Quotes by Themes

## Ambition

1

Two truths are told  
As happy prologues to the swelling act  
Of th’imperial theme (1.3)

Macbeth speaks these lines as he realizes that the witches’ prophecy (that he will be Thane of Cawdor) has come true. He immediately starts to wonder whether this means that their third prophecy (that he will become king) will also be true. The eagerness with which he turns to this idea suggests that he finds the possibility appealing, even though he also realizes he would have to commit a terrible and violent act in order to achieve the position. These lines hint at Macbeth’s ambition and foreshadow his later actions even though, at this point in the play, he seems to refuse to consider acting upon it.

2

Thou wouldst be great  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it (1.5)

Lady Macbeth speaks these lines as she reflects on her husband’s character. She knows that Macbeth is capable of ambitious dreams, but she thinks that he is unwilling to display the ruthless behavior necessary to achieve those dreams. These lines reflect Lady Macbeth’s own philosophy of power, in which only individuals who are willing to set their morality aside will rise to greatness. They also show that she is a sound judge of character, and understands her husband very well.

3

I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself  
And falls on th’other (1.7)

Macbeth speaks these lines as he starts to doubt his plan to murder Duncan. He uses a complicated metaphor that compares his experience to horse-riding. He describes being unable to motivate himself to take action by likening himself to a rider who cannot use his spurs to motivate his horse to go faster. The one thing he does have is ambition, which he compares to a horse and rider who overestimate their ability to leap over an obstacle, and end up falling down. The passage describes the tension between Macbeth’s unwillingness to move ahead with his plan, and his acknowledgement that his ambition is leading him down a dangerous path.

4

To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus (3.1)

Macbeth speaks this line after he has become king, but continues to feel restless and insecure. He is afraid that he might lose his position and is also frustrated by the fact that he has no heir. Without the knowledge that his lineage will continue after him, Macbeth finds it meaningless to be king. This quote reveals how him giving in to his ambition and murdering Duncan has not brought him peace, but rather has just left him more paranoid and anxious. The line also reveals how Macbeth’s first violent action sets off a chain reaction of him continuing to commit violent actions in order to maintain his hold on the power he has gained.

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## Guilt

1

Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incarnadine (2.2)

Macbeth speaks this line when he encounters his wife right after murdering Duncan. He refers to both the literal blood on his hand but also to his sense of guilt. He uses grand and dramatic language to imply that the blood could stain all the world’s oceans red. His language implies that the consequences of his action will not be easily hidden, even though his wife implies that blood can be simply washed away. He will forever be a changed man as a result of what he has done. Interestingly, later in the play, Lady Macbeth will also hallucinate that she has blood on her hands and is unable to get them clean, symbolizing her sense of guilt.

2

Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold  
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes (3.4)

Macbeth speaks this line when Banquo’s ghost appears to him at the banquet. Macbeth’s vision of the ghost reveals his guilt over ordering the murder of Banquo and his young son. His sense of guilt is so powerful that he loses his sense of reality and cannot be sure whether he is having a vision or not. He speaks these lines in order to try and reassure himself that Banquo is truly dead. In doing so, Macbeth reveals that his tormented consciousness is leading him to start losing his grip on sanity.

3

To bed, to bed. There’s knocking at the gate. Come,   
come, come, come, give me your hand. What’s done   
cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed. (5.1)

Lady Macbeth speaks these lines after she has gone mad. They are the final words she utters in the play, and they reveal how guilt has crushed her strong and assertive personality. She now has to be cared for like a child, and has no plans for the future. No matter how much she repents, the violence and death cannot be undone.

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## Children

1

I have given suck, and know  
How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me  
I would, while it was smiling in my face  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dashed the brains out (1.7)

Lady Macbeth speaks these lines when she is trying to shame Macbeth for questioning their plan. She uses the image of a child to make a graphic statement about her own ambition and capacity for violence. By describing herself as a tender and loving mother who nonetheless would have killed her own child before she would abort a plan to seize power, Lady Macbeth disrupts the typical idea of what women and mothers are like. She uses this image to make her husband that he is being unmanly by doubting their scheme.

2

For Banquo’s issue have I filed my mind  
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered (3.1)

Macbeth speaks these lines when he is brooding about his worries that, as the witches have prophesied, Banquo’s heirs will someday gain control of the Scottish crown. Macbeth reveals that he feels guilty about the terrible things he has done, and that he is wondering if these acts were worthwhile. Even though he currently holds power, Macbeth lacks children who will hold power after him and this makes him fear that he has committed terrible deeds for no reason. These lines speak to a strong interest in stable succession, which was a key political issue in Shakespeare’s time.

3

What, all my pretty chickens and their dam  
At one fell swoop (4.3)

Macduff speaks these tragic lines upon learning that his wife and children have been murdered. The affectionate imagery he uses to describe them shows how even though he is a strong and powerful warrior, he is also a loving husband and father. The line conveys the sense of overwhelming loss he feels when he hears that he has lost his entire family at the same time. The sense of immense grief sets the stage for his desire to avenge them by eventually killing Macbeth.

4

Had I as many sons as I have hairs  
I would not wish them a fairer death (5.11)

Siward, a minor character, speaks these lines at the end of the play when he learns that his son has been killed in battle. Even though he is grief-stricken, he is proud that his son died a brave and honorable death. The line shows how important honor and valor are to characters in the play, and also how important it was for Macbeth to be defeated. A father can consider it worthwhile to have lost his child if it means knowing that Macbeth no longer occupies the throne.

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## Patriotism

1

Every one did bear  
Thy praises in his kingdom’s great defense (1.3)

This line is spoken by Ross to Macbeth, explaining how pleased Duncan was with the bravery Macbeth showed during the rebellion. Ross highlights that Macbeth showed solidarity and patriotism for defending Scotland against a usurper, and indicates that these qualities make Macbeth worthy of praise and honor. The line, however, will later turn out to be ironic in that Macbeth will be revealed to be someone whom Scotland needs to be defended against.

2

Our duties are to your throne and state children and servants (1.5)

Macbeth speaks this line to Duncan, expressing the high level of loyalty and devotion a good subject should feel toward his king. The line reveals how a king and the nation that king rules are intertwined, and how someone who is loyal to one should be loyal to the other. However, this line also reveals that patriotism and loyalty can be feigned, since Macbeth is planning to kill Duncan and usurp the throne even as he is seemingly showing how obedient he is.

3

Bleed, bleed, poor country! (4.3)

Macduff speaks this line when he thinks he will not be able to persuade Malcolm to fight against Macbeth and take back the throne. He is in despair, and his main concern is the suffering that Scotland and his people will experience while Macbeth remains on the throne. Macduff shows his patriotism and devotion to his country by lamenting the fate he is afraid it will be left to suffer.

4

O nation miserable  
With an untitled tyrant, bloody-sceptered (4.3)

Macduff speaks this line in his conversation with Malcolm when he becomes very distressed. Because of the lies Malcolm has just told him about his character, Macduff believes that no one is suitable to rule Scotland. At the same time, he still maintains the belief that Macbeth is a terrible ruler, since he obtained power through violent and illegitimate means. Macduff reveals his sincere love for his country through his desire to see a good and honorable man as its king.

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