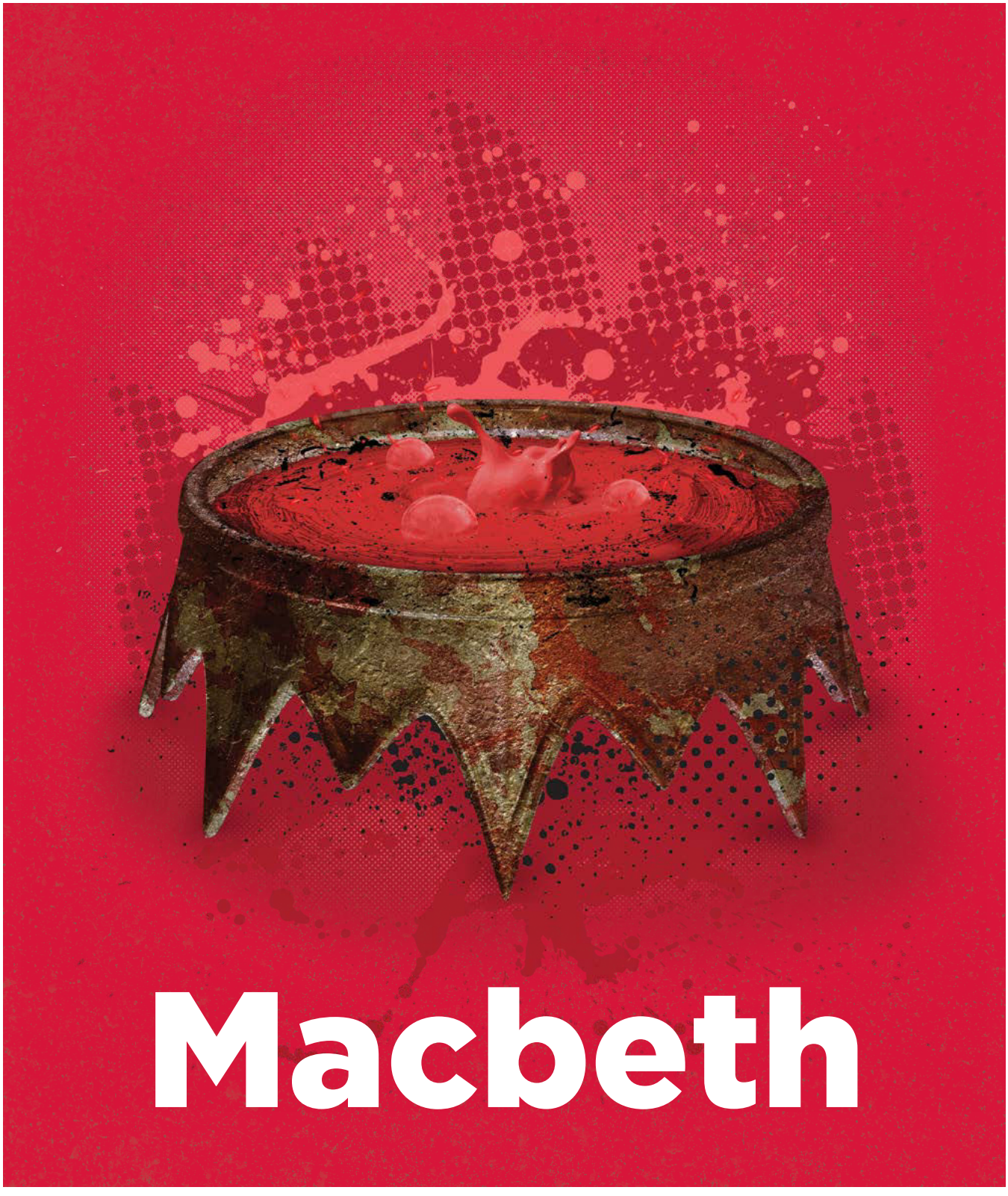
GUTHRIE THEATER

Play Guide

2025–2026 SEASON



Macbeth

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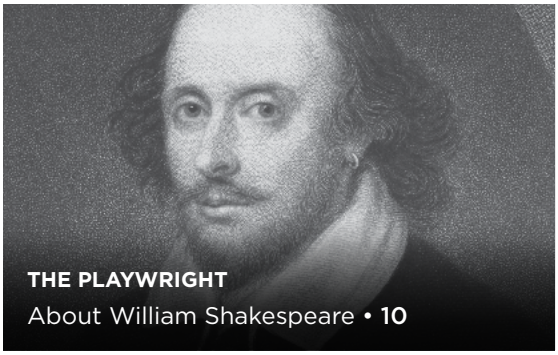
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Macbeth

