

### Excerpt I from *Macbeth*

*In this scene, three witches deliver a cryptic prophecy to Macbeth and Banquo, who are on their way home from a battle in which they fought bravely and defeated a group of men who were rebelling against Duncan, their king.*

**Macbeth:**

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

**Banquo:**

How far is 't called to Forres?—What are these,  
So withered, and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth

5 And yet are on 't?—Live you? Or are you aught  
That man may question? You seem to understand  
me,

By each at once her choppy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret

10 That you are so.

**Macbeth:**

Speak, if you can. What are you?

**First Witch:**

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

**Second Witch:**

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

**Third Witch:**

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!

**Banquo:**

15 Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear  
Things that do sound so fair?—I' th' name of truth,  
Are you fantastical, or that indeed  
Which outwardly you show? My noble partner  
You greet with present grace and great prediction  
20 Of noble having and of royal hope,  
That he seems rapt withal. To me you speak not.  
If you can look into the seeds of time  
And say which grain will grow and which will not,  
Speak, then, to me, who neither beg nor fear  
25 Your favors nor your hate.

**First Witch:**

Hail!

**Second Witch:**

Hail!

**Third Witch:**

Hail!

**First Witch:**

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

**Second Witch:**

30 Not so happy, yet much happier.

**Third Witch:**

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.

**called:** supposed to be; **Forres:** their destination

**aught:** anything

**choppy:** chapped or wrinkled

**thane:** a feudal lord (in Scotland)

**Glamis:** Macbeth's castle

**Cawdor:** another castle

**fantastical:** imaginary

**present grace:** recognition of Macbeth's current status

**that:** so that; **withal:** here, perhaps "with it all"

**happy:** lucky, fortunate

**get:** beget, father

So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

**First Witch:**

Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

**Macbeth:**

Stay, you imperfect speakers. Tell me more.

- 35 By Sinel's death I know I am Thane of Glamis.  
But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives,  
A prosperous gentleman, and to be king  
Stands not within the prospect of belief,  
No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence  
40 You owe this strange intelligence or why  
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way  
With such prophetic greeting. Speak, I charge you.

**Sinel:** Macbeth's father

**from whence:** from what source

**owe:** own

**blasted heath:** wind-blasted wasteland

[Witches vanish.]

**Banquo:**

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,  
And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?

**whither:** to where

**Macbeth:**

- 45 Into the air, and what seemed corporal melted,  
As breath into the wind. Would they had stayed!

**corporal:** physical, tangible (corporeal)

**would:** "I wish"

**Banquo:**

Were such things here as we do speak about?  
Or have we eaten on the insane root  
That takes the reason prisoner?

**insane root:** a plant that causes insanity

### Syntactic and Grammatical Analysis Questions

What function do the dashes in lines 2, 5, and 16 have?

How might the question “Live you?” (line 5) be rendered in contemporary syntax?

What function do the apostrophes in line 16 serve?

Rearrange lines 18-19 (“My noble partner...great prediction”) according to standard contemporary syntax.

### Comprehension Questions

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following pronouns and expressions refer to?  
these (line 2)  
it (line 5)  
you (line 5)  
so (line 10)  
you (line 17)  
these (line 44)  
them (line 44)

Based on the context in which they appear, what do the following words and expressions mean?  
interpret (line 9)  
start (line 15)  
fair (line 16)  
show (line 18)  
rapt (line 21)  
imperfect (line 34)  
prospect (line 38)  
intelligence (line 40)

What do you think Macbeth’s opening line could mean, and what rhetorical and narrative devices is it an example of?

What does Banquo’s question in lines 2-5 suggest, and what is the meaning of his subsequent questions (lines 5-6)? At whom are these various questions directed?

What rhetorical and narrative devices occur in Banquo’s question to Macbeth in lines 15-16?

What is the meaning of the question Banquo asks in lines 16-18?

What is the meaning of Banquo’s comment about “[his] noble partner” in lines 18-21?

What appeal does Banquo make to the witches in lines 22-25? What rhetorical devices does he employ, and what is their effect?

What characteristics make Banquo’s speech in lines 15-25 particularly poetic?

What rhetorical device are lines 29-30 examples of, and how might they make sense in the context of the play?

What is the meaning of Banquo’s comment in lines 43-44?

Given the historical context of the play, what function might lines 43-46 serve for the audience?

What rhetorical device occurs in the first half of line 46, and what is its effect?

What rhetorical device occurs in line 49, and what is its effect?

### Translation Questions

Translate the following sentences into contemporary English:  
lines 8-10: “You should be...That you are so.”  
lines 36-39: “The Thane of Cawdor...to be Cawdor.”

*If you want to make these translation questions more challenging, try to preserve the iambic pentameter of the original lines.*

### Questions for Discussion and Writing

Discuss the significance of Banquo’s question to Macbeth in lines 15-16. Consider the context of the play as a whole.

Discuss the meaning of the witches’ prophecies. How do they turn out to be true, and what themes do the events of the play suggest?