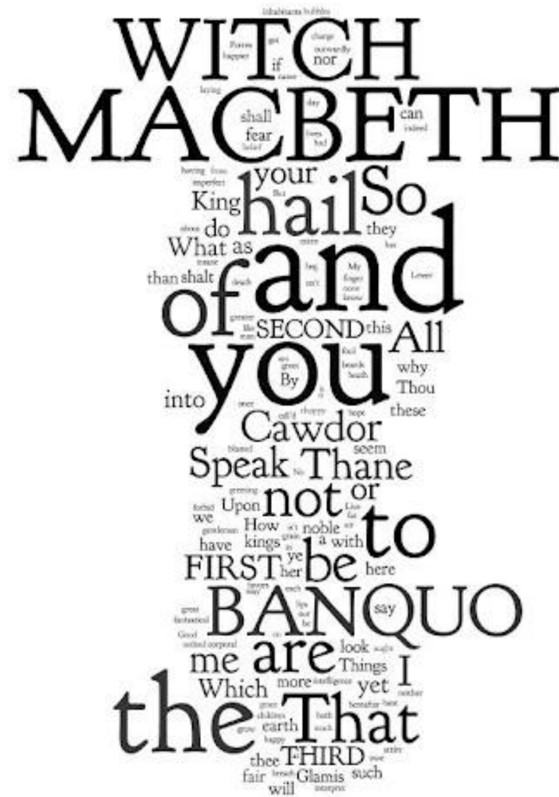
Macbeth



Wider Reading Booklet (AO3)

Name:

An Introduction to Shakespearean Tragedy by Kiernan Ryan (2016)

Despite their dazzling diversity, the tragedies of Shakespeare gain their enduring power from a shared dramatic vision, argues Kiernan Ryan.

When we think about Shakespearean tragedy, the plays we usually have in mind are *Titus Andronicus*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* and *Coriolanus*. That core list of nine can be expanded to twelve, however, if we include the history plays *Richard III* and *Richard II*, both of which were also billed as tragedies in Shakespeare's day, and *Timon of Athens*, whose claim to inclusion is more questionable, but which is listed as one of the tragedies on the contents page (the 'Catalogue') of the 1623 First Folio. So, for that matter, is *Cymbeline*, though no one could make a credible case for its belonging there, when it plainly belongs with the late romances – *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest* – with which it's long been grouped. *Troilus and Cressida*, on the other hand, despite being advertised in an earlier edition as a first-rate comedy, is also entitled a tragedy in the First Folio, but not listed at all in the Catalogue and placed ambiguously – as befits its unclassifiable nature – between the histories and the tragedies.

The more one ponders the question of what qualifies as a Shakespearean tragedy, the more complicated it can become. So modern studies of Shakespeare's tragedies tend to focus on the plays whose right to the title is undisputed, and treat each one separately as a self-contained tragedy, leaving the question of what unites them unaddressed or unresolved. There's a lot to be said for approaching each tragedy first and foremost as a unique work of dramatic art. And the temptation to boil them all down to the same generic formula should obviously be resisted. But it would be equally misguided to rule out the possibility of identifying what the tragedies have in common without dissolving the differences between them. For that would mean denying the strong sense most people have, when watching or reading these plays, that there's something distinctively *Shakespearean* about their tragic vision that sets them apart from other kinds of tragedy.

An Excerpt from Royal Shakespeare: a playwright and his King by Andrew Dickson (2016)

Perhaps most fascinating among these early Jacobean dramas is *Macbeth*, known in the theatre to this day as the 'Scottish play'. On the face of it, the tragedy is so tailored to James it must surely have been written with him in mind, probably in 1606. It is based on an obscure episode in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, previously raided by the playwright for his English histories. The play treats the subject of Scottish history with earnest seriousness, cleverly flatters the King's distant ancestor Banquo, who dies an honorable death, and even includes cameos by a crew of 'weird sisters' or Witches who might have stepped out of the pages of the King's own 1597 treatise on necromancy, *Daemonologie*.

Yet in this strangest and most slippery of tragedies nothing is exactly as it seems. Holinshed's account in fact suggests that Banquo was implicated in the conspiracy to kill King Duncan, a suggestion that it would be impolitic – not to say actively dangerous – to retain, so Shakespeare edited the story to make it more palatable. James must have been impressed by the playwright's tact, but also conscious of the reminder that history is a malleable material, subject to interpretation and equivocation, a word that crops up suggestively in the play. Though Banquo reappears in a vision, introducing a 'show of eight kings' who are his descendants (James was the ninth; equally tactfully, his executed mother does not appear), his true political motivations remain almost as shadowy as those of Macbeth, the man who orders his murder. Likewise, the Sisters are not fiendish agents of popular superstition, but more ambiguous, fair as well as foul. They stand at a remove from the story, symbols of implacable and irrevocable fate, but are also in control of events in ways the play's human characters can only dream of.

Yet the play's most intriguing facet is something barely hinted at in the text as it has come down to us: a real-life event that had convulsed the world of the court. We're not certain when *Macbeth* was first performed, or even if James ever saw it, but if it was in 1606, it must have been frighteningly soon after the Gunpowder Plot in November 1605. The Plot was a Catholic conspiracy to blow up James at the state opening of parliament – and with him nearly every major political figure in the land – and it came dangerously close to happening.

Had it not been halted at the last minute, the Gunpowder Plot would have been the terrorist outrage of the age and changed the course of European history. Watching Shakespeare's portrayal of a dark-hearted villain who inches his way towards absolute power by liquidating everyone in his path, some courtiers must have reflected how fragile the balance of power can be, particularly when James had also survived a much earlier assassination attempt in Scotland in 1600. As murder piled on top of murder – commencing, of course, with the cold-blooded killing of a

king – it is easy to imagine James's retinue holding their breath, watching for their monarch's reaction. As the critic James Shapiro observes, 'if Shakespeare wanted to fawn over his monarch, there were easier and more remunerative ways to do so'. Simple flattery was never Shakespeare's style.