by **WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE**
directed by **JOE DOWLING**
January 31 – March 22, 2026
Wurtele Thrust Stage

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The Guthrie creates transformative theater experiences that ignite the imagination, stir the heart, open the mind and build community through the illumination of our common humanity.

Guthrie Theater Play Guide
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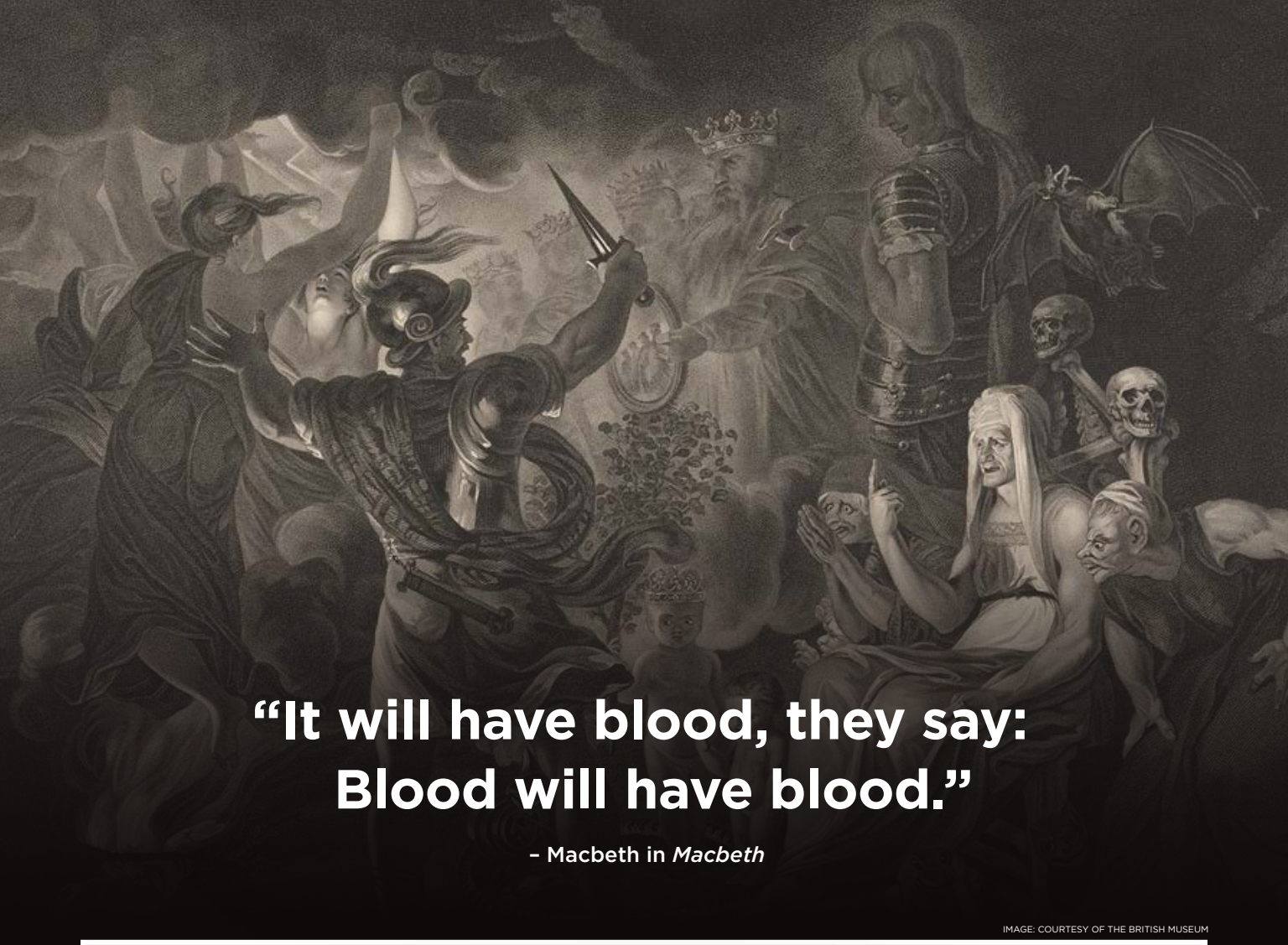


