

Macbeth: Key Quotes Explained

Adnan Shakur
Lecturer & Co-Chairman
Department of English
University of Global Village (UGV), Barishal

‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair

Hover through the fog and filthy air.’

These lines are from William Shakespeare's play "Macbeth," specifically from Act 1, Scene 1. They are spoken by the three witches as they begin their incantation and set the eerie tone for the rest of the play. This opening scene is crucial in establishing the themes of deception, ambiguity, and the inversion of morality that run throughout the play.

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair" can be interpreted as a paradoxical statement that encapsulates the sense of moral confusion and moral inversion that will dominate the events of the play. It suggests that what may seem fair or good can actually be foul or evil, and vice versa. This concept reflects the central theme of appearances versus reality in "Macbeth." The witches' prophecy and manipulation of Macbeth play on his perceptions of what is fair and foul, ultimately leading him down a path of deceit and betrayal.



The phrase "Hover through the fog and filthy air" adds to the mysterious and ominous atmosphere. The image of hovering through fog and filthy air suggests a world that is murky, unclear, and morally tainted. The witches themselves, as supernatural beings, seem to exist in a realm that blurs the boundaries between good and evil, and their actions further emphasize the confusion of morality.

These lines set the stage for the moral ambiguity that characterizes the entire play. As Macbeth becomes consumed by his ambitions and driven to commit heinous acts to achieve power, the idea that appearances can be deceiving becomes a central theme. The quote also foreshadows the theme of supernatural elements influencing human actions, as the witches' prophecies manipulate Macbeth's perception of what is fair and foul.

In summary, the lines "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" and "Hover through the fog and filthy air" capture the themes of moral ambiguity, deception, and the inversion of values that permeate Shakespeare's "Macbeth." They introduce the idea that things are not what they seem and that characters will be drawn into a world where traditional moral distinctions become blurred.

‘Double, double toil and trouble:

Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.’

This line is a famous quote from William Shakespeare's play "Macbeth." It is spoken by the three witches, also known as the Weird Sisters, in Act 4, Scene 1. The witches chant these lines while preparing a potion in a cauldron, and it's a quintessential example of the eerie and supernatural elements present throughout the play.

The lines "Double, double toil and trouble: Fire burn, and cauldron bubble" are essentially an incantation that captures the mystical and dark atmosphere of the scene. Let's break down the meaning and significance of these lines in the context of the play:

"Double, double toil and trouble": The repetition of "double" creates a sense of rhythm and ritualistic chanting. "Toil" refers to labor or hard work, and "trouble" implies distress or turmoil. These words indicate that the witches are conjuring something with complex and difficult efforts.



"Fire burn, and cauldron bubble": This phrase is the heart of the incantation. The witches are instructing the ingredients they are adding to the cauldron to create the desired effect. The "fire burn" part emphasizes the destructive and transformative nature of fire, while "cauldron bubble" suggests a bubbling, seething, and brewing action that is

symbolic of the magical process underway.

In the context of the play "Macbeth," these lines are not only a literal depiction of the witches' magical ritual but also a metaphor for the chaos and disruption that they are about to unleash upon the world. The witches play a crucial role in manipulating Macbeth's ambitions and leading him toward his tragic downfall. Their prophecies and actions contribute to the increasing sense of foreboding and supernatural influence that pervades the play.

The incantation itself is a manifestation of the witches' power and the eerie atmosphere that surrounds them. It also serves to foreshadow the events that will follow as the play progresses, hinting at the dark and unsettling consequences that Macbeth's actions will bring about.

Overall, this iconic line captures the blend of supernatural elements, prophecy, and manipulation that make "Macbeth" one of Shakespeare's most enduring and haunting tragedies.

‘Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more’

This quote is from William Shakespeare's play "Macbeth," specifically from Act 5, Scene 5. When Lady Macbeth kills herself, in this soliloquy, Macbeth reflects upon the fleeting and transient nature of life, using a metaphor to compare life to a "walking shadow" and a "poor player."

"Life's but a walking shadow" suggests that life is like a shadowy and insubstantial figure that moves across the stage of existence. Shadows are fleeting and lack substance; similarly, life is transient and impermanent. Just as a shadow disappears as soon as light changes, life disappears as time passes.

"a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage" signifies the brevity of life. The "poor player" refers to an actor, who, despite his grand gestures ("struts") and anxieties ("frets"), only has a short "hour upon the stage" to perform. This refers to the limited time individuals have to live their lives, much like actors have a limited time to perform their roles on stage.

"and then is heard no more" emphasizes the inevitable conclusion of life. Just as an actor's lines are eventually forgotten after the play ends, a person's existence fades away and their voice is no longer heard once they pass away.



This quote captures Macbeth's realization of the transitory nature of human life and the futility of pursuing power and ambition at the cost of one's morality and well-being. It reflects themes of mortality, fate, and the consequences of one's actions that are prevalent throughout the play.