



THE
TRAGEDY
OF
MACBETH
by
William Shakespeare

Foreword and Annotations By
Erica Abbett



MACBETH: ANNOTATED EDITION

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READ THIS. YES, YOU!

Greetings! Erica Abbett here. I'm the one who annotated this brilliant little play you're holding.

I know people seldom read the foreword to classic novels, so I wanted to provide a few "must-know" facts before you dive in.

- 1) There are more than 1,000 annotations in this edition of *Macbeth*.
- 2) I'm a former English and history teacher, so you're in good hands.
- 3) The annotations were designed to emulate¹ what a good teacher might cover. Instead of simply providing a "translation," I'm also going to highlight essential references and show you how Shakespeare uses language to make his lines more memorable. For instance, instead of just explaining that "Fair is foul and foul is fair" means "Good and bad things happened today," I'll also note the alliteration and inherent paradox in this statement.
- 4) If a footnote falls after a word, it usually defines that word. If it falls after a phrase, it usually explains that phrase.

¹ Emulate - Copy; mimic

That's it!

I suggest reading my official foreword after this, of course, but I won't be terribly offended if you skip it. Just don't tell me.

See you in the foreword (or directly in the footnotes, if you're a lazy bum and a cream-faced loon!¹).

Sincerely,

Erica Abbett

Texas, 2025

¹ "Cream faced loon" is an insult from *Macbeth*.

Foreword by Erica Abbett

Some people say there's no point in reading Shakespeare. I tend to agree with Mark Forsyth that "such people should be hit repeatedly on the nose until they promise not to talk nonsense any more."¹

Almost everything you need to know about the world can be learned from the great books, and Shakespeare's works make up a sizable percentage of them.

Sure, it's possible to live in blissful ignorance. Who needs to know history, logic, and rhetoric? They don't impact you unless you want them to. Right?

Wrong.

If you don't know history, logic, and rhetoric, you will be ruled and led by those who do. You will not be a free man because you will not be making your own decisions; you will be an easily-manipulated fool who dances to the nearest politician's tune.

Micro Lessons

When it comes to any of Shakespeare's plays, you can divide the lessons into two parts: micro and macro.

¹ *The Elements of Eloquence* by Mark Forsyth, 2013.

Micro-lessons—or lessons about small things—pertain to his writing style. How does Shakespeare use words to make his lines more melodic, meaningful, and memorable? How can you use those same tactics to improve your writing?

Alliteration

One of Shakespeare's favorite tricks for making a line more memorable was alliteration, or using the same sound at the beginning of consecutive (or near-consecutive) words.

As the aforementioned Mark Forsyth wrote in his must-read book *The Elements of Eloquence*, "If you say, 'Full fathom five thy father lies,' you will be considered the greatest poet who ever lived. Express precisely the same thought any other way—e.g. 'your father's corpse is 9.144 metres below sea level'—and you're just a coastguard with some bad news."

Advertisers know this trick well, and they use it to generate billions of dollars in revenue by influencing consumer behavior.

What makes you choose one brand over another? It often comes down to nothing more than the fact that you remember its name ("brand recognition"). And what makes it easier to remember a name? Alliteration.

Coca-Cola, PayPal, Lululemon, American Airlines, Best Buy, Dunkin' Donuts, Krispy Kreme, TikTok, Range Rover, Burt's Bees, Kit Kat, M&M's... They all know this trick, and I could continue that list forever.

Authors know the power of alliteration, too. It's one of the reasons why we can't forget titles like *Pride and Prejudice*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, or even *Peter Pan*.

Alliteration is one of many writing tricks, formally known as "rhetorical devices" or "elements of eloquence," that Shakespeare uses to great effect. But, believe me, there are many more...

Paradox

In *Macbeth*, you'll also see countless examples of paradox, or

seemingly self-contradictory statements.

“So foul and fair a day I have not seen” seems like an impossible statement, for instance. How can a day be horrible and beautiful simultaneously? But Macbeth is referring to a battle in which one side won and another lost, so the day is both fair and foul depending on whom you ask.

Rhetorical Questions

In *Macbeth*, you should also keep an eye out for rhetorical questions, or questions that aren’t *really* seeking an answer.

“Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” isn’t so much a question as a statement of shock, but it’s phrased in a more memorable manner than a statement of fact.