Aristotle on the Tragic Hero

He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous- a personage like Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families. A well-constructed plot should, therefore, be single in its issue, rather than double as some maintain. The change of fortune should be not from bad to good, but, reversely, from good to bad. It should come about as the result not of vice, but of some great error or frailty ('Poetics', Aristotle)

Recommended reading: 'Oedipus Rex' by Sophocles – this was a highly influential Classical tragedy which will help you understand the conventions of a tragic hero.

http://classics.mit.edu/Sophocles/oedipus.html

'Women in Power: From Medusa to Merkel', Mary Beard.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VGDJIlUCjA0

(20:28-22:20)

1. How could the description of Clytemnestra as *androboulon* ('with manly purpose' / 'thinking like a man') be related to Lady Macbeth?
2. Is *androboulon* a positive opportunity for female empowerment? Or, is the notion that women need to behave like men to get power problematic?
3. How does Shakespeare explore this issue in the play? What are the consequences of Lady Macbeth's power?

Plato's Allegory of the Cave

Plato's 'Republic' includes a famous allegory which represents how humans perceive illusions as true reality. He imagines a group of people imprisoned within a cave that has no natural light. All they can see is a series of shadows on the wall, created by the light of a fire. Knowing no better, they assume these shadows are the real thing. It is not until one prisoner manages to escape that he realises the beauty of their true forms. However, when he returns to the cave, most of the prisoners are reluctant to believe him or likewise venture outside.

How might this allegory inform our interpretations of Macbeth's Act V:5 soliloquy?

Thomas de Quincey explores his personal reaction to the knocking in II.2-3.

'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth' – An Essay

From my boyish days, I had always felt a great perplexity on one point in *Macbeth*. It was this: the knocking at the gate, which succeeds to the murder of Duncan, produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account. The effect was, that it reflected upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity; yet, however obstinately I endeavoured with my understanding to comprehend this, for many years I never could see why it should produce such an effect.

Here I pause for one moment, to exhort the reader never to pay any attention to his understanding, when it stands in opposition to any other faculty of his mind. The mere understanding, however useful and indispensable, is the meanest faculty in the human mind, and the most to be distrusted; and yet the great majority of people trust to nothing else, which may do for ordinary life, but not for philosophical purposes. Of this out of ten thousand instances that I might produce, I will cite one. Ask of any person whatsoever, who is not previously prepared for the demand by a knowledge of the perspective, to draw in the rudest way the commonest appearance which depends upon the laws of that science; as, for instance, to represent the effect of two walls standing at right angles to each other, or the appearance of the houses on each side of a street, as seen by a person looking down the street from

one extremity.

Now in all cases, unless the person has happened to observe in pictures how it is that artists produce these effects, he will be utterly unable to make the smallest approximation to it. Yet why? For he has seen the effect every day of his life. The reason is that he allows his understanding to overrule his eyes. His understanding, which includes no intuitive knowledge of the laws of vision, can furnish him with no reason a line which is known and can be proved to be a horizontal line, should not *appear* a horizontal line; a line that made any angle with the perpendicular, less than a right angle, would seem to him to indicate that his houses were all tumbling down together.

Accordingly, he makes the line of his houses a horizontal line, and fails, of course, to produce the effect demanded. Here, then, is one instance out of many, in which not only the understanding can overrule the eyes, but where the understanding is positively allowed to obliterate the eyes, as it were; for not only does the man believe the evidence of his understanding in opposition to that of his eyes, but (what is monstrous!) the idiot is not aware that his eyes ever gave such evidence. He does not know that he has seen (and therefore *quoad* his consciousness has *not* seen) that which he has seen every day of his life.

But to return from this digression, my understanding could furnish no reason the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* should produce any effect, direct or reflected. In fact, my understanding said positively that it could *not* produce any effect. But I knew better: I felt that it did; and I waited and clung to the problem until further knowledge should enable me to solve it. At length, in 1812, Mr. Williams made his debut on the stage of Ratcliff Highway, and executed those unparalleled murders which have procured for him such a brilliant and undying reputation. On which murders, by the way, I must observe, that in one respect they have had an ill effect, by making the connoisseur in murder very fastidious in his taste, and dissatisfied by anything that has been since done in that line. All other murders look pale by the deep crimson of his; and, as an amateur once said to me in a querulous tone, "There has been absolutely nothing doing since his time, or nothing that's worth speaking of." But this is wrong; for it is unreasonable to expect all men to be great artists, and born with the genius of Mr. Williams. Now it will be remembered, that in the first of these murders (that of the Marrs), the same incident (of a knocking at the door, soon after the work of extermination was complete) did occur, which the genius of Shakespeare has invented; and all good judges, and the most eminent dilettanti, acknowledged the felicity of Shakespeare's suggestion, as soon as it was realized.

Here, then, was a fresh proof that I was right in relying on my own feeling, in opposition to my understanding; and I again set myself to study the problem; at length, I solved it to my own satisfaction, and my solution is this. Murder, in ordinary cases, where the sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered person, is an incident of coarse and vulgar horror; and for this reason that it flings the interest exclusively upon the natural but ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life; an instinct which, as being indispensable to the primal law of self-preservation, is the same in kind (though different in degree) amongst all living creatures: this instinct, therefore, because it annihilates all distinctions, and degrades the greatest of men to the level of "the poor beetle that we tread on," exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude. Such an attitude would little suit the purposes of the poet. What then must he do? He must throw the interest on the murderer.

Our sympathy must be with *him* (of course, I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter his feelings, and are made to understand them -- not a sympathy of pity or approbation***** {Footnote below}). In the murdered person, all strife of thought, all flux and reflux of passion and of purpose, are crushed by one overwhelming panic; the fear of instant death smites him "with its petrific mace." But in the murderer, such a murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great storm of passion jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.

