

Macbeth soliloquys

[Literature](#), [William Shakespeare](#)



Macbeth's Soliloquy: She should have died hereafter... (5. 5. 17-28).

Commentary In this final soliloquy we uncover the ultimate tragedy of Macbeth. " It is the tragedy of the twilight and the setting-in of thick darkness upon a human soul" (Dowden 66). Macbeth's heinous acts throughout the play have resulted in his last, horrible conclusion about life: it is utterly meaningless. Our days on this earth serve no purpose other than to thrust us toward " dusty death." Life is a seemingly endless and depressing succession of bleak days creeping along at a " petty pace." Our time on this earth is so unsubstantial that it can only be compared to a shadow; so unreal that it can only be compared to a stage on which frets a pitiful actor. When the play is over his character disappears into nothingness, and has left nothing significant behind. Macbeth's feelings toward Lady Macbeth in this soliloquy are not as clear as the overlying theme. As seen in the annotations, there are four, and possibly several more, opinions regarding Macbeth's initial reaction when he hears that his wife is dead. Those who take the first line to mean " she would have died at sometime, either now or later" usually argue that it illustrates Macbeth's callous lack of concern for Lady Macbeth. However, it seems more likely that the line is a combination of meanings (1) and (4) cited in the annotations: [Macbeth] has said (in Scene III of this act) that the battle will cheer him ever after or disseat him now. Up to this time he had expected to win the battle; he was ready to laugh the siege to scorn when interrupted by the cry of women. And may not his visionary thought have pictured the victory as restoring him to the man he once was? He pauses on the word " hereafter" (there are two missing feet in the meter), and realizes that the time will never come now. Sadly he reflects that if it

could have been, if he could have gone back, then there would have been time to consider that word, death, and to mourn properly. But now, now that there is to be no victory, and no going back, now that she is gone the tomorrows creep on with their insignificant slow pace to the last syllable of recorded time. (Coles 269-79) In Macbeth's final soliloquy, the audience sees his final conclusion about life; it is devoid of any meaning, full of contrived struggles. Days on this earth are short, a "brief candle," and an ignorant march toward a fruitless demise, "lighted fools. . . to dusty death." A person's life is so insubstantial that it is comparable to an actor that fills minor roles in an absurd play. There a struggle for substance in life, the actor who "struts and frets his hour," or a playwright who tells a "tale full of sound and fury," but it is contrived, senseless, and will thus fade into obscurity, a tale "Told by an Idiot. . . Signifying nothing" in which a "walking shadow" performs "And then is heard no more. This soliloquy and existential reflection of Macbeth seems somewhat incongruous with his murderous path except that it indicates his deep love for and attachment to Lady Macbeth. Indeed, it is this love for his wife which gives Macbeth pause. For, as he feels his life propelled by his "vaulting ambition," he now realizes the nothingness of his life without his wife and anyone to give it meaning. In its expression, Macbeth's soliloquy contains some literary devices: *

Personification As he ponders the meaning, or lack of meaning, in life, Macbeth repeats the word tomorrow in order to suggest the passage of time. He personifies this word of time, too, suggesting that it "Creeps." Likewise, there is personification with "yesterdays" who have lighted the way to death for fools, and with "Life" that is described as being like an actor who "

struts" and " frets." * Metaphor " Life" is also part of a metaphor, an unstated comparison that evokes similarities between one's life and " a walking shadow and " a poor player" on a stage. The final lines are also metaphoric as life is compared to an idiotic story: It is a tale Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury Signifying nothing. * Repetition and Alliteration Repetition of the word " tomorrow" adds effect and suggests the passage of time. The alliteration of the /t/ also speeds up the line. In line 25, " dusty death" exemplifies also alliteration and " Out, out" is not only repetition, but also assonance, the repetition of a vowel sounds, /ou/ Life, Macbeth contends, signifies nothing without one to share this life. His soliloquy, then, is a deeply regretful one as he has lost his partner in life and ambition Macbeth's Soliloquy: If it were done when 'tis done... (1. 7. 1-29). Commentary Macbeth's first soliloquy reaffirms that the three witches, by informing him that he will be " king hereafter" (1. 3. 50), have merely kindled his own innermost desire to obtain the throne. Their prediction may encourage Macbeth to act upon his secret thoughts, as does the prodding of Lady Macbeth, but it does not dictate Macbeth's course of action. Macbeth makes a conscious choice to forsake morality and pursue his " Vaulting ambition" (28). This soliloquy exposes Macbeth's conflicting feelings about the murder. His first thoughts revolve around the consequences of committing the crime. In lines 1-12 his primary concern and reason for hesitation is the possibility that someone will exact that " even-handed Justice" (10) upon him. Once Macbeth usurps the throne there will be others who will plot to steal it from him. Some critics seem to end their analysis at this point and conclude that Macbeth " wishes intensely the death of