Simile and Metaphor

You’ve probably known about similes and metaphors since you were 10, but in case you’ve forgotten, a simile is a comparison using “like” or “as.” A metaphor is a comparison that skips the “like” or “as,” jumping straight to conflating¹ two very different things.

When Lady Macbeth urges her husband to *pretend* to be a good guy, she uses a simile and a metaphor in the same sentence: “Look **like** the innocent flower, but **be** the serpent under it” [*emphasis mine*].

Dramatic Irony

Shakespeare uses dramatic irony to great effect in *Macbeth*, frequently structuring scenes so that the audience knows something the characters do not.

This creates the “fingernail biting” effect you frequently encounter in scary movies. It’s that terrible feeling when *you* know the murderer is in the house, but the main character does not.

¹ Conflating - Combining (often in a misleading way)

As she waltzes in with her groceries, you find yourself telling the screen, “Don’t go in! He’s in the closet!”

Dramatic irony, or providing information to the audience that the characters lack, is one of many literary devices Shakespeare employs to great effect in *Macbeth*.

Apostrophe

Apostrophe is the last one I’ll give you for now, though Shakespeare uses about 100 others, and I’ll point some of them out in the footnotes.

In terms of rhetorical devices, an apostrophe isn’t the punctuation mark connecting two words; it’s an exclamatory passage addressed to someone or something that isn’t there.

“Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?” is a famous apostrophe from *Romeo and Juliet*, and you’ll see them frequently in *Macbeth* as the characters struggle aloud with their respective consciences (or lack thereof).

When Macbeth addresses time in the abstract, saying, “Time, thou anticipat’st my dread exploits: / The flighty purpose never is o’ertook / Unless the deed go with it,” he’s essentially saying, “Curse you, time! Ideas never amount to anything unless you act on them right away.”

Macro Lessons

“Macro-lessons,” as I’ve termed them, pertain to big-picture issues like power, ambition, relationships, and fate.

Many teachers will tell you that the macro-lesson in *Macbeth* is something like, “absolute power corrupts absolutely,” or “we should all be careful not to be too ambitious.”

Nonsense.

There is no evidence that Shakespeare was making a point about the evils of monarchy. He wrote *Macbeth* for the king! As a proud American, I don’t personally approve of absolute power, but it’s important not to rewrite history and put words in the

mouths of people who can't argue back.

When it comes to ambition...I hardly think the most ambitious playwright who ever lived is trying to tell you, "Don't get too excited about the world...Stay in your own lane, peasant."

In my opinion, the central struggle in *Macbeth* is between fate and free will, and within this paradigm, there are quite a few macro-lessons that can be inferred.

Take Responsibility for Your Decisions

The greatest lesson in *Macbeth* is that abandoning personal responsibility—and feeling like you're entitled to everything—is a quick road to ruin.

It's strange that I need to point out the difference between "ambitious" and "entitled," but there is a vast gap between working hard for a dream that may or may not come true, and killing everybody standing between you and something you haven't earned. Ambition is admirable; entitlement is just embodied envy.

Even if you don't take it as far as Macbeth did, a sense of entitlement robs you of responsibility, separating your actions from their inevitable consequences. This is always ruinous.

The Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

Have you ever heard of "self-fulfilling prophecies"? When the term is used today, we aren't referring to witches and oracles, but predictions, studies, and other statistics that can be just as misleading.

If a teacher says he expects half the class to fail an upcoming test, he might be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Hearing this news, some students might look at their notes and think, "Why bother?" They decide not to waste their time studying, and in turn, increase the number of people who fail.

People of all ages are susceptible to this error. During the Great Depression of the 1920s, there was a rumor that the banks

ran out of money. Hearing the news, everybody ran to take their money out before it was too late. Soon, the banks actually *were* out of money.

People usually tell the truth, but every so often, a lie or half-truth can influence behavior enough to make it true. Children are particularly susceptible to self-fulfilling prophecies. That's why it's more effective to shout, "You got this!" at their athletic events than, "There's a 76% chance you'll miss this shot!"

Both statements might be true, but they're also both likely to become self-fulfilling prophecies.

Life is 10% What Happens, 90% How You Respond

Macbeth couldn't control where he was in the order of succession, nor could he prevent random witches from telling him he was fated to become king.

However, as you'll soon see, he could've reacted very differently to that news.

