

Macbeth, Act I, Scene 3

At the beginning of Scene 3, three witches have met Banquo and Macbeth, greeted Macbeth with his rightful title, Thane of Glamis, and told him that he will become Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland. Shortly after the witches have disappeared, two messengers from the Scottish king have arrived and told Macbeth that he is indeed now Thane of Cawdor because the former Thane has been condemned to death for committing treason.

Macbeth (aside) Two truths are told,
 As happy prologues to the swelling act
 Of the imperial theme. – I thank you, gentlemen. –
 This supernatural soliciting
 5 Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion,
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
 10 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings.
 My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man that function
 15 Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is,
 But what is not.

Banquo Look how our partner's rapt.

Macbeth If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me
 Without my stir.

20 **Banquo** New honours come upon him
 Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould,
 But with the aid of use.

Macbeth Come what come may,
 Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

25 **Banquo** Worthy Macbeth, we stay upon your leisure.

Macbeth Give me your favour. My dull brain was wrought
 With things forgotten. – Kind gentlemen, your pains
 Are registered where every day I turn
 The leaf to read them. Let us toward the king.
 30 [To Banquo] Think upon what hath chanced and at more time,
 The interim having weighed it, let us speak
 Our free hearts each to other.

Banquo Very gladly.

Macbeth Till then, enough. – Come, friends. [Exeunt]

Annotations

- line 4:** **soliciting** – promising of pleasure
line 8: **suggestion** – *here:* idea of killing the King
line 11: **Present fears ... imaginings** – real dangers are less frightening than what I can imagine
line 14: **function/Is smothered in surmise** – vivid fantasies prevent action
line 20: **New honours come upon him ... aid of use** – New titles, like new clothes, take time to become familiar
line 24: **Time ... roughest day** – what will be, will be
line 30: **what hath chanced** – what has happened
line 31: **The interim having weighed it** – after time for thought

Tasks

1 Content/Comprehension

- a) Explain in your own words what is going on in Macbeth's mind.
b) Shakespeare made little use of stage directions. In a few words tell the actors who play Banquo and Macbeth in this scene which sentences they address to whom. Give reasons.

2 Form/Analysis

- a) Analyse to what extent the drama's leitmotif 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' is reflected in this scene.
b) Assess the relationship between Banquo and Macbeth as shown in this scene. Consider aspects such as truthfulness and trust.

3 Creative writing/Text production

Imagine you are Banquo. You cannot stop thinking about the day's events, so you decide to write a diary entry. Use modern language, explaining what has happened and describing your feelings and thoughts.

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1 Content/Comprehension

a) Explain in your own words what is going on in Macbeth's mind.

Macbeth has realised that one of the witches' prophecies is now fulfilled; therefore, he thinks that the fulfilment of the second prophecy must be close at hand ("Two truths are told as happy prologues to the swelling act of the imperial theme", ll. 1–3). However, he also understands that the prophecies cannot be entirely good. Now that he is Thane of Cawdor, his desire to become king is so strong that he even begins to consider killing for it ("My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical", l. 13). The thought of committing regicide is deeply unsettling for him. He understands that it would be a terrible crime; nevertheless, he cannot stop thinking about it ("why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair and make my seated heart knock at my ribs, against the use of nature?", ll. 8–11). His considerations end with the resolution that he will do nothing to become king, but rather that he will simply wait and see what the future holds ("If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir", ll. 18–19). Still Macbeth is careful not to mention any of these thoughts to the people standing nearby, and Macbeth lies and tells Banquo that his "dull brain was wrought with things forgotten" (ll. 26–27).

b) Shakespeare made little use of stage directions. In a few words tell the actors who play Banquo and Macbeth in this scene which sentences they address to whom. Give reasons.

