

Breakdown & Paraphrase of an Excerpt from Macbeth

You'll be using many of the same skills from breaking down and paraphrasing sonnets as well as some of the ideas you've grappled with in our work with Act I of Macbeth. Have as much weird fun with this as possible. You'll be closely re-reading a chunk of the play, breaking it into complete thoughts (always separated by periods, semicolons, colons, and question marks), providing an original paraphrase for each complete thought in contemporary English, and writing a brief (three sentence) synopsis of the excerpt.

- Instead of sonnets (which are mostly straightforward love poetry), you'll be looking at a **soliloquy**. Soliloquies are complicated because they don't really sound like normal human speech. They can be confessions, panic attacks, self-hype, self-doubt, prayers, suicide notes, ecstatic imaginings, and all seven of those at the same time! They're meant to represent not what we share with our mouths but what goes on inside our minds, outside of our own control.
- Look over the **example** on the next page of this document.
- Use your copy of the play – including its footnotes – and don't be afraid to make some big inferences. However, be sure it's **original** and not lifted from elsewhere. (It's going through a plagiarism checker anyway, so be good cats and kittens.) If you get really stuck on a few complete thoughts, it's really okay to leave some blank: you won't lose points.
- I have one more **tip**. If the original complete thought is interrogative (a question), make sure your paraphrase is also a question. Likewise, if the original paraphrase is imperative (a command), be sure your paraphrase is also a command. It's okay to make declaratives (statements) into exclamations if you think it fits the tone.
- When you're ready, access your assigned excerpt **here**.
- If you're raring for more and/or if you'd like some extra credit, you can sharpen your teeth on another excerpt **here**.



Macbeth's first soliloquy – from the beginning of I.iii

Two truths are told
 As happy prologues to the swelling act
 Of the imperial theme. [...]
 This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings.
 My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man
 That function is smothered in surmise,
 And nothing is but what is not.

original text	my original contemporary English paraphrase
1. Two truths are told [a]s happy prologues to the swelling act [o]f the imperial theme.	They told me two true things as happy previews to the third thing – the thing about ruling an empire.
2. This supernatural soliciting [c]annot be ill, cannot be good.	The way I see it, this prophecy can't be evil, but ... it also can't be good.
3. If ill, [w]hy hath it given me earnest of success [c]ommencing in a truth?	How can the prophecy be evil if it promised me such great news that actually turned out to be true?
4. I am Thane of Cawdor.	I mean – wow– I'm the Thane of Cawdor now!
5. If good, why do I yield to that suggestion [w]hose horrid image doth unfix my hair [a]nd make my seated heart knock at my ribs [a]gainst the use of nature?	But ... how can this prophecy be good if it's making my hair fall out and my heart beat like crazy when I think about what it implies?
6. Present fears [a]re less than horrible imaginings.	Real life dangers are way spookier than the terrible things I'm imagining right now.
7. My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, [s]hakes so my single state of man [t]hat function is smothered in surmise,[a]nd nothing is but what is not.	Even though this idea of murder is just in my imagination, it messes me up so much that the only thing I can think about is the thing that isn't true yet.

My original synopsis: Here, Macbeth is reacting to the witches' prophecies. Maybe he's thinking about the moral implications of all of this. He definitely seems ready to accept whatever eventually happens, but he definitely doesn't seem ready to kill the king.