We're all given a set of circumstances, and if you're sitting somewhere safely reading *Macbeth*, you're one of the lucky ones.

But here's the thing: that's only a small percentage of who you are. What really matters is how you respond to that predetermined 10%. You probably can't control what school you go to, but how do you comport yourself when you're there? Are you nice or a jerk? A hard worker or a lazy bum? Your behavior says far more about you than your circumstances ever will.

Author Charles Swindoll coined the famous phrase, "Life is 10% what happens to you and 90% how you react to it." Macbeth hit the jackpot with his 10%—he was rich, royal, healthy, and happily married—but, boy, did he mess up the 90%.

In many ways, this is just another way of saying, "Life is better when you take responsibility for it," but we all connect with different variations of the theme.

That's it for now! As always, I'll see you in the footnotes.



THE
TRAGEDY
OF
MACBETH



DRAMATIS PERSONÆ¹

THREE WITCHES, also known as the Weird Sisters

HECATE, goddess of witchcraft

KING DUNCAN, king of Scotland

MALCOLM, his elder son

DONALBAIN, his younger son

A CAPTAIN, serving in the king's army

MACBETH, thane of Glamis

LADY MACBETH, his wife

THREE MURDERERS, who work for Macbeth

SEYTON, attendant to Macbeth

GENTLEWOMAN, attendant to Lady Macbeth

MESSENGER

BANQUO, general in the king's army

FLEANCE, his son

MACDUFF, nobleman of Scotland

LADY MACDUFF, his wife

BOY, their son

MESSENGER

LENNOX, nobleman of Scotland

ROSS, nobleman of Scotland

MENTEITH, nobleman of Scotland

ANGUS, nobleman of Scotland

CAITHNESS, nobleman of Scotland

SIWARD, commander of the English forces

YOUNG SIWARD, his Son

¹ Dramatis Personae - Characters in the play (Latin, lit: "people of the drama")

AN ENGLISH DOCTOR

A SCOTTISH DOCTOR

A PORTER

AN OLD MAN

**LORDS, GENTLEMEN, OFFICERS, SOLDIERS, SERVANTS AND MES-
SENGERS**

THE GHOST OF BANQUO AND SEVERAL OTHER APPARITIONS

ACT ONE

Act 1, Scene 1

Thunder and Lightning. Enter three WITCHES.

FIRST WITCH

When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?¹

SECOND WITCH

When the hurlyburly's² done,
When the battle's lost and won.

THIRD WITCH

That will be ere³ the set of sun.⁴

¹ Note that all the options are bleak. Insofar as we can predict character traits based on the weather—which sounds strange, but works in fiction more than you think—we can infer that these are “bad” witches. They aren’t sweet Glinda-types who float down in bubbles and bless Munchkins. They’re wicked witches who prefer storms and curses.

² Hurlyburly - Fighting

³ Ere - Before

⁴ Nobody agrees with me, but I find this kind of funny. The first and second witches are all dramatic, “When shall we three meet again?” And the third witch is like, “We’ll see each other in a few hours, you fools.” Some scholars interpret the third witch as representing the future, though others disagree.

FIRST WITCH

Where the place?

SECOND WITCH

Upon the heath¹.

THIRD WITCH

There to meet with Macbeth.²

FIRST WITCH

I come, Graymalkin!³

SECOND WITCH

Paddock calls.⁴

THIRD WITCH

Anon⁵.

ALL

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:⁶

Hover through the fog and filthy air.⁷

*Exeunt.*⁸

¹ Heath - An area of open, wild land

² Once again, the third witch gets straight to the point.

³ The witch is speaking to her cat, or “familiar,” as witches’ animals are called.

⁴ Paddock is the second witch’s familiar—a toad, in this case. These lines are much easier to understand when you’re watching the play vs. reading it!

⁵ Anon - (I’ll see you) soon

⁶ This is one of the most important lines in the book, serving both as foreshadowing and a thematic statement. Shakespeare is warning us that all is not as it seems, and he’s using several literary devices to make the line more memorable. First, it’s an oxymoron (fair and foul being opposites). Second, there is significant “f” alliteration.

⁷ Shakespeare continues the “f” alliteration, providing some beautiful imagery. Can’t you just see these witches scowling as they fly their broomsticks through the fog and filthy air?