“It will have blood, they say: Blood will have blood.”

– Macbeth in *Macbeth*

IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM

About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

NOTE: Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for more information.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Thanks for your interest in the Guthrie Theater’s production of *Macbeth*. Please direct literary inquiries, requests to reprint content or questions about this guide to Literary Manager and Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org. If you’re an educator with questions about this guide, please contact our Education Team at education@guthrietheater.org.

REHEARSAL PHOTO: REGINA MARIE WILLIAMS, JAMES A. WILLIAMS, MEGHAN KREIDLER, MICHELLE O'NEILL AND SUN MEE CHOMET (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

Synopsis

Scotland is victorious over foreign invaders and civil rebels, in no small part because of the action of the brave and noble soldier Macbeth. On his way to greet his king, Macbeth encounters three Weïrd Sisters, who prophesy his path to greatness, ending with "All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter." When their predictions begin to come true, Macbeth and his ambitious wife decide to do whatever is necessary to ensure their rise to power. They hatch a plot to kill King Duncan and take his place, and all goes according to plan: The bloodstained guards are blamed and dispatched, the king's sons flee the country and Macbeth is crowned king.

But Macbeth becomes convinced that this single murder is not enough to secure his throne, so he hires men to kill his friend Banquo, whose descendants the Weïrd Sisters claim will sit on the throne. When Banquo's bloodstained ghost shows up uninvited to a dinner party, Macbeth's paranoia sends him into a hysterical fit. Desperate for answers, he seeks out the Weïrd Sisters, who tell him no man born of woman will harm him nor will he be vanquished until the woods rise up to the castle, but he must beware Macduff.

The remaining action of the play descends into darkness — and even more blood — as Macbeth becomes more desperate and the Scottish nobility take action to reclaim their country from this tyrant. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth find their early strength and unity tested by their bloody course, and each feels the weight of responsibility differently. The play ends with an inevitable final battle between Macbeth and Macduff, with the country's future hanging on the outcome.

CHARACTERS

Duncan, *king of Scotland*

Malcolm, *his older son and named successor to the crown*

Donalbain, *his younger son*

Macbeth, *thane of Glamis and captain in Duncan's army*

Lady Macbeth, *his wife*

Banquo, *captain in Duncan's army, friend of Macbeth*

Fleance, *his son*

Macduff, *thane of Fife*

Lady Macduff, *his wife*

Macduff's Son, *their young child*

Lennox, *thane of Scotland*

Ross, *thane of Scotland*

Sergeant, *in Duncan's army*

Seyton, *Macbeth's armorer*

Gentlewoman, *attendant to Lady Macbeth*

Doctor

Siward, *an English general*

Three Weïrd Sisters

Soldiers, Guests, Attendants and Apparitions

SETTING

The play begins on the day of Scotland's victory over foreign invaders and civil rebels. The action travels from a military camp to the castles at Inverness, Forres, Fife and Dunsinane in Scotland and the king's palace in England.

Responses to *Macbeth*

A.C. Bradley

Shakespearean Tragedy, 1905

The other three tragedies [*Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*] all open with conversations which lead into the action: Here the action bursts into wild life amidst the sounds of a thunderstorm and the echoes of a distant battle. It hurries through seven very brief scenes of mounting suspense to a terrible crisis, which is reached, in the murder of Duncan, at the beginning of the second act. Pausing a moment and changing its shape, it hastes again with scarcely diminished speed to fresh horrors. And even when the speed of the outward action is slackened, the same effect is continued in another form: We are shown a soul tortured by an agony which admits not a moment's repose, rushing in frenzy towards its doom. *Macbeth* is very much shorter than the other three tragedies, but our experience in traversing it is so crowded and intense that it leaves an impression not of brevity but of speed. It is the most vehement, the most concentrated, perhaps we may say the most tremendous, of the tragedies.

