

A Closer Look at

"If it were done when 'tis done..."

This speech is spoken by Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 7 of *Macbeth*.

Who's Macbeth?

Macbeth is a low-ranking noble and warrior who has fought valiantly in the service of King Duncan. After a battle, Macbeth encounters three 'weird sisters' who address Macbeth as Thane of Glamis (Macbeth's current title), then as Thane of Cawdor (a more prestigious title belonging to someone else), and then as the future King.

After these unusual characters leave, messengers arrive from King Duncan with news that Macbeth has indeed been named Thane of Cawdor. When Macbeth rejoins the rest of the court, King Duncan announces that they will all visit Macbeth's castle to celebrate their victory. When Macbeth arrives ahead of the others to prepare for the visit, Lady Macbeth suggests that murdering the King that night is the best way for Macbeth to take the throne.

What's happening when this speech is spoken?

King Duncan and the court are enjoying a banquet and celebrating their military victory. Macbeth has left the party to contemplate Lady Macbeth's suggestion that they murder their royal guest.

MACBETH:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust;
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubins, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other.

Enter LADY MACBETH:

How now! what news?

The speech: thought by thought

Shakespeare's language can be overwhelming, so it helps to break it down, thought by thought. Look at the speech again below, taking your time to make sense of each thought. This is a subjective process, so this example is just one way to break the speech down into thoughts. Would you do it differently?

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Enter LADY MACBETH
How now! what news?

Words and phrases that might be new or have an unexpected meaning

- **'tis** - it is
- **'twere** - it were
- **trammel up** - a trammel was a type of net used for catching fish or birds, so to trammel up something would be to stop it and bind it
- **surcease** - a fancy way of saying end; the action of stopping or coming to an end
- **the be-all and the end-all** - the whole thing, or the only thing that matters; as far as we know, this is the first time this phrase was used
- **bank** - a raised shelf or ridge of ground, such as on the edge of a river
- **shoal** - a place where the water is shallow
- **jump** - here it means to risk or hazard
- **the life to come** - this can mean different things to different people: for example, it could mean the rest of your life, the afterlife, or the life of society or the community after you've gone. What do you think?
- **cases** - instances or examples of a particular situation
- **plague** - afflict or bring misfortune, especially as a punishment
- **even-handed** - impartial or fair
- **commends** - offers, or presents as worthy
- **chalice** - a drinking cup or goblet
- **kinsman** - relative, either by blood or by marriage
- **subject** - someone who is either under the control of or owes obedience to another person
- **borne** - possessed or carried
- **faculties** - abilities or talents, or, in the case of a monarch, powers
- **meek** - gentle, courteous, and kind
- **clear** - pure, transparent, serene
- **his great office** - in this case, being King
- **taking-off** - here it means murder
- **striding** - walking with long, extended steps
- **blast** - a storm, either literal or figurative
- **cherubins** - also known as cherubs or cherubim, they are an order of angels in the Judaic, Christian, and Islamic traditions
- **horsed** - mounted on horseback
- **couriers** - swift horses often used for carrying messages
- **the sightless couriers of the air** - this could mean the winds, since they carry messages and have no sight (in either sense of being invisible or not seeing)
- **vaulting** - jumping or leaping, sometimes with the help of a pole
- **o'erleaps** - overleaps, or leaps too far

Explore the language

- Are the words short and simple, or long and complex?
- If you're a hearing person, what do the words sound like? Are there any sounds that repeat?
- What's the effect of this language?
- How do you respond to wordplay like 'surcease success'?
- Are the thoughts short and direct, or long and complex? Do they ever change? What might this tell you about what's happening for the character?



Explore the images

- What do you imagine when you encounter the following phrases:
 - "...if the assassination could trammel up the consequence..."
 - "...the bank and shoal of time..."
- What do you imagine when you hear about "bloody instruction" returning to "plague the inventor"?
- As you imagine Duncan's virtues pleading like trumpet-tongued angels, what do you think those virtues might be? To whom might they be pleading? To what end are they pleading?
- Why do you think Macbeth describes Pity as looking like a "naked, new-born babe"?
- What to you imagine when you hear the phrase, "...heaven's cherubins horsed / Upon the sightless couriers of the air / Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye / That tears shall drown the wind?"



Explore the ideas

- What do you think about how Macbeth uses the word 'it' at the beginning of the speech? Look for all the times Macbeth refers to murdering Duncan. What do you notice about the language Macbeth uses for this act?
- What do you think about Macbeth's distinction between the consequences here and now, as opposed to in "the life to come"? Which do you think is more important to Macbeth? Does it change as the speech progresses?
- As you go through the speech, track when you think Macbeth is leaning towards killing Duncan, and when you think Macbeth is leaning away from committing the murder. What ideas persuade Macbeth one way or the other?

Explore the character

- What kind of person do you think Macbeth is? What information can you find in the play to support your ideas?
- Early in the play, Macbeth is celebrated as a powerful warrior who wreaks violent havoc on Duncan's enemies. What do you think about this? Do you share the Scottish soldiers' admiration?
- Lady Macbeth describes Macbeth's nature as *too full of the milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way* (presumably to kill Duncan). What evidence do you see of Macbeth's kindness?
- Why do you think Macbeth ultimately decides to kill Duncan?



Make it your own

Performance

Learn some or all of the speech by heart and perform it. Discover what it all means, and what it means to you, so you can truly make it your own. If you like, think about staging, costuming, props, lighting, etc. Share your work with an audience of family and/or friends.

Ask someone to film your performance so you have a record of it. They can either film your live performance, or you can create a special opportunity for filming. Collaborate to find the best location, lighting, camera angles, sound, titles, etc. for what you'd like to create.

Art

Create a drawing, painting, sculpture, still life, photograph, or film that expresses what the speech means to you. Decide how you would like to share your creation.

Music

Express what the speech means to you through music. Choose a song or piece of music, build a playlist, or even compose an original piece that conveys your feelings about the speech. Decide how you'd like to share what you've created.

Creative Writing

Compose your own poem, speech, or story inspired by the speech. Imagine a situation in which you have to make a difficult decision. How would you describe the situation and convey the feelings it would inspire?

How would you respond to Macbeth? If Macbeth brought this dilemma to you, how would you respond? Write a response in the form of a poem, speech or story.