

How Macbeth is presented in Act I.iii-iv

In act I.iii Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches and unlike his friend Macbeth notably does not question the appearance of the witches, apparently unfazed by the subversion of Jacobean ideals manifested in the 'weird sisters'. This perhaps suggests that he is comfortable with women demonstrating characteristics considered unnatural and unfeminine such as his arguably Machiavellian and ambitious wife. This may be linked to the idea that Shakespeare himself respected powerful women, atypically marrying a woman older than he was. Alternatively, Macbeth could be said not to acknowledge the witches' appearance due to his curiosity and underlying ambition, he 'start[s]' at their prophecies perhaps because they have voiced his secret desires reinforcing the idea of his hidden ambition. Alternatively, he 'start[s]' as he instantly recognises the chaos that would result in the realisation of these prophecies including the death of a king he is at this point loyal to. Macbeth is described as 'rapt withal' this could imply that these words have caused him to lose his volition and his later actions are a result of the trance the prophecies have immersed him in. The imperatives and interrogatives Macbeth uses when communicating with the witches could indicate his determination or conversely, his desperation but both these emotions have evolved from attempting to sate his deep-seated ambition.

In Macbeth's first soliloquy (act i.iii) the audience can witness the emotional turmoil the witches' prophecies have initiated. The use of this soliloquy could also insinuate that Macbeth is becoming more introspective and secretive. This could signify the beginning of his deviation from the ideals of the contextually more noble men who will start to have less and less influence on him (such as Banquo and King Duncan). There is abundant punctuation in the soliloquy depicting Macbeth's fractured state of mind and indecisiveness showing that his ambition has not yet eclipsed his morality – he is deeply unsettled by 'horrible imaginings' of killing the king and the assonance in this phrase highlights his deliberation over it.

In the beginning of act I.iv, Shakespeare utilises imagery of growth creating a semantic field with words such as 'plant', 'nourish' and 'harvest'. Duncan states that he will nurture Macbeth so that gradually he can flourish, the growth of a plant in such a way is what is natural, however Macbeth uses language of haste like 'o'erleap' which foreshadows how he will undermine this natural order, in the way that Shakespeare wants the audience to know regicide would do. Macbeth here could be epitomised by a weed, weedkiller stimulates so much growth to a weed at such a rapid and unsustainable rate that it cannot cope and self-destructively perishes, in this case the weedkiller is Macbeth's hamartia: his ambition. Society (like a flower garden) cannot function when the hierarchy is unnaturally altered and Shakespeare demonstrates this, appeasing James I.

Towards the end of act I.iv Macbeth appears more likely to carry out the nefarious act of murdering Duncan. He dehumanises 'The Prince of Cumberland' reducing him to an obstacle he must 'o'erleap', portraying how his ambition is diminishing his own humanity. Macbeth speaks in rhyme in his aside, affirming his sense of certainty and serving to draw parallels between him and the witches suggesting alignment with their very flawed moral code. The phrase 'let not light' uses the harsh plosive 't' to evoke a sense of finality and again the plosive alliteration of 'deep desires' implies that he is now decided and isn't so much plagued by conscience. Macbeth's 'desire' for 'stars' to 'hide [their] fires' is juxtaposed with Duncan's reference to 'stars' shining, this emphasises the chasm forming between Macbeth and Duncan, and that Macbeth is now quite solidly on the side of darkness and evil. However, the audience is still given some sense of a conflict within Macbeth, the idea of him dehumanising himself to avoid compunctiousness is reaffirmed when he speaks of 'the eye' and 'the hand' - body parts - instead of referring to himself. It also appears that he wants to distance himself and his identity from a deed he still understands is evil.