In *Macbeth*, for the sake of gratifying his own enormous and teeming faculty of creation, Shakespeare has introduced two murderers; and, as usual in his hands, they are remarkably discriminated; but, though in *Macbeth* the strife of mind is greater than in his wife, the tiger spirit not so awake, and his feelings caught chiefly by contagion from her yet, as both were finally involved in the guilt of murder, the murderous mind of necessity is finally to be presumed in both. This was to be expressed; and on its own account, as well as to make it a more proportionable antagonist to the unoffending nature of their victim, "the gracious Duncan," and adequately to expound "the deep damnation of his taking off," this was to be expressed with peculiar energy. We were to be made to feel that the human nature, i.e., the divine nature of love and mercy, spread through the hearts of all creatures, and seldom utterly withdrawn from man was gone, vanished, extinct? and that the fiendish nature had taken its place.

And, as this effect is marvellously accomplished in the dialogues and soliloquies themselves, so it is finally consummated by the expedient under consideration: and it is to this that I now solicit the reader's attention. If the reader has ever witnessed a wife, daughter, or sister in a fainting fit, he may chance to have observed that the most affecting moment in such a spectacle is *that* in which a sigh and a stirring announce the recommencement of suspended life. Or, if the reader has ever been present in a vast metropolis on the day when some great national idol was carried in funeral pomp to his grave, and chancing to walk near the course through which it passed, has felt powerfully in the silence and desertion of the streets, and in the stagnation of ordinary business, the deep interest which at that moment was possessing the heart of man -- if all at once he should hear the death-like stillness broken up by the sound of wheels rattling away from the scene, and making known that the transitory vision was dissolved, he will be aware that at no moment was his sense of the complete suspension and pause in ordinary human concerns so full and affecting as at that moment when the suspension ceases, and the goings-on of haman life are suddenly resumed.

All action in any direction is best expounded, measured, and made apprehensible by reaction. Now, apply this to the case in *Macbeth*. Here, as I have said, the retiring of the human heart, and the entrance of the fiendish heart was to be expressed and made sensible. Another world has stepped in; and the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is "unsexed;" Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed. But how shall this be conveyed and made palpable?

In order that a new world may step in, this world must for a time disappear. The murderers and the murder must be insulated -- cut off by an immeasurable gulf from the ordinary tide and succession of human affairs locked up and sequestered in some deep recess; we must be made sensible that the world of ordinary life is suddenly arrested -- laid asleep -- tranced -- racked into a dread armistice; time must be annihilated; relation to things without abolished; and all must pass self-withdrawn into a deep syncope and suspension of earthly passion. Hence it is, that, when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.

O mighty poet! Thy works are not as those of other men, simply and merely great works of art: but are also like the phenomena of nature, like the sun and the sea, the stars and the flowers; like frost and snow, rain and dew, hail-storm and thunder, which are to be studied with entire submission of our own faculties, and in the perfect faith that in them there can be no too much or too little, nothing useless or inert but that, the farther we press in our discoveries, the more we shall see proofs of design and self-supporting arrangement where the careless eye had seen nothing but accident.

Footnote

***** It seems almost ludicrous to guard and explain my use of a word, in a situation where it would naturally explain itself. But it has become necessary to do so, in consequence of the unscholarly-like use of the word sympathy, at present so general, by which, instead of taking it in its proper sense, as the act of reproducing in our minds the feelings of another, whether for hatred, indignation, love, pity, or approbation, it is made a mere synonym of the word *pity*, and hence, instead of saying "sympathy *with* another," many writers adopt the monstrous barbarism of "sympathy *for* another."

Conjuring darkness in *Macbeth by John Mullan (2016)*

https://www.bl.uk/shakespeare/articles/conjuring-darkness-in-macbeth

Much of *Macbeth* is set at night, yet its first performances took place in the open air, during daylight hours. John Mullan explores how Shakespeare uses speech and action to conjure the play's sense of growing darkness.

It is strange to think that *Macbeth* was almost certainly written for, and first performed at, the open-air Globe Theatre, where plays were staged in daylight. ‘Light thickens, and the crow / Makes wing to th’ rooky wood’ (3.2.50–51), says Macbeth – but the actor first speaking these words did so in the bright light of day. The palpable gathering of darkness that the speaker describes and welcomes had to be imagined by Shakespeare’s audience. We know for certain that *Macbeth* was performed in daylight at the Globe, for the astrologer Simon Forman records seeing it performed there in 1610. It had first been staged in 1606. Even if it were later performed at the indoor theatre at

Blackfriars, where plays were illuminated by candlelight and where darkness was obtainable, this theatre was not available to Shakespeare's company until 1608–09. It seems clear, then, that Shakespeare conceived it as a play where darkness had to be theatrically conjured rather than literally provided.

Literal and metaphorical darkness

In modern times, productions of the play have given directors opportunities for many a special theatrical effect that has depended on alternations of darkness and concentrated light. Yet the original play, by having to create these alternations in the imagination, powerfully merges literal and metaphorical darkness. Shakespeare did have some special effects to hand: *Macbeth* begins with 'thunder and lightning' and, in the performances at the Globe, this lightning might have been represented by flashes from fireworks, as was done with other plays of the period. But, for the most part, in the bright daylight of a Thameside afternoon, the darkness that seems to envelop the play had to be created by words and gestures.

Key scenes of the play are set at night, and even in many of the daytime scenes characters are aware of the fading of the light. The Witches who open the play agree that they will meet Macbeth 'ere the set of sun' (1.1.5); Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle at evening (Act 1, Scene 6); the First Murderer, instructed by Macbeth to kill Banquo and Fleance, notes how 'The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day' (3.3.5). We often feel darkness coming, especially because both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seem to invoke and invite it. They need darkness to do their worst.