⁸ Exeunt - Latin for “they exit”

Act 1, Scene 2

*Alarum*¹ *within.*² Enter KING DUNCAN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN,
LENNOX, with ATTENDANTS, meeting a bleeding CAPTAIN.

DUNCAN

What bloody man is that? He can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
The newest state.³

MALCOLM⁴

This is the sergeant
Who, like a good and hardy soldier, fought
'Gainst my captivity.⁵—Hail, brave friend!
Say to the King the knowledge of the broil
As thou didst leave it.⁶

CAPTAIN

Doubtful it stood;
As two spent swimmers that do cling together
And choke their art.⁷ The merciless Macdonwald⁸
(Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature

¹ Alarum - A call to arms (often in the form of trumpets or drums)

² "Within," counterintuitively, means "offstage."

³ "Good heavens, who's that guy covered in blood? He can probably tell us what happened on the battlefield."

⁴ Malcolm is King Duncan's oldest son.

⁵ The enemy fighters wanted to kidnap Malcolm, the king's eldest son, but this bloody man saved him.

⁶ "Tell us what was going on as you left."

⁷ The two sides were like drowning men clinging together to stay afloat, but in doing so, can't actually swim to safety. (Both sides are near defeat, but it's unclear who will go under first.)

⁸ Alliteration alert.

Do swarm upon him)¹ from the Western Isles
 Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied;²
 And Fortune³, on his⁴ damned quarrel⁵ smiling,
 Show'd like a rebel's whore.⁶ But all's too weak;
 For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),⁷
 Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,⁸
 Which smok'd with bloody execution,⁹
 Like Valour's minion,¹⁰ carv'd out his passage,
 Till he fac'd the slave;¹¹
 Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
 Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chops,¹²
 And fix'd his head upon our battlements.¹³

DUNCAN

O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!¹⁴

¹ This parenthetical is an insult about Macdonwald. He's a "good" rotten villain because evil things, like swarms of flies, gather around him.

² Kerns and gallowglasses are types of infantry soldiers, so he's just saying Macdonwald has plenty of footsoldiers from the Western Isles.

³ Fortune personified as a woman or the goddess Fortuna.

⁴ "His" being Macdonwald

⁵ Quarrel - Fight

⁶ Fortune favored Macdonwald like a lover.

⁷ The word "Macbeth" is considered bad luck today—you're not supposed to say it in a theater unless you're performing, for instance—but the word itself comes from Gaelic (the traditional language of Scotland) and means "son of life," according to the Online Etymology Dictionary.

⁸ Macbeth laughed at Fortune and sallied forth with his sword.

⁹ Macbeth killed a lot of people.

¹⁰ "Minion" didn't carry the same negative connotations in Shakespeare's day. Basically, Macbeth acted with valor.

¹¹ "The slave" being Macdonwald.

¹² Macbeth didn't give Macdonwald a chance to say goodbye before killing him; he just stuck his sword in Macdonwald's stomach and brought it out near his jaw.

¹³ Macbeth put Macdonwald's head on a pike on the castle walls.

¹⁴ This line carries tension and dramatic irony because we all know Macbeth is going to become a homicidal maniac. What happens between now and then? How does he go from a valiant, worthy gentleman to *that*?

CAPTAIN

As whence¹ the sun 'gins² his reflection
 Shipwrecking storms and direful thunders break,
 So from that spring, whence comfort seem'd to come
 Discomfort swells.³ Mark, King of Scotland, mark:
 No sooner justice had, with valour arm'd,
 Compell'd these skipping kerns to trust their heels,⁴
 But the Norwegian lord, surveying vantage,⁵
 With furbish'd arms and new supplies of men,
 Began a fresh assault.⁶

DUNCAN

Dismay'd not this
 Our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?

CAPTAIN

Yes;
 As sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion.⁷
 If I say sooth⁸, I must report they were
 As cannons overcharg'd with double cracks;⁹
 So they doubly redoubled¹⁰ strokes upon the foe:
 Except¹¹ they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,¹²

¹ Whence - From a certain place

² 'Gins - Begins

³ "It seemed like victory was ours at last—like the sun was rising on our metaphorical ship—but then a storm hit!"

⁴ "No sooner had we run the soldiers back..."

⁵ "...then the king of Norway, sensing an opportunity..."

