

The Raven

The raven is a bird of ill omen, and Lady Macbeth means that the raven is hoarse from saying again and again that King Duncan must die.

The Owl

The cry of a screech owl was thought to announce a death, and a “fatal bellman” was a night watchman who rang a bell to call a prisoner to his hanging. Lady Macbeth is glad to hear the cry of the screech owl, because it means that Macbeth is murdering King Duncan.

The owl is the “obscure bird,” because it flies in the night and can’t be seen. Perhaps that owl was the same one that Lady Macbeth heard when Macbeth was killing King Duncan. Just after Lennox finishes this speech, Macduff comes rushing in with the news that King Duncan has been murdered.

The Falcon

The falcon’s “pride of place” is the highest point of its flight. And the owl, which usually catches mice on the ground, went up instead of down, and killed a falcon. Also, a falcon is a day creature, and a royal companion, while the owl is an untameable bird of night and death. If things in nature stand for things in human life, King Duncan is the falcon, and Macbeth the owl.

The Crow

“Night’s black agents” are all things that hunt and kill in the dark, including birds of prey, including the crow.

The Kite

“Kites” are hawks, and their “maws” are their entire eating apparatuses—beaks, gullets, and stomachs. An ancient fear was that a person who was not properly buried would have his bones picked clean by birds. Macbeth thinks that the dead ought to stay where they belong; if the graves are going to send the bodies back, the kites, with their maws full of human flesh, are going to be the only real graves.

Magpies, Jackdaws and Rooks

Macbeth realises that a murder will always be discovered, sometimes in strange ways. “Magot-pies” (magpies), “choughs” (jackdaws), and “rooks” are all birds that can be taught to speak a few words. He fears that these birds will reveal his guilt.

The Wren

Lady Macduff compares her husband to a little wren that runs away because he is afraid of the owl.