On a stage crowded with Duncan and his thanes, Macbeth speaks in one of his asides that allow us to hear his unspoken thoughts. 'Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires' (1.4.50–51). This is the first reference to darkness in the play. He has just found out that he has become Thane of Cawdor, as prophesied by the Witches, and that Duncan is to visit his castle. The underside of the roof covering much of the stage of the Globe was decorated with painted stars, so Macbeth's invocation is like a spell to darken the very space in which he stands. In the next scene, Lady Macbeth, excited by the tidings that the king is to come 'tonight' to her castle, brings on a kind of conjuration of darkness. 'Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell' (1.5.50–51). She has not heard her husband's words as we have done, yet she seems to echo them with her wish that 'heaven' not 'peep through the blanket of the dark / To cry, 'Hold, hold!'' (1.5.53–54)

Hiding deeds from heaven

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth separately call on darkness not just to assist their plans but to hide their deeds from 'Heaven' or their own consciences. 'Let ... The eye wink at the hand' (1.4.51–52), says Macbeth, as if the dark might hide his own action from himself. Later he echoes his wife's when he talks to her of his planned murder of his friend Banquo, but in such way that she might remain 'innocent of the knowledge' of what he is about to do (3.2.45). 'Come, seeling night, / Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,' he continues. *Seeling* is a metaphor taken from hawking, where a hawk has its eyelids sewed shut in order to be trained. Macbeth looks forward to the darkness that will facilitate his murderous plans. But it is more than this. Day is 'pitiful', and in his ruthless actions Macbeth must escape pity. In his imagining, darkness is a psychological space, where scruple can be shed, compunction lost.

Audiences will be most aware of the gathering of darkness when Duncan comes to stay at Macbeth's castle. What Lady Macbeth chillingly calls 'This night's great business' (1.5.68) must happen in the dark. Servants carrying torches enter at Act 1, Scene 7 to signify that night has fallen. And it gets yet darker. At the opening of Act 2, Banquo's son Fleance carries a torch when he enters with his father. It is after twelve and 'The moon is down' (2.1.2): it is pitch dark. With a brilliant touch, Shakespeare lets us hear how different characters make their own sense of the blackness. 'There's husbandry in heaven, / Their candles are all out' (2.1.4–5), says Banquo, fancifully – and unconsciously reminds us of the obscuring of Heaven and starlight for which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have wished.

Now, in this deep darkness, characters cannot see each other even by the light of torches. 'Who's there?' asks Banquo as Macbeth enters with a torch-bearing servant (2.1.10). It is the same nervous exclamation as begins Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and as in the first scene of that play, which begins in darkness on the battlements of Elsinore, the audience at the Globe would have been able to see very clearly how the characters on stage were unable to see clearly. A little later, after Banquo has retired, Lady Macbeth enters and catches herself starting at the shriek of an owl, just before her husband comes to meet her. 'Who's there? What ho?' (2.2.8) asks Macbeth, and at first, she hardly seems to recognise him: 'My husband!' (2.2.13). Their dialogue creates a darkness in which sounds and apprehensions are amplified: 'Didst thou not hear a noise?' (2.2.14), 'Did not you speak?' (2.2.16). The terrible deed

has been done and the darkness that made it possible concentrates their fears.

The discovery of Duncan's murder is followed by an odd little scene, which must take place several days later, in which Ross and an Old Man discuss unnatural events that seem to have accompanied the killing. Shakespeare takes from his source story in Holinshed's *Chronicles* the report that after Donwald murdered King Duff 'For the space of six monenths together ... there appeered no sunne by day, nor moone by night in anie part of the realme'. In the wake of Duncan's killing, darkness appears to have seeped from the night into the day. 'By th' clock 'tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp' (2.4.6–7), observes Ross. Without any help from artificial lighting effects, we gain an impression of 'night's predominance' (2.4.8), as he calls it.

When we return to Macbeth he has been crowned king but fears Banquo and 'his royalty of nature' (3.1.49). He must again call darkness to his aid. Banquo tells him that he is riding out and will probably be 'a borrower of the night / For a dark hour or twain' (3.1.26–27) before he returns for Macbeth's feast. Night will, of course, facilitate the arrangement of his murder, and when Macbeth instructs the two Murderers on their mission, he echoes Banquo's own phrasing. Fleance, he tells the hired killers, must 'embrace the fate / Of that dark hour' (3.1.136–37). As so often in this play, darkness is simultaneously metaphorical and literal. The 'dark hour' is the time of killing – but also the lightless time when a trap can be sprung. When the Murderers attack Banquo, it is darkness that allows them to surprise him – but also that allows Fleance to escape. 'Who did strike out the light?' asks the Third Murderer (3.3.19). Darkness is not the friend to Macbeth that he believes. Fate is not his to command

Darkness may seem to become Macbeth's element, but his wife, once the prime mover of their plots, comes to dread it. Watching her sleepwalking, her Gentlewoman tells the Doctor that 'she has light by her continually, 'tis her command' (5.1.22). '*Enter Lady with a Taper*' is the stage instruction in the First Folio, on which text all later editions are based. The taper, the smallest kind of candle, is Lady Macbeth's safeguard against the powers of darkness. These were once the powers that she invoked, but now they crowd in on her. Once she called 'Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell' (1.5.50–51); now she feels and fears 'Hell is murky' (5.1.36). In her final scene before her death, Shakespeare shows how the horror of her deeds has possessed her, and does so by dramatising the most elemental and childlike of fears: fear of the dark.

Witches in *Macbeth* by Diane Purkiss (2016)

Diane Purkiss discusses Renaissance beliefs about witches and shows how, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare blurs the line between the witches and Lady Macbeth.

The witch hunts are one of those areas that people often think they know about, when a lot of what they *know* is not correct. Witches were never burned in England, for example; the punishment was hanging. Nor was torture ever used in English witchcraft interrogations. Also, witch hunts were most often directed at elderly women, rather than at young and pretty girls. Relations between the accused and a small animal – a weasel, a rat, a fly – which fed off the witch's blood in exchange for power; this animal was called a familiar. Accused witches usually didn't have secret herbal knowledge; some did practice as healers, but by using charms, not herbal remedies. These charms, as we shall see, were not remnants of paganism; by the time of the witch trials, the Old Religion was not paganism, but medieval Catholicism.

The word 'charm' in early modern drama always means magic, usually not healing magic but the quasi-erotic magic of bewilderment, sleep or reverie. There are many such uses in drama of the period, including metaphoric ones. Deceptive charming has haunted the word all along. This becomes very clear in Macbeth's last reference to his 'charmed life' (5.8.12), which Macduff denounces as a cover for his satanic embroilment: 'despair thy charm,' cries Macduff, like any reformer (5.8.13). The play ultimately reconfigures all charming as deceptive. The witches have not really charmed or sained/saved Macbeth; they have tricked him into thinking he is invincible when he is not. They have flattered him and he has believed their lies because he wants to. This, for Macduff, seems to amount to Macbeth's enrolment as a minion of Hell. The relation between this turn of the word's usage in the play and that in demonological work is very clear, and it is entirely orthodox.