...

[W]hile the influence of the Witches' prophecies on Macbeth is very great, it is quite clearly shown to be an influence and nothing more. There is no sign whatever in the play that Shakespeare meant the actions of Macbeth to be forced on him by an external power, whether that of the Witches, or of their "masters," or of Hecate. It is needless therefore to insist that such a conception would be in contradiction with his whole tragic practice. The prophecies of the Witches are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal: They are dramatically on the same level as the story of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, or the falsehoods told by Iago to Othello. Macbeth is, in the ordinary sense, perfectly free in regard to them, and if we speak of degrees of freedom, he is even more free than Hamlet, who was crippled by melancholy when the Ghost appeared to him. That the influence of the first prophecies upon him came as much from himself as from them, is made abundantly clear by the obviously intentional contrast between him and Banquo. Banquo, ambitious but perfectly honest, is scarcely even startled by them, and he remains throughout the scene indifferent to them. But when Macbeth heard them, he was not an innocent man. Precisely how far his mind was guilty may be a question; but no innocent man would have started, as he did, with a start of *fear* at the mere prophecy of a crown, or have conceived thereupon *immediately* the thought of murder. Either this thought was not new to him, or he had cherished at least some vaguer dishonorable dream, the instantaneous recurrence of which, at the moment of his hearing the prophecy, revealed to him an inward and terrifying guilt. In either case, not only was he free to accept or resist the temptation, but the temptation was already within him. We are admitting too much, therefore, when we compare him with Othello, for Othello's mind was perfectly free from suspicion when his temptation came to him. And we are admitting, again, too much when we use the word "temptation" in reference to the first prophecies of the Witches. Speaking strictly, we must affirm that he was tempted only by himself. He speaks indeed of their "supernatural soliciting"; but in fact, they did not solicit. They merely announced events: They hailed him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and King hereafter. No connection of these announcements with any action of his was even hinted by them. For all that appears, the natural death of an old man might have fulfilled the prophecy any day. In any case, the idea of fulfilling it by murder was entirely his own.

IMAGE: COURTESY OF VICTORIAN ILLUSTRATED SHAKESPEARE ARCHIVE

Friedrich Nietzsche

"On the Morality of the Stage," *Daybreak: Thoughts on the Prejudices of Morality*, 1881

Whoever thinks that Shakespeare's theater has a moral effect, and that the sight of Macbeth irresistibly repels one from the evil of ambition, is in error; and he is again in error if he thinks Shakespeare himself felt as he feels. He who is really possessed by raging ambition beholds this its image with joy; and if the hero perishes by his passion, this precisely is the sharpest spice in the hot draught of this joy. Can the poet have felt otherwise? How royally, and not at all like a rogue, does his ambitious man pursue his course from the moment of his great crime! Only from then on does he exercise "demonic" attraction and excite similar natures to emulation. … Do you suppose that Tristan and Isolde are preaching against adultery when they both perish by it? This would be to stand the poets on their head: They, and especially Shakespeare, are enamored of the passions as such and not least of their death-welcoming moods — those moods in which the heart adheres to life no more firmly than does a drop of water to a glass.

Macbeth and the Witches by John G. Murdoch, 1877

IMAGE: COURTESY OF VICTORIAN ILLUSTRATED SHAKESPEARE ARCHIVE

Harley Granville-Barker

Preface to *Macbeth*, 1927, published by Nick Hern Books, 1993

To pitch upon an informing epithet, *Macbeth* is the starkest of the great tragedies. It is the least discursive, even less so than *Othello*. With *Othello*, it is the most forthright in its action; and this we should expect, for it is the tragedy of unchecked will, even as *Hamlet* is the tragedy of indecision. It is cold and harsh and unrelenting. If Shakespeare's mind was ever plagued by the doctrine of hell hereafter, this play might well be his comment on it. He puts hell here. Macbeth the man is a study in self-damnation. … But he ends as a soulless man, a beast, chained to a stake and slaughtered like a beast. …

The play, in the light of its story, falls into three parts. Acts One and Two form the first and stand for the achievement of Macbeth's ambition. Act Three, with the two first scenes of Act Four, form a second, which shows his wielding of power. From then to the end, we see the process of retribution.

