

A SAMPLE STYLISTIC ANALYSIS

Here is a stylistic analysis by the Shakespearean scholar Russ McDonald. It quotes a short passage, then focuses on a single stylistic element: the resonance of Shakespeare's word choices.

Near the beginning of *Macbeth*, just before the murder of King Duncan, Banquo remarks to his son on the late hour, the dark night, and the fatigue that overwhelms him.

There's husbandry in heaven,
Their candles all are out. Take thee that too.
[*Gives him his belt and dagger.*]
A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,
And yet I would not sleep.

The sky (heaven) is described as an economical household in which all sources of light (the stars and moon) have been extinguished. Some powerful force (like lead) calls the speaker to sleep (a heavy summons), and yet he resists. The ideas could have been expressed much more plainly, but the power of the lines rests in their resonance. The nouns —“husbandry,” “candles,” “summons,” “lead”—are evocative in themselves, but in the context of the action they become even more charged with meaning. “Husbandry” connotes household management or government, which Macbeth is about to disrupt, and we have just heard Lady Macbeth ridicule her “husband” for cowardice or unmanliness. In handing the dagger to his son, Banquo foreshadows the hallucinated dagger that Macbeth imagines in his soliloquy a few lines later, as well as the actual dagger that he carries away from the murder. At the end of this scene, a ringing bell “invites” or summons Macbeth to perform the murder; in act 3 Banquo faces the even heavier summons of death, brought by the murderers Macbeth has engaged. The heaviness of lead evokes a burden of foreboding that marks all these early scenes. In her subsequent madness, Lady Macbeth, fearing the dark, carries a candle, and darkness in the moral sense—evil—is a principle subject of the play.

Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare* 2nd edition, page 37.