⁶ "...began attacking us with fresh forces."

⁷ "Ha! The King of Norway scared Macbeth and Banquo about as much as sparrows scare eagles and rabbits scare lions."

⁸ Sooth - The truth

⁹ They were like overloaded cannons ("cracks" meaning explosives, not fractures)

¹⁰ Note the wordplay in "doubly redoubled." Far from daunted, our forces fought more than twice as hard as before.

¹¹ Except - Unless

¹² Maybe it wasn't bravery. Perhaps they just wanted to bathe in their enemy's blood.

Or memorize another Golgotha,¹
I cannot tell—
But I am faint, my gashes cry for help.²

DUNCAN

So well thy words become thee as thy wounds:³
They smack of honour both.—Go, get him surgeons.

Exit CAPTAIN, attended.

Enter ROSS and ANGUS.

Who comes here?

MALCOLM

The worthy Thane of Ross.

LENNOX

What a haste looks through his eyes! So should he look
That seems to speak things strange.⁴

ROSS

God save the King!

DUNCAN

Whence cam'st thou, worthy thane?

ROSS

From Fife⁵, great King,
Where the Norwegian banners flout⁶ the sky

¹ Or make this battle as famous as Golgotha, where Jesus was crucified.

² "Can't you tell I'm bleeding out? I need a doctor!"

³ "Your words and your wounds do you credit. Nicely done, noble subject."

⁴ "His wild eyes suggest he has a crazy tale to tell!"

⁵ Fife - A place in Scotland

⁶ Flout - Mock; taunt

And fan our people cold.¹
 Norway himself, with terrible numbers,
 Assisted by that most disloyal traitor,
 The Thane of Cawdor, began a dismal conflict;²
 Till that Bellona's³ bridegroom, lapp'd in proof,⁴
 Confronted him with self-comparisons,⁵
 Point against point, rebellious arm 'gainst arm,
 Curbing⁶ his lavish spirit: and, to conclude,
 The victory fell on us.

DUNCAN

Great happiness!

ROSS

That now
 Sweno, the Norways' king, craves composition⁷;
 Nor would we deign him burial of his men
 Till he disbursed at Saint Colme's Inch
 Ten thousand dollars to our general use.⁸

DUNCAN

No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive
 Our bosom⁹ interest. Go pronounce his present death,

¹ The Norwegian flags are freaking people out.

² Now we're hearing the next part of the story. Though it seemed like the Scottish forces won after Macbeth killed Macdonwald, the King of Norway saw the Scots were weak and decided to invade (assisted by the Scottish Thane of Cawdor).

³ Bellona - Roman goddess of war

⁴ "Until Macbeth, covered in blood and beloved by the goddess of war..."

⁵ "...matched him on the battlefield."

⁶ Curbing - Halting; stopping

⁷ Composition - An agreement; a treaty

⁸ "But we told him, 'Treaty? Ha! You won't even bury your dead until you retreat to Saint Colme's Inch and give us ten thousand dollars.'"

⁹ Bosom - Close to the heart

And with his former title greet Macbeth.¹

ROSS

I'll see it done.

DUNCAN

What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.

Exeunt.

Act 1, Scene 3

Thunder. Enter the THREE WITCHES.

FIRST WITCH

Where hast thou² been, sister?

SECOND WITCH

Killing swine³.

THIRD WITCH

Sister, where thou?

FIRST WITCH

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
And mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd. "Give me,"
quoth I.⁴

"Aroint thee, witch!"⁵ the rump-fed ronyon⁶ cries.

¹ "The Thane of Cawdor will betray us no more. Go announce that he'll be executed soon, and tell Macbeth that he can have the title."

² Thou - You

³ Swine - Pigs

⁴ "I saw a sailor's wife eating chestnuts, and told her to give me some."

⁵ "Be gone with you, witch!"

⁶ Ronyon - A scabby, mangy woman (alternately spelled "runnion")

Her husband's to Aleppo¹ gone, master o' th' *Tiger*:
 But in a sieve² I'll thither sail,
 And, like a rat without a tail,
 I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.³

SECOND WITCH

I'll give thee a wind.

FIRST WITCH

Th'art kind.⁴

THIRD WITCH

And I another.