Mary McCarthy

The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays, 1962

Macbeth is not a monster … though in the catalogue he might go for one because of the blackness of his deeds. But at the outset, his deeds are only the wishes and fears of the average, undistinguished man translated into half-hearted action. Pure evil is a kind of transcendence that he does not aspire to. He only wants to be a king and sleep the sleep of the just, undisturbed. … Macbeth does not fall; if anything, he somewhat improves as the result of his career of crime. He throws off his dependency and thus achieves the "greatness" he mistakenly sought in the crown and scepter. He swells to vast proportions, having supped full with horrors.

"Macbeth is an Everyman; and for him, as for all habitual sinners, the guilt that is at first a matter of choice becomes, as his will atrophies, a matter of fate."

– Frank Kermode

W.H. Auden

"*Macbeth*," March 19, 1947, in *Lectures on Shakespeare*, Princeton University Press, 2000

The idea of love or obligation versus malice is played out in terms of light and darkness as well as in imagery of blood in *Macbeth*. The play takes place largely in the physical darkness of nature at night, which for the good is a time of rest and danger, and for the guilty a time of hiding and dread — and bad dreams. There is also the internal darkness of the malicious, the conscience-stricken, the frightened, the injured.

Frank Kermode

Introduction to *Macbeth, The Riverside Shakespeare*, 1974

[The Weïrd Sisters] are real — Banquo sees them; and Banquo's ghost is also, for all we can know, real. Shakespeare seems here, and with the apparition of the dagger, to be inviting reflections as to whether the imagination can produce real effects; but dramatically, they are undoubtedly real. The evils within and without Macbeth's mind are subtly twinned.

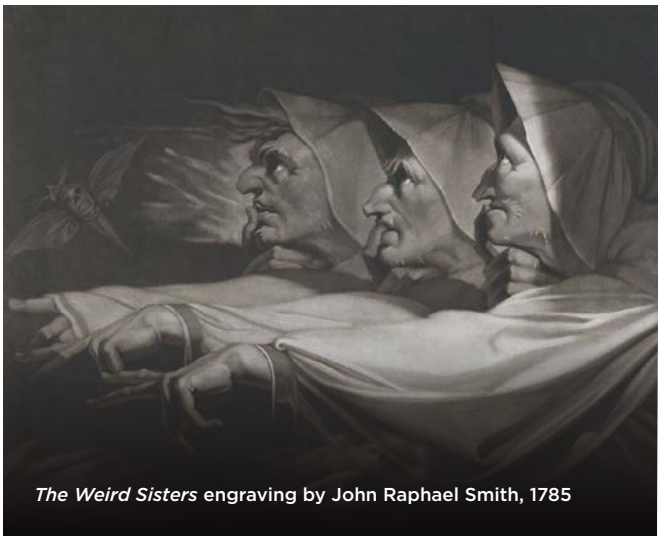
King James knew all about this, and he knew also that the Sisters had no direct power over Macbeth's soul (he had told his witch-tormenter Bothwell the same thing years before). The Weïrd Sisters, knowing of his ambitions, could persuade Macbeth to evil, but they could not compel him to it; by an equivocal representation of a foreseen future they could tempt him to choose an apparent before a real good. Thus they subjected him to the temptations he was least able to withstand, but had no direct power over his free will. It is in this sense that Macbeth is an Everyman; and for him, as for all habitual sinners, the guilt that is at first a matter of choice becomes, as his will atrophies, a matter of fate.

Richard Huggett

Supernatural on Stage: Ghosts and Superstitions of the Theatre, 1975

For the actual text of the witches' scenes, Shakespeare would not have had to go further than his own memories of his boyhood in Warwickshire. Witchcraft was a very vital force in Tudor England. Shakespeare grew up in a countryside where the people lived and practiced, where they believed in witches and their powers, where they were ducked in ponds, tortured, humiliated and killed in dreadful, unspeakable ways. He would certainly have known some in the Warwickshire villages where he lived and played. He would have heard of their spells and incantations, these being the living tradition of country life in which he grew up. In his natural and praiseworthy desire for authenticity, he went a little too far, for the witches' brew in [Act Four, Scene One] whose repulsive ingredients make up the potion. ...

