in supernatural events cause huge problems for everyone in the world. The witches in Macbeth have caused nature itself to turn on its head.
- Shakespeare creates the character of Duncan as someone who is completely virtuous and pure, in order to show what kind of king James should be, and therefore make it easier for people to accept him as the divine choice. Furthermore, through Malcom's test to see whether Macduff remains loyal, Shakespeare demonstrates exactly the consequences of being the wrong kind of king to King James, 'cut off the nobles for their lands', 'forge quarrels unjust against the good and loyal, destroying them for wealth'.
- At the time of the play, Banquo was thought to be the ancestor of king James, and Shakespeare therefore presents him in a very noble way – he had a 'royalty of nature', 'He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour to act safety' – Shakespeare is telling King James not to take any rash actions and take revenge. Furthermore, the witches' prophesies include that the line of descent from Banquo will 'stretch out to the crack of doom', Shakespeare here is employing a blatant form of flattery, that James will become such a good king that his descendants will stay on the throne forever.

## Madness and Blood

- Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth 'O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!' (3,2). This **metaphor** suggests that he cannot control his thoughts and that he lives under a constant threat.
- When Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost, Lady Macbeth is angry. She tells him it is his imagination, that he is seeing things that old women talk about in fairy tales: '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.'
- When she is sleepwalking, Lady Macbeth speaks in prose rather than the iambic pentameter, which is usually used for the speech of key characters.
- Lady Macbeth's words when sleepwalking show all the emotions and thoughts that she keeps bottled up when she is awake: 'Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of / Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O' (5,1). She is clearly distressed. This is shown by her cries of 'O'. The adjective 'little' describing her hand makes her seem childlike and innocent.
- Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth: 'It will have blood they say: blood will have blood' (3,4). This suggests that murder will lead to other murders and consequences.
- Macbeth doesn't think he will be able to wash the blood from his hands after King Duncan's murder: 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand? No: this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red' (2,2). He thinks the blood is so great that it will stain the ocean red if he tries to clean his hands.
- After King Duncan's body is discovered, Donalbain warns Malcolm: 'the nea'er in blood, / The nearer bloody.' Blood here represents lineage and that they have the blood of their father in their veins. They are at risk of whoever has killed him harming them.

## Appearances and Deception

- In Act 1, Scene 5, Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth he must 'Bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue; look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under' t.' This **simile** tells Macbeth that he must put on a welcoming face for King Duncan. She's worried that he can't trick people. She tells him, 'Your face, my thane, is as a book where men / May read strange matters.' This suggests that it is easy to read his emotions by looking at him. She says he needs to control his emotions if they're to gain Duncan's trust.
- Macbeth seems to be much better at tricking people by the time Macduff finds King Duncan's body. He says: 'Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had liv'd a blessed time, for from this instant, / There's nothing serious in mortality' (2,3). This suggests that life has nothing left to offer now the king is dead. Macbeth seems like a loyal subject (someone under the King's rule) who is very upset by King Duncan's death, rather than a murderer who is responsible for it.
- Macbeth agrees. He says they must, 'make our faces vizards to our hearts, / Disguising what they are.' A vizard is part of a helmet that covers the face. This metaphor means they must make their faces like masks to hide their true selves from everyone else.
- After the murder of their father, Donalbain tells Malcolm 'There's daggers in men's smiles' (2,3). This suggests that they are surrounded by people who pretend to be friends by smiling, but in fact have murderous plans. He knows that appearances can trick people.
- Before meeting with Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 4, King Duncan says 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face.' This suggests that it is difficult to read true intentions by looking at someone.
- Malcolm says 'Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell' – this refers to Satan, who was banished from heaven and damned to Hell by God, and yet he was viewed as the 'brightest' showing the extent of deception, how even God – the most powerful and divine figure to a Jacobean audience – cannot determine the liars.

## Women, Children and Sleep

- Macduff's birth becomes the main anagnorisis (realisation) of the play: 'Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd.' The language and structure here really emphasise the revelation. The line breaks after 'womb' to create a pause before 'untimely ripp'd'. This verb phrase is savage, just as the moment in the play is horrendous for Macbeth. It means he can be killed (5,8).
- 'Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more: / Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep, / Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care, / The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath, / Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course, / Chief nourisher in life's feast' (2,2). The list of sleep's qualities shows how valuable sleep is in life – it heals, nourishes and allows us to get rid of the stresses of the day before. Macbeth killed King Duncan in his sleep. This becomes symbolic of Macbeth killing his own peace. He will never rest soundly again.