FIRST WITCH

I myself have all the other,
 And the very ports they blow,
 All the quarters that they know
 I' the shipman's card.⁵
 I will drain him dry as hay:⁶
 Sleep shall neither night nor day
 Hang upon his pent-house lid;^{7;8}

¹ Aleppo - A city in modern-day Syria

² Sieve - Basket; container for kitchen produce (not necessarily with holes, as we describe sieves today)

³ Because this woman wouldn't share her chestnuts, the First Witch is going to chase down the woman's husband and harm him (which we can infer based on the fact that she's comparing herself to a rat.) She'll sail halfway around the world in a kitchen basket for revenge over this petty slight!

⁴ Ha! Is it "kind" to help someone get revenge over nothing? It would be like if someone budged you in line, and a friend volunteered to help you destroy the budger's life. Are they really being "kind" in helping you destroy this person's life over a small slight?

⁵ The witch claims to control all the other winds she'll need, including those at the ports and in every direction on the sailor's compass (card).

⁶ She's going to suck the life out of the sailor, maybe marooning him somewhere without water.

⁷ Penthouse lid - Eyelid

⁸ The sailor won't get any sleep.

He shall live a man forbid.
 Weary sev'n-nights nine times nine,¹
 Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine:
 Though his bark cannot be lost,
 Yet it shall be tempest-tost.²
 Look what I have.

SECOND WITCH

Show me, show me.

FIRST WITCH

Here I have a pilot's³ thumb,
 Wrack'd as homeward he did come.⁴
[Drum within.]

THIRD WITCH

A drum, a drum!
 Macbeth doth come.

ALL

[Dancing together in a circle]
 The Weird⁵ Sisters, hand in hand,
 Posters⁶ of the sea and land,
 Thus do go about, about:
 Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,⁷
 And thrice again, to make up nine.

¹ He'll suffer 24/7 for 81 weeks (about a year and a half).

² "I can't sink his ship ('bark'), but I'll make sure it faces terrible storms."

³ Pilot - Sailor

⁴ This all cements how villainous the witches are. The First Witch carries around a dead sailor's thumb.

⁵ There are different spellings of this in different editions, but almost everyone agrees it's a reference to an Old English word that meant "having the power to control destiny."

⁶ Posters - Speedy travelers

⁷ "We spin three times your way, then three times mine."

Peace!—the charm's wound up.¹

Enter MACBETH and BANQUO.

MACBETH

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.²

BANQUO

How far is't call'd to Forres?³—What are these,
So wither'd, and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o' th' earth,
And yet are on't?—Live you? or are you aught
That man may question?⁴ You seem to understand me,
By each at once her choppy⁵ finger laying
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.⁶

MACBETH

Speak, if you can;—what are you?

FIRST WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!⁷

¹ All of this implies they were doing some kind of magic.

² This echoes the witches' line, "Fair is foul and foul is fair..." And that, my friends, gets to the heart of the dilemma: did the witches *know* Macbeth was going to say this? Was his fate predestined and they are merely revealing it? Or did they actively shape it? Or is it neither of the above, and Macbeth can do what he wants regardless of what they tell him? Is it merely a coincidence that they uttered almost identical lines?

³ "How far do they say it is to Forres?"

⁴ "Who are these wild-looking creatures? You—are you human? Can you speak?"

⁵ Choppy - Wrinkly

⁶ This is a little comedic relief. Women with beards! Ha ha. It also helped create the stereotype of ugly witches with warts on their noses and hair growing from their chins.

⁷ Macbeth knows he is Thane of Glamis.

SECOND WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!¹

THIRD WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter!²

BANQUO

Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear
 Things that do sound so fair?³—I' th' name of truth,
 Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
 Which outwardly ye show?⁴ My noble partner
 You greet with present grace and great prediction
 Of noble having and of royal hope,
 That he seems rapt withal. To me you speak not.⁵
 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
 Your favours nor your hate.

FIRST WITCH

Hail!

SECOND WITCH

¹ He does not yet know that King Duncan has made him Thane of Cawdor (but we do!). When the audience knows something the characters do not, it's called dramatic irony.

² Now Macbeth is like, "Wait, what? Yeah, I'm Thane of Glamis—and how did you know that????—but what do you mean Thane of Cawdor? And future king???"