It is taken from an actual black-magic incantation which he would certainly have known about during those years in which he lived in Stratford.



The Weird Sisters engraving by John Raphael Smith, 1785

IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Harold Bloom

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human, 1998

The sublimity of Macbeth and of Lady Macbeth is overwhelming: They are persuasive and valuable personalities, profoundly in love with each other. Indeed, with surpassing irony, Shakespeare presents them as the happiest married couple in all his work. And they are anything but two fiends, despite their dreadful crimes and deserved catastrophes. So rapid and foreshortened is their play (about half the length of *Hamlet*) that we are given no leisure to confront their descent into hell as it happens. Something vital in us is bewildered by the evanescence of their better natures, though Shakespeare gives us emblems enough of the way down and out.

Élisa Rachel as Lady Macbeth by Charles Louis Müller, 1892

IMAGE: COURTESY OF MUSÉE D'ART ET D'HISTOIRE DU JUDAÏSME

"Lady Macbeth is the strongest character in the play. From the first moment we see her, she is resolute, apparently without moral reservation and devastatingly scornful of her husband's inner struggles, which she equates with unmanliness."

– Marjorie Garber

Marjorie Garber

Shakespeare After All, 2004

Like *Richard II*, *Macbeth* has a chiastic, or X-shaped, structure, charting at once the upward and downward trajectories of its two protagonists. As Macbeth moves downward toward inhumanity and loss of affect, Lady Macbeth moves upward, toward feeling and horror. At the beginning of the play, it is Macbeth who hears voices, sees visions: the dagger before him, coated with blood; the voice that cries "Sleep no more"; the ghost of Banquo. Lady Macbeth sees and hears nothing. Like Iago, she has no interior dimension in which to feel this emotional tug-of-war, this battle of the soul. But by the play's close, it is Lady Macbeth who has the most terrible vision, presented to us like a play-within-the-play: the vision of a bloody hand that cannot be cleansed. And this exchange of qualities takes place between Macbeth and his wife, two characters whom Freud would use as case studies for "disunited parts of a single psychical individuality" in *Some Character-Types Met With in Psycho-Analytical Work*. Yet in the opening scenes, we see in Lady Macbeth none of this frailty. We see instead rigidity, resolution and the rejection of a restricted notion of a woman's place. Lady Macbeth is the strongest character in the play. From the first moment we see her, she is resolute, apparently without moral reservation and devastatingly scornful of her husband's inner struggles, which she equates with unmanliness.

Macbeth by John Martin, 1828

IMAGE: COURTESY OF THE MET

Peter Ackroyd

Shakespeare: The Biography, 2005

Yet Shakespeare wrote with only one eye upon [King James]. *Macbeth* was also designed to entertain everyone else. It ushers onto the stage ghosts as well as bloodshed and magic. What could be more appealing to an early 17th-century audience than royalty and mystery combined? The scene at the banquet, in which Banquo's ghost appears to Macbeth, mightily impressed itself upon Shakespeare's contemporaries. It is a play that acquired an almost Celtic sense of doom and the supernatural. That is why actors refuse to name it *Macbeth* but to this day continue to call it "the Scottish play." ...

Macbeth is one of the shortest plays Shakespeare ever wrote. ... The verse is shaped and pared down so that it becomes echoic; it is almost relentless in its pace, and there are images throughout of rushing action. "Time" is mentioned on 44 occasions. There are no puns, and only one "comic" scene; it is hardly comic, however, since the Porter is modeled upon the keeper of hell's gates. ...

The Porter is indeed an image of the hell porter in the mystery plays, and it has been well observed that the banqueting scene in the play is related to the scene of feasting in part of the mystery cycle entitled "The Death of Herod." The death and doom of the ancient plays survive in Shakespeare's dramaturgy as another layer of darkness and supernatural fear. Shakespeare is much more concerned with the ancient forces of the earth than with the omens of the sky. *Macbeth* is a poem of the night.

