

Macbeth – Key Quotes Explained



Quote	What you can say about it
Unseamed him from the knave to the chaps	This is Macbeth 'unseaming' the rebel Macdonwald. This foreshadows Macbeth's own 'unseaming' by Macduff. It is also a clothing metaphor suggesting Macdonwald is being stripped of his title due to his traitorous actions, like Macbeth is later.
Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?	Macbeth asks this when he is deemed Thane of Cawdor. This suggests his suspicion that there may be trickery at play. It also indicates that this title is not rightly his, it is 'borrowed.'
Unsex me here	This imperative rejects Jacobean ideas of femininity which impede Lady Macbeth from committing acts of violence which are associated with masculinity. Jacobean femininity, symbolised by milk and breasts elsewhere in the soliloquy, denotes weakness and compassion which Lady Macbeth must rid herself of in order to become powerful. This can link to Queen Elizabeth I who said she had the body of a 'weak woman' but the 'heart of a king' to be credible.
I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent but vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself	This metaphor suggests the only motivation Macbeth has to commit regicide is unchecked or 'vaulting' ambition which disrupts the natural order or divine right. Shakespeare warns against 'vaulting' or ruthless ambition and through the Macbeth's downfall reveals its destructive consequences.
When you durst do it then you were a man	Shakespeare reveals that Lady Macbeth emasculates Macbeth in order to control his actions. To be masculine in the Jacobean period was to take action and be courageous (inaction indelibly associated with femininity) thus to be a 'man' Macbeth must act. Ironically, although Lady Macbeth desires great power, her power remains passive – she controls through manipulation.
Is this a dagger I see before me The handle toward me hand? Come, let me clutch thee	The dagger is a visual representation leading Macbeth (literally and metaphorically) to the murder of Duncan and foreshadows bloodier visions to come. The feminine iambic pentameter suggests uncertainty and weakness which diminishes as the soliloquy progresses.
Infirm of purpose. Give me the daggers!	Macbeth returns with the daggers which Lady Macbeth ridicules. She criticises his resolve and significantly takes action and seizes the weapons with the imperative 'Give me the daggers!' Thus, here she takes the masculine role – active, powerful and violent.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?	Here, Shakespeare uses blood to symbolise guilt and water to symbolise purity. The metaphor of Neptune's ocean suggests that no amount of 'water' will ever remove the sacrilegious 'stain' of regicide.
Be innocent of the knowledge dearest chuck	Shakespeare shows the change in Macbeth's character and his relationship with Lady Macbeth. Not only is he independently murderous, he also distances himself from the previously dominant Lady Macbeth – she is no longer his 'partner of greatness,' she is dismissed as 'dearest chuck.'
Full of scorpions is my mind	This metaphor reveals both Macbeth's paranoia and his 'deep and dark desires.' The metaphorical scorpions have replaced the 'milk of human kindness' cementing Macbeth as a villain.
Out, damned spot Out, I say!	The repetition of 'out' portrays Lady Macbeth as frenetic as she desperately tries to rid herself of this metaphorical 'spot'. The imperative further demonstrates Lady Macbeth's loss of power as it is proves futile.
All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand	This contrasts with Lady Macbeth's earlier remark demonstrating her guilt. The metaphor suggests the irreversibility of her actions – nothing will rectify it. The adjective 'little' also connotes weakness, childishness and fragility reinforcing Lady Macbeth's fall from power.
Give me my armour	This imperative suggests power and authority. Here Macbeth is reverting back to his soldier persona from the start of the play. This is the role that is truly his, it 'fits' him unlike the 'giant' role of King which he usurped.
Life is a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing	This metaphor suggests that with his wife dead (perhaps the source of his power) and an army marching towards him, Macbeth succumbs to a pessimistic, even nihilistic, outlook. However, the metaphor also implies his crimes are meaningless suggesting Macbeth perhaps does not feel true guilt.
Dead butcher and fiend-like queen	Butcher connotes violence and brutality and epitomises Macbeth as a leader – he has brutally 'butchered' Scotland in his own quest for power. 'Fiend-like' suggests evil and the supernatural connecting Lady Macbeth to the witches.