Duncan" (Langford xxxv) and that only his fear of potential ramifications is a deterrent. However, the second half of the soliloquy supports the fact that Macbeth is deeply troubled by the horror of killing Duncan, who is a benevolent ruler, honest man, and good friend. It is guilt and not fear of the consequences that is Macbeth's greatest obstacle. The imagery of Macbeth's soliloquy reveals the intentions he would like to achieve ("assassination," "success"), but its construction shows the workings of a mind still very much in confusion. Notice the insistent repetition of individual words - if, were, done, be, but, and here - each repeated two or three times within the first few lines. Within the fluid construction of this soliloquy, words and sounds constantly attract and suggest each other, giving the impression of a train of thought. All this begs the question of whether Macbeth, able to rationalize and express his thoughts, is thereby revealed as an intelligent, poetic soul. And if that's the case, does he appear more human, more or less capable of sinning, and, worrisome for the audience, more or less capable of winning their sympathy? It is the thought of something after death that puzzles Macbeth. Throughout the speech, his words recall those of Shakespeare's earlier tragic hero, Hamlet. In paraphrase, Macbeth wonders whether the act of murder itself must, by necessity, carry consequences in "the life to come" or whether judgment will await him in this life. Macbeth is simultaneously aware of the duplicity and imbalance of the proposed murder (he is Duncan's relative, subject, and host, yet he is to be his killer) and of the equality and balance of earthly and heavenly law: "this even-handed Justice / Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" (11-12). Of further concern to Macbeth is the disparity between his own reputation and the

world's perception of Duncan as a good and virtuous king. The final section of the speech contains an apocalyptic vision in which he imagines Duncan's virtue and pity proclaimed as if by angels and cherubim from a storm-filled sky. This doom-laden vision, whose imagery (for example, "trumpet-tongued") reflects that of the biblical Day of Judgment, gives way in turn to a nagging self-doubt. Whereas he pictures the angels and cherubim "horsed upon the sightless couriers of the air," Macbeth admits that he himself has "no spur / to prick the sides of my intent but only / Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself / And falls on the other [side]" (25-28). Lady Macbeth must immediately detect Macbeth's self-doubt. When Macbeth admits to her that his golden reputation might lose its "gloss," she sets out to strengthen his resolve by mocking his perceived weakness. Her questions drive further the wedge between daring and doing, between courage and action, between desire and fulfillment. To these, she adds a distinction between masculinity and femininity: In contrast to her own self-proclaimed manliness, she pours scorn upon her husband's lack of courage. She tells him he is "green," "a coward," and that he resembles the proverbial "poor cat" who wanted the fish but would not get its paws wet. Finally, and most damningly, she tells him that her own lack of pity would extend to murdering her own child as it suckled at her breast. With this one terrifying example, she confirms that "the milk of human kindness" is absent in her. The next paragraph commences with a shift in tone - no less pragmatic but even more ruthlessly efficient - as Lady Macbeth switches her attention to the details of the murder itself. Her plan to drug the guards with alcohol is couched in metaphorical language derived from the ancient science of alchemy. The

words " receipt," " fume," and " limbeck" specifically refer to this process, whose purpose was to turn base metal (such as lead) into gold. It is heavily ironic that, in the Macbeths' experiment, that which is gold - the king himself - will become base and doubly ironic that Macbeth's golden reputation will be reduced to worthlessness. Macbeth has been convinced. In words that uncannily recall his wife's, he now puts on the mantle of murderer: the monosyllabic " False face must hide what the false heart doth know" has a certainty to it that completely overturns his earlier vacillation. Macbeth's Soliloquy: Is this a dagger which I see before me (2. 1. 33-61). Commentary Macbeth, after discussing the crime with Lady Macbeth, has decided to go through with the " terrible feat" (1. 7. 75). Now he sits alone, waiting for the bell which will summon him to murder Duncan, pondering his decision one final time. The focus of the soliloquy, the invisible dagger, is our first glimpse of Macbeth's powerful imagination — imagination that is largely responsible for his mental torment throughout the drama. Although Macbeth knows that the dagger is an optical illusion, and suspects that it could be brought about by his potentially " heat-oppressed brain" (39), he nonetheless allows the phantom dagger, soon stained with imaginary " gouts of blood" (46), to affect him greatly. Enhancing the ominous and eerie atmosphere of the speech is the use of successive allusions to people and practices which conjure up images of satanic and earthly evil. Hecate, the goddess of witchcraft and a strong presence overall in Macbeth, is preparing her sacrificial victims, and Murder himself, summoned by his trusted watchman, the wolf, moves with the power and speed of evil king Tarquin towards his prey. Just as talk of the murder is about to stifle his courage, Macbeth's