"Shakespeare is much more concerned with the ancient forces of the earth than with the omens of the sky. *Macbeth* is a poem of the night."

– Peter Ackroyd

Emma Smith

This Is Shakespeare, 2021

Is this a story in which Macbeth, willingly or unwillingly, directs the action of his own play? Or is it better understood as a story in which he is acted upon by other people? Might we see him puppeted by supernatural forces beyond his control? ...

The opening scenes of the play set out these questions in some provocative ways. Shakespeare begins with the witches, and their spooky speech rhythms and their thunder and lightning accompaniment. They seem already to know what is going to happen "when the hurly-burly's done / When the battle's lost and won," and they arrange to "meet with Macbeth." Does that mean they know where to find him, or are they able to draw him to them? Is their power the power of prophecy, or of direction? ...

Their absence at the end of Shakespeare's play may suggest that they are not, in fact, active agents but merely passive predictors of how things will turn out. That things do turn out in that way is conclusive enough of their roles in the play.

William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare was born in 1564 to John and Mary Arden Shakespeare and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire, in England's West Country.

Much of the information about him comes from official documents such as wills, legal documents and court records. There are also contemporary references to him and his writing. While much of the biographical information is sketchy and incomplete, for a person of his class and as the son of a town alderman, quite a lot of information is available.

Young Shakespeare would have attended the Stratford grammar school, where he would have learned to read and write not only English, but also Latin and some Greek. In 1582, at age 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway, and the couple had three children: Susanna in 1583 and twins Hamnet and Judith in 1585.

After an eight-year gap where Shakespeare's activity is not known, he appeared in London by 1592 and quickly began to make a name for himself as a prolific playwright. He stayed in London for about 20 years, becoming increasingly successful in his work as an actor, writer and shareholder in his acting company. Retirement took him back to Stratford to lead the life of a country gentleman. His son Hamnet died at age 11, but both daughters were married: Susanna to Dr. John Hall and Judith to Thomas Quiney.

Shakespeare died in Stratford in 1616 on April 23, which is thought to be his birthday. He is buried in the parish church, where his grave can be seen to this day. His known body of work includes at least 37 plays, two long poems and 154 sonnets.

Shakespeare's Plays

EARLY PERIOD

ca. 1587–92	*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*
ca. 1589–90	*Titus Andronicus*
ca. 1590	*Henry VI, Part II*
ca. 1590–91	*Henry VI, Part III*
ca. 1591	*The Taming of the Shrew*
ca. 1592	*Henry VI, Part I*; *Richard III*
ca. 1594	*The Comedy of Errors*; *Love's Labour's Lost*

MIDDLE PERIOD

ca. 1595	*Richard II*; *Romeo and Juliet*
ca. 1596	*A Midsummer Night's Dream*; *King John*; *The Merchant of Venice*
ca. 1598	*Henry IV, Part I*; *Henry IV, Part II*; *Much Ado About Nothing*
ca. 1599	*Henry V*; *Julius Caesar*
ca. 1600	*As You Like It*; *The Merry Wives of Windsor*
ca. 1601	*Twelfth Night*
ca. 1602	*Troilus and Cressida*
ca. 1602–04	*Hamlet*
ca. 1604	*Othello*; *Measure for Measure*
ca. 1605–06	*All's Well That Ends Well*; *King Lear*; ***Macbeth***

LATE PERIOD

ca. 1606	*Timon of Athens*; *Antony and Cleopatra*
ca. 1608	*Pericles*; *Coriolanus*
ca. 1609–11	*The Winter's Tale*
ca. 1610	*Cymbeline*
ca. 1611	*The Tempest*
ca. 1613	*Henry VIII*
ca. 1613–14	*The Two Noble Kinsmen*

Authorship and dating of Shakespeare's plays is a subject of much academic debate. These dates are speculative but the "most probable" dating from *The New Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*.

MACBETH

James VI of Scotland supposedly traced his ancestry to the legendary Scottish figure Banquo. A talented scholar, James published works on the theory of the divine rights of kings and on witchcraft and the occult. Succeeding Elizabeth I in 1603, he became England's first Scottish king, James I. The English were violently divided on such issues as religion and the legitimacy of the royal bloodline.