The ingredients in the witches' cauldron

A lot of the horrible stuff that the witches put in the cauldron is material considered foreign or strange. It comes from alien peoples – Jews, Tartars, Turks – or from animals which are not usually eaten – dog, bat. But the

outlandish ingredients are included in a practice that looks reassuringly familiar to an audience from Shakespeare's time, when few people had ovens and most cooked in a cauldron slung over an open fire. As with written charms, then, magic is about inserting the outsider into the familiar world, about letting the outside in, or even inviting it in.

That's just what Lady Macbeth does. After she hears of the witches' prophecy, she addresses the powers of darkness directly, trying to make herself just like them. The witch's body, however, was the last place to look for hot, free-flowing blood. The body was hard, and desiccated by age. However, once breached, the witch's power was lost; the classic folk remedy for witchcraft was scratching the witch above the heart. Once her hard skin was pierced, her power evaporated. Yet these wizened bodies were apparently actively sought by demons. Familiars are apparently drawn to the lower body. Lady Macbeth delivers the only authentic invocation to the powers of darkness in the play, and they too relate to the loss of milk:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
and fill me from the crown to the toe topful
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood
Stop up th' accents and passage to remorse,
that no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers ... (1.5.40–48)

This speech is usually read as a renunciation of the sexed body. But what does that mean within the context of the play? The witches, of course, are unsexed, or rather their gender is to Banquo problematically undecidable – because they have beards. But what kind of marker are beards in women? They are markers of old age, when hair begins to grow in places coded as smooth in young women. What Banquo is seeing is a body unsexed by old age, and we shall see in a moment that this is how Lady Macbeth marks her body too.

Old age brings the functions of the female body to a halt. Lady Macbeth is making, in effect, the same choice as women who 'adopted' devilish familiars, but making it much more comprehensively. She is wishing for early menopause, and this is why she asks that her blood be made thick. A witch's blood was thought to be so thick with old age, so lacking in fire that it was impossible to extract it, and it was this idea which lay behind the notion that a witch's body could not be pierced by shot or by a pin. Such hardness is the opposite of the soft body of the mother. To early modern medicine, deriving its knowledge from Aristotle, breast-milk was impure blood from the womb that was made white and pure by the burning fires of maternal love, which also drew it upward through the body until it reached the breasts. By contrast, the gall which Lady Macbeth substitutes for milk is a signifier that her heart has failed in maternal love. Gall is also the kind of poison in which witches were believed to deal. In an era when babies who were not breast-fed were far more likely to die, she imagines herself murdering her child, via the trope of a refusal to feed it. Lady Macbeth's double refusal of breast-milk marks her as a witch, too, because witches were beings who stole the milk of other animals and mothers, substituting unnourishing blood for it. And she also imagines herself choosing not to feed the child, but to feed something else, to feed the familiar spirits she summons.

Character analysis: The Witches in *Macbeth* by Carol Atherton (2017)

Looking at context, language and form, Carol Atherton provides a close analysis of the Witches in Act 1, Scene 3 of *Macbeth*.

Key quotation

Drum within

THIRD WITCH A drum, a drum!
Macbeth doth come.

ALL The weird sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go, about, about:

Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again, to make up nine.
Peace, the charm's wound up. (1.3.30–37)

Setting the scene

At the start of Act 1, Scene 3 of *Macbeth*, we see the Witches preparing for their first encounter with Macbeth. The First Witch tells her companions that she has been insulted by a sailor's wife who refused to give her some of the chestnuts that she was eating ('"Give me!" quoth I. / "Aroint thee, witch!" the rump-fed ronyon cries' (1.3.5–6)). The First Witch says that she will take revenge by punishing the woman's husband, describing in detail what 'I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do' (1.1.10) to him: she will deprive him of sleep ('Sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid' (1.3.19–20)) and ensure that his ship is tossed by the waves ('tempest-toss'd' (1.3.25)) and unable to find safe harbour. The passage ends with the Witches chanting a spell as they prepare to meet Macbeth, repeating a movement three times in the direction of each Witch to consolidate their power.

How does Shakespeare present the Witches here?

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* at a time when interest in witchcraft bordered on hysteria. Witches were blamed for causing illness, death and disaster, and were thought to punish their enemies by giving them nightmares, making their crops fail and their animals sicken. Witches were thought to allow the Devil to suckle from them in the form of an animal, such as 'Graymalkin' and 'Paddock', the grey cat and the toad mentioned by the Witches in Act 1, Scene 1. Those who were convicted were often tortured, their trials reported in grisly detail in pamphlets that circulated in their hundreds. Often, those accused of witchcraft lived on the edges of society: they were old, poor and unprotected, and were therefore easy to blame.

King James VI of Scotland was deeply concerned about the threat posed by witches. He believed that a group of witches had tried to kill him by drowning him while he was at sea (a curse echoed here by the First Witch). During his reign thousands of people in Scotland were put on trial for witchcraft. In 1604, under his rule as king of England and Wales, witchcraft was made a capital offence, meaning that anyone who was found guilty of being a witch could be executed. When Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in 1606, then, he knew that his audience would have felt a mixture of fear and fascination for the three 'weird sisters', their imaginations captivated by the mysterious meeting on the desolate heath with which the play begins.

Shakespeare's portrayal of the Witches in Act 1, Scene 3 draws directly on many of the beliefs about witchcraft that his audience would have held. They harm animals (as when the Second Witch reports, matter-of-factly, that she has been 'killing swine' (1.3.2)). Their power over the elements means that they can control the winds, raise storms and sail in sieves. They use gruesome ingredients such as body parts (the 'pilot's thumb' (1.3.28)) in their spells. They are also deeply vindictive. The First Witch vows to make the sailor suffer simply because his wife refuses to give in to her gluttonous demand. Her reaction is shockingly, disproportionately cruel: she vows to drain the life out of him until he is 'dry as hay' (1.3.18) and curses him with a tortuous inability to sleep, declaring 'He shall live a man forbid' (1.3.21) and that he shall 'dwindle, peak and pine' (1.3.23). This is a clear example of the crime known in Shakespeare's day as 'mischief following anger', a punishment inflicted because of grievance. Shakespeare uses this passage, then, to demonstrate the Witches' vindictive nature, leaving the audience in no doubt as to their connection with the powers of evil.