intense illusion is shattered by the bell, a signal from Lady Macbeth that Duncan's chamberlains are asleep, and Macbeth races away to commit the heinous crime. One can only wonder if a few more moments of deliberation would have changed Macbeth's mind. This passage has long been a personal favorite of mine. The rhythm is predominantly straightforward iambic pentameter, which makes it one of the easier speeches to illustrate the fundamentals of Shakespeare's versification. Add to it the pure psychological insight of a man standing on the precipice of regicide, alongside the vivid language and imagery, and it's not difficult to see why this speech is viewed as a paragon among the Bard's greatest soliloquies. Macbeth has long been one of Shakespeare's most gripping tales, dispensing with the usual subplots and humorous digressions in favor of a singular and direct plot action. As one wag once put it, the premise may be reduced to "behind every great man is a wife fully prepared to goad him into murder if it enhances the couple's social standing." The psychology behind Macbeth is a bit more complex, however. The tale is a tragedy of ambition studied through the prism of temptation. As such, it stands as a starkly humanistic morality play, more observing of Macbeth's evil than editorializing upon it. The unspoken conflict is between free will and predestination; the subtle part of this study is the contrast of Macbeth and Banquo. Macbeth finds himself driven by external forces that seemingly conspire to abet his darker ambition. Banquo, on the other hand, resists temptation through his own choice, and yet passively fulfills his destiny even as Macbeth actively fulfills his own. Macbeth at first tries to distance himself from the dishonorable implications ("If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/Without my stir.") and is reticent

to commit the greatest treason. However, there are more than enough hints that the subject has been previously debated, either with his wife or his own conscience. Macbeth, tempted or not, becomes a man betrayed by his baser nature. What makes it tragic is Macbeth's knowing complicity in his own damnation. With this speech, Shakespeare foreshadows the toll that Duncan's murder will exact upon the conspirators. For now, the appearance of a bloody dagger in the air unsettles Macbeth. Even he doesn't know whether the dagger is real or a figment of his guilty imagination. It is, however, certainly a harbinger of bloodier visions to come. Macbeth will suffer more frightening apparitions in the scenes that follow, and Lady Macbeth will go mad trying to scrub away blood on her hands that only she can see. As Macbeth fears, the murder of Duncan is not a deed that will be "done, when 'tis done." The last vestiges of the honorable Macbeth die at the end of this speech. It is a fleeting match between Macbeth's ambition and revulsion. The bell ultimately tolls for Macbeth as it does for Duncan; the dagger of the mind is as potent a killer as the dagger Macbeth wields in murder.

Macbeth's Soliloquy: To be thus is nothing (3. 1. 47-71). Commentary

Macbeth has killed Duncan and has become king of the Scots, yet he believes his crown is in jeopardy. The menace is Banquo. Like Macbeth, Banquo knows that there were two key parts to the unearthly revelation: first, that Macbeth will become king, and second, that Banquo will beget future kings. Macbeth fears Banquo is planning a coup to hasten the day of triumph for his heirs. Macbeth's mistrust of Banquo causes him to dwell on the Witches' prediction that he will have no successors of his own. Thinking that he has murdered Duncan to secure the throne for Banquo's offspring,

Macbeth's unease grows to ferocious enmity as he vows to crush Fate's kingly plans for Banquo's children. A comparison between the above soliloquy and Macbeth's previous soliloquies in 1. 7 and 2. 1 reveals a key change in his character. Macbeth is again contemplating murder, but what impels his deliberation this time is not guilt and shame but panic and rage. The murder of Duncan has made the murder of Banquo a necessity and, more importantly to Macbeth's character development, a facile task. Gone is any trace of the humanity under the vaulting ambition -- gone are the moments of reflection and regret that prompted "this Duncan/Hath borne his faculties so meek" (1. 7. 17) and that incited the shameful plea "Thou sure and firm-set earth, Hear not my steps" (2. 1. 56). Macbeth forfeited his soul with the murder of Duncan. What is left now is the husk of a man who shows not a hint of compunction as he plans the murder of his noble friend. There is no remorse after the deed either. He was unable to say 'Amen' after Duncan's murder; now he effortlessly says "Thanks" to the hired assassins who slay Banquo, adding maliciously, "There the grown serpent lies" (3. 4. 38). What makes Macbeth a tragic character and saves him from becoming a one-dimensional monster is that he is perpetually conscious of his evil choices. He is poignantly aware of the rapid deterioration of his humanity, as we will see in his final and pivotal soliloquy in Act 5.