³ "Why do you seem startled and scared by what seem to be good tidings? Who wouldn't want to be king?" A lot of people believe it's because Macbeth has, in the dark night of his soul (and probably with his wicked wife, whom you'll soon meet), talked about becoming king before. And not in a, "I hope the king and his family remain healthy, but if some tragedy were to befall them, we would be next in line to the throne" way. Their discussion was more like, "If we kill the king and his family, we could be king and queen!" He's ashamed to hear his murderous musings voiced aloud.

⁴ Banquo is addressing these comments to the witches. "Are you imaginary or real?"

⁵ "You foretold such great things for my friend, he can barely talk. What's my fate?"

Hail!

THIRD WITCH

Hail!¹

FIRST WITCH

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.²

SECOND WITCH

Not so happy, yet much happier.³

THIRD WITCH

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:⁴
So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

FIRST WITCH

Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

MACBETH

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more.
By Sinel's⁵ 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
You owe this strange intelligence? or why
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
With such prophetic greeting?—Speak, I charge you.⁶

¹ You say "hail!" to a king, obviously. But since they just said Macbeth will be king, what does that mean for Banquo?

² Another paradox...

³ And another...

⁴ And here's the explanation: your descendants will be kings, though you will not.

⁵ Sinel - The father of Macbeth

⁶ "Explain why you're saying this."

WITCHES vanish.

BANQUO

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them. Whither¹ are they vanish'd?²

MACBETH

Into the air; and what seem'd corporal³,
Melted as breath into the wind.
Would they had stay'd!⁴

BANQUO

Were such things here as we do speak about?⁵
Or have we eaten on the insane root
That takes the reason prisoner?⁶

MACBETH

Your children shall be kings.

BANQUO

You shall be king.

MACBETH

And Thane of Cawdor too; went it not so?

BANQUO

To the selfsame tune and words. Who's here?

Enter ROSS and ANGUS.

¹ Whither - To where

² "These women must have bubbled up from the earth. Where did they go?"

³ Corporeal - Having a physical body; appearing in human form

⁴ "I wish they'd stayed!"

⁵ "Did we really see those things?"

⁶ "Or are we hallucinating?"

ROSS

The King hath happily receiv'd, Macbeth,
 The news of thy success, and when he reads
 Thy personal venture in the rebels' fight,
 His wonders and his praises do contend
 Which should be thine or his:¹ silenc'd with that,
 In viewing o'er the rest o' th' selfsame day,
 He finds thee in the stout Norweyan ranks,
 Nothing afeard of what thyself didst make,
 Strange images of death.² As thick as tale
 Came post with post;³ and everyone did bear
 Thy praises in his kingdom's great defence,⁴
 And pour'd them down before him.

ANGUS

We are sent
 To give thee from our royal master thanks;
 Only to herald thee into his sight,
 Not pay thee.⁵

ROSS

And, for an earnest⁶ of a greater honour,
 He bade me, from him, call thee Thane of Cawdor:
 In which addition, hail, most worthy thane,
 For it is thine.⁷

¹ "The king was thrilled to hear of your success in battle, Macbeth! So happy, in fact, that between being stunned into silence and offering fulsome praise, he didn't know whether the victory was yours or his!"

² "The king couldn't believe that on the same day you defeated Macdonwald, you fearlessly fought the King of Norway, though death was all around you."

³ "Messengers were arriving one after another..."

⁴ "...and everyone told him how great you were."

⁵ "We're just here to thank you and bring you to the king; your real reward is yet to come."

⁶ Earnest - Token; indication

⁷ "The king also told me to call you Thane of Cawdor. Hail! The title is yours now."

BANQUO

What, can the devil speak true?¹

MACBETH

The Thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me
In borrow'd robes?²

ANGUS

Who was the Thane lives yet,
But under heavy judgement bears that life
Which he deserves to lose.³ Whether he was combin'd
With those of Norway, or did line the rebel
With hidden help and vantage, or that with both
He labour'd in his country's wrack, I know not;
But treasons capital⁴, confess'd and prov'd,⁵
Have overthrown him.

MACBETH

[*Aside.*] Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor:⁶
The greatest is behind.⁷ [*To Ross and Angus.*] Thanks for your
pains.
[*To Banquo.*] Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me
Promis'd no less to them?

BANQUO

¹ "What? Can those devilish witches have spoken the truth?"

² "The Thane of Cawdor isn't dead. Why are you calling me by his title? (Note the metaphor of being dressed in someone else's clothes).