The Witches' language

Throughout the play, the language used by the Witches helps to mark them out as mysterious and other-worldly. They speak in verse, but it is a form of verse that is very different from that which is used by most of Shakespeare's characters. Many of the lines in this passage are in rhyming couplets, in contrast to the unrhymed verse used elsewhere in the play. Rather than speaking in an iambic metre, with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables, the Witches speak in a trochaic metre, with stressed syllables followed by unstressed. In addition, where most of Shakespeare's verse lines have five stresses, the Witches' lines typically only have four. In this scene, compare Macbeth's first line with the First Witch's description of how she will torture the sailor:

MACBETH So **foul** and **fair** a **day** I **have** not **seen**. (1.3.38)

FIRST WITCH **Sleep** shall **nei**ther **night** nor **day**
Hang up**on** his **pent**house **lid**;
He shall **live** a **man** for**bid** (1.3.19–21)

These heavy stresses give the Witches' speech a sense of foreboding that emphasises their malevolence and unearthliness. In the First Witch's lines, they make her vendetta against the sailor seem relentless. At the end of this passage, when the Witches chant in unison, they bring a sense of eeriness.

It's also worth noting that the Witches' speech is full of numbers. The First Witch will make the sailor's torture last 'sev'nnights, nine times nine' (1.3.22): a 'sev'nnight' was a week (seven nights), so the sailor will suffer for 81 weeks. As the Witches chant, they move 'Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine / And thrice again, to make up nine' (1.3.35–36). There are further examples of the number three: the sailor's wife 'mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd' (1.3.5); the First Witch repeats 'I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do' (1.1.10); and there are, of course, three witches. Three is a number that is often seen as having a significance. In Christianity, for example, there is the Holy Trinity: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Bad luck is frequently thought to come in threes. Macbeth is hailed by three titles (Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and King hereafter) and is later given three prophecies. When the Witches concoct their famous spell in Act 4, Scene 1, they begin with two references to the number three:

FIRST WITCH Thrice the brinded cat hath mew'd.

SECOND WITCH Thrice, and once the hedge-pig whin'd. (4.1.1–2)

Nine, meanwhile, is a multiple of three: therefore, 'nine' and 'nine times nine' multiplies and reinforces the power of the number three. Is Shakespeare suggesting that the Witches are a kind of unholy trinity? It's an obvious conclusion.

How does this scene fit into *Macbeth* as a whole?

This is the second time that we've met the Witches, and the second time that they've mentioned Macbeth, building a sense of anticipation for their forthcoming encounter. In Act 1, Scene 2, Macbeth is presented as a loyal warrior, a hero who fights valiantly on the battlefield to defend his country against invasion and treachery. Yet the association between Macbeth and the Witches introduces a different side to his character. The battle referred to by the Second Witch in Act 1, Scene 1 could be interpreted as not just a literal battle (the conflict raging between Scotland and Norway) but also a metaphorical battle: the battle for Macbeth's soul. It's significant, therefore, that Macbeth's first words to the Witches – 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' (1.3.38) – echo the Witches' chant, 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair', from Act 1, Scene 1 (l. 11). Banquo soon echoes the Witches, too, asking Macbeth, 'Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?' (1.3.51–52). This allusion is loaded with dramatic irony: while Banquo perceives the Witches' prophecies as 'fair', the audience is already aware things are not necessarily what they seem. Banquo introduces an element of doubt, too, by framing his observation within a question. The Witches' paradox – which indicates that appearances can be deceiving – is central to the play and reverberates through the major characters. Take Lady Macbeth, for example: 'look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't' (1.5.65–66).

When Macbeth and Banquo meet the Witches, their reactions give us an important insight into their personalities. Banquo is unafraid, but Macbeth 'start[s]' (1.3.51), or flinches, and 'seems rapt' (1.3.57), so mystified by their greeting that he is rendered speechless. Once he has regained his composure, he challenges the Witches to tell him more. They vanish, but it is not long before Macbeth finds that he is to become Thane of Cawdor – a 'truth' that immediately sets him wondering how the Witches' final prophecy will come about, and losing himself in the 'horrible imaginings' (1.3.138) that will eventually lead to the murder of King Duncan. Later in the play, it is Macbeth who seeks out the Witches, cementing his willingness to give himself over to the 'instruments of darkness' (1.3.124).

How have the Witches been interpreted?

It is Banquo who first describes the Witches. His words in Act 1, Scene 3 depict the Witches as stereotypical hags – 'withered' and 'wild', unearthly beings ('That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' Earth') with 'skinny lips', chapped ('choppy') fingers and beards (1.3.40–46). However, directors and designers have shown that the Witches don't have to be portrayed like this.

In Rupert Goold's 2010 film version of the play, starring Patrick Stewart as Macbeth, the Witches appear first as nurses in a nightmarish hospital, ripping out the heart of the wounded soldier. They later appear in the film in many other roles, including Lady Macbeth's attendants and serving-women at the banquet. In Justin Kurzel's 2015 production, starring Michael Fassbender as Macbeth, the witches are more conventional, looming through the mist at the edge of the battlefield and encircling Macbeth before greeting him in whispered voices. They are not physically grotesque, however, in the way that Banquo describes them. Interestingly, Kurzel gives us four witches: one is a child and two are young adults, while the eldest holds a baby. Other versions have drawn on the play's historical context: the actors who played the Witches in the Globe Theatre's 2010 production developed backstories for their characters that explained why they were isolated from society, leading to the vindictive behaviour they display in Act 1, Scene 3.

Witchcraft in Shakespeare's England by Carole Levin (2016)

Did Shakespeare's contemporaries believe in witches? Carole Levin looks at witchcraft trials in the 16th century and considers their relation to the 'weird sisters' of *Macbeth*.

