Daily Bard

QUOTATION SHEET

# Macbeth: key quotes and analysis

The 10 Macbeth quotations worth knowing by heart, each with a plain-English reading, an analysis of its language, space for your notes, and a fill-the-gap test.



## How to use this sheet

These are the 10 key quotations from the Macbeth study guide, set out for revision. Part one gives each quotation with a plain-English reading, a short analysis of what the language is doing, and space for your own notes. Part two prints them again with a word missing from each line, so that you can test yourself.

- [ ] Read the quotation aloud twice. Sound helps memory more than staring does.
- [ ] In the note space, name one method (a device, a word choice, a feature of the verse) and the effect it has.
- [ ] Add one link: to a theme, to another moment in the text, or to a point of context.
- [ ] A day later, cover part one and complete part two from memory.

## Part one: the quotations

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
> Hover through the fog and filthy air.
>
> WITCHES · ACT 1, SCENE 1 · 1.1.12-13

Plain English: Good is bad and bad is good; let us fly off through the murk.

The line is a chiasmus (a pattern repeated in reverse order), so the sentence itself turns values upside down. The Witches chant in short rhymed lines with a falling beat, unlike the blank verse of the human characters. Macbeth's first words, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen", echo them before he has met them.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> Stars, hide your fires;
> Let not light see my black and deep desires.
>
> MACBETH · ACT 1, SCENE 4 · 1.4.57-58

Plain English: Let the stars go dark so that no light can reveal what I secretly want.

An aside in a rhyming couplet, spoken while Duncan praises him. The imperative "hide" begins the play's long appeal to darkness, and "black and deep" shows that Macbeth already judges his wish as evil. He wants the result without having to look at the act.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
>
> LADY MACBETH · ACT 1, SCENE 5 · 1.5.47-48

Plain English: Come, spirits that serve murderous thoughts, and strip away my womanhood.

Lady Macbeth summons evil in imperatives: "Come", "unsex". She assumes that pity is feminine and must be removed before she can act. For a Jacobean audience this invocation aligns her with the Witches. That she needs outside help implies cruelty is not her nature, which her collapse confirms.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> Look like th' innocent flower,
> But be the serpent under 't.
>
> LADY MACBETH · ACT 1, SCENE 5 · 1.5.76-78

Plain English: Appear harmless, but be the snake hidden beneath.

The contrast of "Look" and "be" states the theme of appearance and reality as an instruction. The serpent recalls the temptation in Eden, casting the murder as a second Fall. The image had topical force after the discovery of a hidden plot against the King.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> I have no spur
> To prick the sides of my intent, but only
> Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
>
> MACBETH · ACT 1, SCENE 7 · 1.7.25-27

Plain English: Nothing drives me on except ambition, which jumps too high and comes crashing down.

An extended riding metaphor: intent is a horse, ambition a rider who vaults too far. After listing every reason against the murder, Macbeth admits he has only one for it and predicts its failure. The soliloquy breaks off unfinished as his wife enters, so the argument is interrupted, not answered.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> Is this a dagger which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand?
>
> MACBETH · ACT 2, SCENE 1 · 2.1.44-45

Plain English: Is that a dagger in front of me, its handle turned for me to grasp?

The soliloquy begins with a question, and the speech keeps questioning its own senses. The dagger may be supernatural or the product of a feverish mind; Shakespeare does not decide. The handle points to his hand, so that the vision invites him and he chooses to follow.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green one red.
>
> MACBETH · ACT 2, SCENE 2 · 2.2.78-81

Plain English: Could the whole ocean wash my hand clean? No: my hand would turn the seas red.

Hyperbole measures guilt on a cosmic scale. Two long Latinate words, "multitudinous" and "incarnadine", swell the line; then plain monosyllables, "Making the green one red", state the fact flatly. The contrast with Lady Macbeth's brisk "A little water" a few lines later defines the difference between them.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> I am in blood
> Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
>
> MACBETH · ACT 3, SCENE 4 · 3.4.168-170

Plain English: I have waded so deep into blood that going back would be as wearisome as going on.

Blood is now a river to be crossed. The key word is "tedious": murder has become a matter of effort, not horror. Compare the agonised imagery of Act 2 to see how far his conscience has dulled.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> Out, damned spot, out, I say! ... Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?
>
> LADY MACBETH · ACT 5, SCENE 1 · 5.1.37-42

Plain English: Away, cursed stain. Who would have guessed the old man had so much blood in him?

She speaks in broken prose, the verse of her earlier scenes gone with her control. Fragments of different murders surface together. "damned" is literal as well as an oath: she fears hell. The woman who needed only water now cannot clean one hand. Read the full essay on this scene.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more.
>
> MACBETH · ACT 5, SCENE 5 · 5.5.27-29

Plain English: Life is only a moving shadow, a bad actor who swaggers and worries through his hour on stage and is then forgotten.

The metaphors shrink life from "shadow" to "poor player". The theatrical image is self-aware, since an actor speaks it on a stage. This is Macbeth's view, not the play's: he has emptied his own life of meaning. The essay on "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" analyses the whole speech.

**Your notes:**

**Links to:** _____

# Part two: test yourself

Fill each gap from memory, then check against part one. Mark the ones you missed and come back to them tomorrow.

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair;
> Hover _____ the fog and filthy air.
>
> WITCHES · ACT 1, SCENE 1

> _____, hide your fires;
> Let not light see my black and deep _____.
>
> MACBETH · ACT 1, SCENE 4

> Come, you _____
> That tend on mortal _____, unsex me here,
>
> LADY MACBETH · ACT 1, SCENE 5

> Look like th' _____ flower,
> But be the _____ under 't.
>
> LADY MACBETH · ACT 1, SCENE 5

> I have no spur
> To prick the sides of my _____, but only
> Vaulting ambition, which _____ itself
>
> MACBETH · ACT 1, SCENE 7

> Is this a _____ which I see before me,
> The _____ toward my hand?
>
> MACBETH · ACT 2, SCENE 1

> Will all great _____ ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will _____
> The _____ seas incarnadine,
> _____ the green one red.
>
> MACBETH · ACT 2, SCENE 2

I am in _____
_____ in so far that, should I wade no more,
_____ were as tedious as go o'er.

MACBETH · ACT 3, SCENE 4

Out, damned spot, out, I say! ... Yet who would have _____ the old man to have had so much blood in him?

LADY MACBETH · ACT 5, SCENE 1

Life's but a _____ shadow, a poor player
That _____ and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is _____ no more.

MACBETH · ACT 5, SCENE 5

## Next steps

For more quotations, sorted by theme and analysed: **ambition**, **guilt**, **power**, **the supernatural**, **fate**. Turn three of these quotations into full paragraphs with the **essay planner**, and check your method against the **close reading toolkit**. For a small daily dose of the language, **Daily Bard** shows one passage each morning with a plain-English reading on the back of the leaf.



# A page of Shakespeare, every day.

This resource comes from Daily Bard, an app for iPhone and iPad. Each morning it shows one engraved plate and one passage, exactly as Shakespeare wrote it, with a plain-English reading on the back of the leaf.

Free to download. The Full Edition is a one-time US$11.99: no subscription, no account, no ads, no tracking.

Get it on the App Store: **apps.apple.com/app/id6792967225**

---

More free study guides, lesson plans and close readings: dailybard.app