³ "Yeah, he's alive, but he'll be dead soon, and he deserves it."

⁴ Capital (adj.) - The highest possible (as in "capital punishment")

⁵ "I don't know if Macdonwald planned all this with the King of Norway, or if he just gave him the opportunity, but he's a confessed traitor whose crime deserve the death penalty."

⁶ He's marveling that one of the witches' predictions has already come true.

⁷ The best is yet to come (king).

That, trusted home,¹
 Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
 Besides the Thane of Cawdor.² But 'tis strange:
 And oftentimes to win us to our harm,
 The instruments of darkness tell us truths;³
 Win us with honest trifles⁴, to betray's⁵
 In deepest consequence.—⁶
 Cousins, a word, I pray you.⁷
[They step aside.]

MACBETH

*[Aside.]*⁸ Two truths are told,
 As happy prologues to the swelling act⁹
 Of the imperial theme.¹⁰—I thank you, gentlemen.—
[Aside.] This supernatural soliciting¹¹
 Cannot be ill; cannot be good.¹² If ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth?¹³ I am Thane of Cawdor:
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,

¹ "That, if you believe it..."

² "If you want my kids to be kings, does that mean you want to be king, also?"

³ "Sometimes the devil tells us little truths to convince us of his lies."

⁴ Trifles - Little, unimportant things

⁵ Betray's - Betray us

⁶ This is another way of articulating what he just said: sometimes we can be swayed in the wrong direction if the speaker gives us a few truths at the beginning.

⁷ Banquo goes to talk with Ross and Angus, leaving us free to focus on Macbeth.

⁸ This "aside" just means "speaking to himself."

⁹ Macbeth ignores all the wisdom of what Banquo just said. In his mind, the witches' two truths (that he is Thane of Glamis and now Cawdor) are proof that he will become king ("the swelling act").

¹⁰ The "imperial theme" makes it clear that he's definitely referring to kingship.

¹¹ Alliteration

¹² Paradox

¹³ "If this is all bad, why has it started with true and good news?"

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,¹
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings.²
 My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man
 That function is smother'd in surmise,³
 And nothing is but what is not.⁴

BANQUO

Look, how our partner's rapt⁵.

MACBETH

[*Aside.*] If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown
 me
 Without my stir.⁶

BANQUO

New honours come upon him,
 Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould
 But with the aid of use.⁷

MACBETH

[*Aside.*] Come what come may,

¹ "And if it's good, why am I thinking about murdering my king and cousin? An image that makes my hair stand on end and my heart race?"

² He's more afraid of what he's imagining than any fear that gripped him today— and seeing as he probably just dodged death 100 times in battle, he's afraid of his own imagination, indeed.

³ "I can barely think, I'm so shaken by this thought of killing the king."

⁴ Paradox alert. Also a very important line: "nothing is but what is not." He's obsessed with this thought of killing the king; it's becoming more real than actual reality.

⁵ Rapt - Fascinated; completely absorbed by something

⁶ "Maybe I can become king without doing anything. Maybe I don't have to kill Duncan."

⁷ "Macbeth has a new title. Like new clothes or shoes, it fits awkwardly until broken-in."

Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.¹

BANQUO

Worthy Macbeth, we stay upon your leisure.²

MACBETH

Give me your favour. My dull brain was wrought
With things forgotten.³ Kind gentlemen, your pains
Are register'd where every day I turn
The leaf to read them.⁴—Let us toward the King.—
Think upon what hath chanc'd; and at more time,⁵
The interim having weigh'd it, let us speak
Our free hearts each to other.⁶

BANQUO

Very gladly.

MACBETH

Till then, enough.—Come, friends.

Exeunt.

Act 1, Scene 4

*Flourish. Enter KING DUNCAN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN,
LENNOX and ATTENDANTS.*

DUNCAN

Is execution done on Cawdor? Are not

¹ "Time waits for no man! Let's go."

² "We're ready. We were waiting for you!"

³ "Sorry, I was lost in thought."

⁴ He's speaking to Ross and Angus, telling them he won't forget their kindness or the trouble they went through to fetch him.

⁵ This line, and the rest of the stanza, are spoken in an aside to Banquo.

⁶ "Think about everything that just happened. When we have time, we'll talk about it all."