While king of Scotland, James VI became utterly convinced about the reality of witchcraft and its great danger to him, leading to trials that began in 1591. James was convinced that a coven of powerful witches was conspiring to murder him through magic, and that they were in league with the Devil. In 1597, with the end of the trials, James published his study of witchcraft, *Demonology*. When James became king of England in 1603, the book was published in London as well. James I's fascination with witches was well known, and no doubt Shakespeare composed *Macbeth* in 1605 or 1606, using *Holinshed's Chronicles* as his source, to please his new king.

When Jacobean audiences watched *Macbeth* and heard the three witches talking, they would have witnessed Shakespeare's own conjuring of the strange and supernatural. At the same time, some of the conversation of the 'weird sisters' would have seemed ordinary and familiar. In Act 1, Scene 3, the first witch tells her sisters that once when she saw a woman eating chestnuts she demanded some: 'Give me!' (1.3.4), but the woman called her 'witch' and ordered her away. The first witch then plans the harm she will cause the woman's husband, a sailor on a ship, and the three witches cast a spell or 'charm' in retaliation (1.3.37). In Shakespeare's England, this alleged practice was known as 'mischief following anger', and it was one of the most common charges against suspected witches in cases brought to trial. Most often, it was old, poor, often widowed women who were accused of these acts of angry revenge: a woman would beg for food or drink and when she was turned away she might respond angrily; later, when something unfortunate – such as a bad harvest or an ordinary illness – happened to the person who had denied the woman charity, the old woman would be blamed for their problems. Shakespeare's enactment on stage of the witches plotting mischief would have intensified familiar fears of the harm witches could perform in daily life.

In Shakespeare's England, anxiety about witchcraft and belief in magic and the supernatural were not limited to the lower or uneducated classes. Macbeth is a powerful man of high estate, and though at times he questions the validity of the three witches and their prophecies, he ultimately accepts the potential of witchcraft and magic. One of Queen Elizabeth's courtiers, Sir Walter Ralegh, described witches as women controlled by the Devil. But others, such as Reginald Scot, author of *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, were far more skeptical; Scot argued against the existence of supernatural witchcraft and claimed that some accused witches were women with mental illness while others may have been con artists. Indeed, at the height of the witchcraft trials almost all those accused were women, and many of them poor or economically vulnerable who, like the witches of *Macbeth*, might beg their neighbours for something to eat. But unlike the stage witches, who, in Act 4, Scene 1, truly can conjure powerful magic, while some of those accused were convinced they were able to do so, ability to perform such magic was only on stage.

Criminal trials

Since the Reformation, witchcraft in England had become a statutory crime. The first statute against it was passed in 1542, but this was repealed in 1547; a more severe one was passed in 1563, early in Elizabeth's reign; and the harshest of all was passed in 1604, soon after James VI of Scotland became James I of England. Ironically, as James's English reign progressed, the King grew more and more skeptical that there were witches.

As well as the charge of 'mischief following anger', there were other ways witches were identified at trial. One was the presence of 'witch marks', a mark supposed to have been put on a woman's body by the Devil. Witches were also said to have 'familiars', demonic creatures which might appear to be cats, dogs, mice, rats or other small animals; these familiars would do the witches' bidding. Another claim was 'recovery after counter magic': if someone was unwell and a spell helped them recover, this was seen as evidence that the original illness was caused by witchcraft. Water was another commonly used means of determining whether women were witches: water was seen as inherently pure, so a suspected witch would be tied up and flung in a pond or lake; if the suspect sank, the water 'accepted' her and therefore she was not a witch, but if she floated, the water 'rejected' her, and she was presumed a witch. Of course, the suspects proven not to be witches might be drowning victims instead. Yet another way to prove someone was a witch was to extract confessions; in fear of their lives and sometimes under torture, there are cases of accused witches who delivered false confessions and named others as witches.

Character analysis: Lady Macbeth by Michael Donkor (2017)

Focusing on characterisation, language and imagery, Michael Donkor analyses Lady Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 5 of *Macbeth*, and considers how this scene fits into the play as a whole.

LADY MACBETH

The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-ful
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!' (1.5.38–54)

Setting the scene

Act 1, Scene 5 of *Macbeth* is set in Macbeth's castle in Inverness. It forms part of the audience's first encountering of Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth has just read Macbeth's letter, which outlines the weird sisters' prophecies. She proceeds to express to herself her concern that Macbeth does not possess the steeliness or desire to use underhand means to acquire the glittering titles the witches have said lay before him.

The passage we're interested in here follows this directly. It opens with a messenger interrupting Lady Macbeth's meditations on the letter. The attendant informs Lady Macbeth of her husband and King Duncan's impending arrival ('The king comes here to-night' (1.5.30)). The passage moves on to Lady Macbeth resuming her interrupted soliloquy, now in chillingly resolute mood as she readies herself for the imminent killing of Duncan. Then Macbeth arrives and she instructs him to leave the planning and execution of their bloody plan in her hands.

How does Shakespeare present Lady Macbeth here?

In this scene, Lady Macbeth's characterisation is used to continue the play's steady ratcheting up of tension. The suspense of this passage is enhanced by the fact that Lady Macbeth's soliloquy after the messenger has left is uttered in a stolen moment of stillness before action and fretful dialogue commences. It is a fleeting opportunity for her to consider her own feelings and responses to the unfolding events before Macbeth enters with weaknesses that will inevitably require her 'tending'. This time pressure accounts for the strikingly condensed nature of the soliloquy. In just 17 lines, the audience are offered a dense series of images that speak of Lady Macbeth's own complexities, contradictions and itchy anxiety about the ungodly acts she and her husband are about to commit.

The soliloquy's opening image – a croaking raven – is a telling one. The bird not only has associations of ill omens but was also renowned for eating the decayed flesh of fallen soldiers on battlefields, closely linking to the idea of the Macbeths – and Lady Macbeth in particular – being a sinister, parasitical couple feeding on the lives of those more powerful and benevolent than themselves.