Most of the time Macbeth speaks to himself in asides. Only when Banquo directly addresses Macbeth ("Worthy Macbeth, we stay upon your leisure", l. 25) does Macbeth turn round and address Banquo ("Give me your favour ... with things forgotten", ll. 26–27). Then Macbeth addresses the other men: "Kind gentlemen ...", l. 27. Lines 30–32 are redirected solely towards Banquo (the stage directions here say "to Banquo"), to which Banquo responds. On stage one can imagine that Banquo and the others form a group and quietly talk amongst themselves in the first part of the scene. After a glance at Macbeth, who is standing aside and seems to be lost in thought, Banquo tells the others: "Look how our partner's rapt" (l. 17), and "New honours come upon him ... use" (ll. 20–22). These lines serve as an explanation for his friend's strange behaviour. Macbeth then joins the group but makes sure that he stands close enough to Banquo to be able to speak to him without the others hearing every word he says. The final words ("Come, friends", l. 34) must be addressed to the whole group as the plural form is used.

2 Form/Analysis

a) Analyse to what extent the drama's leitmotif 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' is reflected in this scene.

The drama's leitmotif is picked up in a number of lines in this scene: "This supernatural soliciting cannot be ill, cannot be good" is another way of saying that the prophecy is both "foul" and "fair".

- ♦ Macbeth was told two truths, and the witches' prophecy has come true. – "fair"
- ♦ Macbeth is already starting to think of getting rid of those who stand in his way to make the last prophecy come true. – "foul"
- ♦ Evil thoughts are taking hold of him; he is shaken with excitement about the things he might do to become king. – "foul"
- ♦ He loses touch with reality ("nothing is but what is not", ll. 15–16). – "foul"
- ♦ He might trust chance to crown him and make him king without resorting to evil deeds himself. – "fair"

b) Assess the relationship between Banquo and Macbeth. Consider aspects such as truthfulness and trust.

Good friends share secrets and rely on each other for help in times of trouble. One can say that Banquo behaves like a friend in this scene. When Macbeth behaves strangely (he is standing aside completely lost in thought), Banquo is concerned about Macbeth, who tries to explain it away by saying that he must come to terms with the fact that he is now Thane of Cawdor. Banquo carefully and politely reminds Macbeth that everyone is waiting for him saying, "Worthy Macbeth, we stay upon your leisure", l. 25, and Banquo is very willing to talk to his friend about what has happened ("Very gladly", l. 33). Banquo knows that the fulfilment of two out of three prophecies must have given Macbeth second thoughts, and Banquo is only too happy to be able to discuss the matter with Macbeth when the time is right because Banquo trusts him. Macbeth, on the other hand, lies to Banquo by saying that "his dull brain was wrought with things forgotten" (ll. 26–27) and postpones further discussion until later: "at more time, the interim having weighed it" (ll. 30–31). If Macbeth had really been interested in talking things

through with his friend, he would have specified a time; as it is, Macbeth is deliberately vague. The remark is intended to reassure Banquo temporarily, but it is not a serious request for an open-hearted discussion of what has happened. Macbeth's words reflect the leitmotif again. He pretends to be open and honest ("let us speak our free hearts each to other", ll. 31–32), but Macbeth has actually just lied to Banquo and does not seriously intend to talk openly to Banquo.

3 Creative writing/Text production

Imagine you are Banquo. You cannot stop thinking about the day's events, so you decide to write a diary entry. Use modern language, explaining what has happened and describing your feelings and thoughts.

Individual answers expected. Students might mention the following aspects:

- ♦ Macbeth and I met some witches, and they greeted him by name and told him he would become Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland.
- ♦ We laughed it off.
- ♦ Then messengers arrived and told Macbeth that the Thane of Cawdor has fallen from favour and that Macbeth has been rewarded with his title.
- ♦ Macbeth behaved very strangely after he was told about the new title.
- ♦ I was a bit surprised myself, but then again someone might have told the witches that the Thane of Cawdor was a traitor.
- ♦ Macbeth, however, seemed to be completely lost in thought; I am sure he was thinking about the witches and the prophecies.
- ♦ I had to find an excuse for his strange behaviour.
- ♦ He told me he wanted to talk to me about everything later, but he did not say when. He just told me that I should think about it.
- ♦ I am a bit worried. I think Macbeth and I should talk this through and discuss what to do next or how to interpret the fulfilment of the prophecies as soon as possible – maybe it was all a trick or just coincidence.