Development

Possessing the crown does not make Macbeth secure. He begins planning violence independently, while the banquet makes his private fear a public political problem.

Journey through the act or stave

3.1: He fears Banquo and hires murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance.

3.2: He hides the new plan from Lady Macbeth.

3.3: Banquo is killed but Fleance escapes.

3.4: The ghost disrupts the royal banquet; Macbeth decides to seek the witches again.

1. “To be thus is nothing”

Macbeth, 3.1

Method: Soliloquy; contrast with being safe

Kingship feels worthless without security. Ambition has not ended desire: it has become fear of losing what violence gained.

2. “fruitless crown”

Macbeth, 3.1

Method: Metaphor of failed growth

He measures power through hereditary succession. Banquo’s promised descendants make his own crown feel sterile and his crime unrewarded.

3. “full of scorpions is my mind”

Macbeth, 3.2

Method: Metaphor of poisonous creatures

His inward life feels crowded with stinging threats. The image makes mental suffering vivid while anticipating the violence he orders.

4. “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck”

Macbeth, 3.2

Method: Imperative; affectionate diminutive

He excludes his wife from planning. Their relationship shifts: the man who needed persuasion now manages murder without her knowledge.

5. “I am in blood”

Macbeth, 3.4

Method: Metaphor of wading in blood

He imagines violence as an engulfing landscape. Claiming that retreat is difficult rationalises further crime; it does not prove that he has no choice.

Connections to other characters

Banquo’s integrity and promised heirs make him a threat in Macbeth’s imagination; Fleance’s escape exposes the limits of murder as control.

Lady Macbeth tries to preserve appearances at the banquet, but can no longer direct his decisions as in Act 1.

The nobles witness a king unable to maintain order at his own feast: private terror threatens public authority.

Develop your interpretation

Basic: Macbeth becomes increasingly fearful and violent.

Further: public kingship is undermined by private mental turmoil.

Advanced: seeing him suffer may invite sympathy, but his deliberate delegation of murder prevents suffering from cancelling responsibility.

Pair the evidence

“vaulting ambition” (1.7) ↔ “I am in blood” (3.4): a warning about overreaching becomes a justification for continuing.

Context

A royal banquet should display stable hierarchy and hospitality. Its collapse turns a social ritual into a theatrical exposure of insecure rule.

Recall questions

Why does the crown fail to satisfy Macbeth?

How does “dearest chuck” reveal a change in the marriage?

Writing task

How does Shakespeare present Macbeth’s attempt to secure power in Act 3?

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