This idea recurs (but taking the argument in a different direction) when Lady Macbeth calls on 'spirits' for assistance; in some ways, what she seeks is for her own body to be decomposed. She asks dark agents to 'come' and strip her of her femininity, to 'unsex' her body, using a series of listed imperatives that foreshadow the persuasive techniques she will subsequently use on Macbeth towards the end of the scene.

But, having called upon malevolent presences to help disintegrate her body, she does not want to remain in a sexless, physically diminished state. She also wants to be reconstituted and refigured as a being hard and armoured like her warrior husband; as a monstrous being with unnaturally thickened blood and breasts that produce deadly poisonous 'gall'.

That Lady Macbeth calls on mystical, external forces to assist her with this transformation is worth interrogating too, for two reasons. Firstly, it clearly gives weight to the reading of the character being a fourth witch, whose speech here has incantatory rhythms that lend it a distinctly supernatural quality. Secondly, this request for the support of others also perhaps reveals a sense of lacking beneath the surface of Lady Macbeth's boldly assured malevolence: Lady Macbeth does not 'naturally' possess the zeal and evil required to undertake her plan, and so must seek out the power of 'murth'ring ministers' to help her do it.

Alternatively, rather than interpreting Lady Macbeth's requests for dark assistance literally, we can see them as more metaphorical utterances: the speech is, in fact, a kind of 'pep talk' directed to herself and designed to undermine the merest inkling of 'remorse' she might feel. It is a moment of self-encouragement to help bolster and 'thick[en]' the most reprehensible parts of her character.

Images of obscurity abound in this passage: 'dark ... sightless ... thick night ... pall … dunnest smoke', all clearly chiming with Lady Macbeth's desire for her wrongdoing to pass unseen by prying eyes. These images serve as a counterpart to Macbeth's transparency – his open face where 'men can read strange matters' without any difficulty. These allusions, of course, carry with them the obvious associations of impure intent and evil. But, in this instance, they also reflect Lady Macbeth's need to conceal and hide her own weakness and misgivings from herself and from Macbeth. With such a reading in mind, when Macbeth enters and Lady Macbeth presents him with careful guidance about how to dissemble, her instruction about controlling appearance to ensure that guilt does not reveal itself is as much for herself as it is for Macbeth.

How does this presentation of Lady Macbeth fit into the play as a whole?

The most familiar, recognisable reading of Lady Macbeth's role in the play is that she is the puppet master who pulls – often mercilessly yanks – at Macbeth's strings. Several aspects of her portrayal in Act 1, Scene 5 add to this view. When Macbeth enters, not only does she shape and direct his behaviour, she also speaks significantly more than he does. Macbeth's utterances are concise and practical, hers expansive, detailed and richly embroidered with imagery, reflecting the elaborate workings of a mind masterminding a dastardly plan. The perception of Lady Macbeth as the powerful, motivating force behind the couple's scheme is of course sharpened in Act 1, Scene 7 when, using terrifying images of infanticide and her 'undaunted mettle' (1.7.73) ,she taunts Macbeth for his lack of masculine resolve and reignites his passion to pursue power at any cost.

However, the view that insecurities lurk within Lady Macbeth's outward strength connects our extract with her final appearance in the play, in Act 5, Scene 1. In this later scene after the Macbeths' killing spree, Lady Macbeth's mind is 'infected' (5.1.72) by guilt and madness (as opposed to being possessed by demonic powers as in Act 1, Scene 5). Her speech is presented in loose, unravelling prose where questions, repetitions and reversals show a fully exposed frailty and an anxiety that 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten [her] little hand' (5.4.51).

As well as her vulnerability having developed between Act 1, Scene 5 and this final encounter with her, in the latter scene her attitude towards darkness shows progression too. Previously, Lady Macbeth had courted darkness and dimness. But by the end of the play her desire is for clarity; to be free of dirty, blemishing entities. She wants to be rid of 'damn'd spot[s]' (5.1.35) and the 'murky' (5.1.36) nature of the Hell that awaits her provokes great fear.

Themes

The thematic complexity of this passage explains why it continues to fascinate audiences. In a play that, in many ways, presents us with a world turned upside down – where 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (1.1.11) – this scene offers us a glimpse of conventional gender roles being inverted. Lady Macbeth's wish to be symbolically 'defeminised' is seemingly granted with great speed: her activity, forcefulness and engagement that are present as soon as Macbeth arrives shows that she is taking on characteristics that an Elizabethan audience would have identified as being more 'masculine'.

How has this scene been interpreted?

Trevor Nunn's 1979 version of the play (recorded for television), with Judi Dench as Lady Macbeth and Ian McKellen, as her husband remains a towering and chilling production of the text, of which Act 1, Scene 5 is a high point. Here, Dench's performance is multifaceted. Often, her lines are delivered with an icy austerity, in suitably hushed, hissed tones. Dench's call to the 'spirits' is presented as the character engaging in a real, meaningful dialogue with these presences; it is a conversation so powerful and real to Lady Macbeth that its implications shock and frighten her, making her voice waver, making her squeal with fear.

Macbeth's arrival in the scene brings about a subtle shift in Dench's performance. Rather than aggressively cajoling her husband into following her 'fell purposes', instead Dench interestingly uses her feminine wiles – using womanliness she renounced seconds before – to flirt with and coerce Macbeth into action. Their conversation here, and Lady Macbeth's persuasion, is full of seduction and unsettling sensuality.

Glossary

Word	**Definition**	**R/A/G**
Hubris		
Ambition		
Regicide		
Hamartia		
Tragedy		
Insanity		
Good		
Evil		

Masculinity		
Femininity		
Identity		
Order		
Disorder		
Inversion		
Conflict		
Natural		
Unnatural		
Supernatural		
Trust		
Guilt		
Betrayal		
Rejection		
The Great Chain of Being		
The Divine Right of Kings		
Prose		
Soliloquy		
Iambic Pentameter		
Trochaic Tetrameter		
Peripeteias		
Rhyme		

Aside		
Dramatic Irony		
Dialogue		
Anagnorisis		
Exposition		
Rising Action		
Climax		
Falling action		
Denouement		
Catharsis		
Transgressive		
Allegory		