Fears for the king's safety were exacerbated when, on November 5, 1605, Guy Fawkes was discovered in the cellar of the House of Lords intending to blow up Parliament, including the king and his family. Conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot attempted to use the doctrine of equivocation in court, giving ambiguous or misleading testimony, to no avail; the trials and subsequent executions of those implicated led to anti-Catholic sentiment as well as fierce loyalty to the crown.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was performed for James during the height of this raw political environment. Though regicide was not new to the stage, it surely held a special significance for James, and it was a daring move to bring such a bloody play as *Macbeth* before the king. However, in glorifying James' Scottish ancestry, Shakespeare also comments on the legitimacy of his rule, and James proved to become a loyal patron to Shakespeare.

Edited from a piece written by Kayla Skarbakka for the play guide for the Guthrie's 2010 production of *Macbeth*.

MACBETH AT THE GUTHRIE:

PHOTOS: JOHN N. HERTZLER, FRANK MELODIA, LOIS FORAKER, ROBERT NADIR AND PAUL SHENAR (BRUCE GOLDSTEIN); SALLY WINGERT AND ROBERT FOXWORTH (MICHAL DANIEL); BILL McCALLUM AND ERIK HEGER (MICHAL DANIEL)

Comments on Shakespeare

Shakespeare's mind is the type of the androgynous, of the manwoman mind. ... It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.

Virginia Woolf
A Room of One's Own, 1929

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "It's Greek to me," you are quoting Shakespeare; if you claim to be more sinned against than sinning, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you recall your salad days, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you act more in sorrow than in anger, if your wish is father to the thought, if your lost property has vanished into thin air, you are quoting Shakespeare; if you have ever refused to budge an inch or suffered from green-eyed jealousy, if you have played fast and loose, if you have been tongue-tied, a tower of strength, hoodwinked or in a pickle, if you have knitted your brows, made a virtue of necessity, insisted on fair play, slept not one wink, stood on ceremony, danced attendance (on your lord and master), laughed yourself into stitches, had short shrift, cold comfort or too much of a good thing, if you have seen better days or lived in a fool's paradise — why, be that as it may, the more fool you, for it is a foregone conclusion that you are (as good luck would have it) quoting Shakespeare; if you think it is early days and clear out bag and baggage, if you think it is high time and that that is the long and short of it, if you believe that the game is up and that truth will out even if it involves your own flesh and blood, if you lie low till the crack of doom because you suspect foul play, if you have your teeth set on edge (at one fell swoop) without rhyme or reason, then — to give the devil his due — if the truth were known (for surely you have a tongue in your head) you are quoting Shakespeare; even if you bid me good riddance and send me packing, if you wish I was dead as a doornail, if you think I am an eye-sore, a laughing stock, the devil incarnate, a stonyhearted villain, bloody-minded or a blinking idiot, then — by Jove! O Lord! Tut, tut! For goodness sake! What the dickens! But me no buts — it is all one to me, for you are quoting Shakespeare.

Bernard Levin
Enthusiasms, 1983

REHEARSAL PHOTO: DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA AND JOE DOWLING (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

[Shakespeare] was the man who of all Modern, and perhaps Ancient Poets, had the largest and most comprehensive soul. All the Images of Nature were still present to him, and he drew them not laboriously but luckily; when he describes anything, you more than see it, you feel it too. Those who accuse him to have wanted learning, give him the great commendation; he was naturally learned; he needed not the spectacles of Books to read Nature; he looked inwards, and found her there.

John Dryden
Essay on Dramatic Poetry, 1668

We do not understand Shakespeare from a single reading, and certainly not from a single play. There is a relation between the various plays of Shakespeare, taken in order; and it is a work of years to venture even one individual interpretation of the pattern in Shakespeare's carpet.

T.S. Eliot
"Dante," *Selected Essays*, 1929

Shakespeare has two sides to him: one is the historical side, where he's one of a group of dramatists working in Elizabethan London and writing for an audience living in that London at that time; the other is the poet who speaks to us today with so powerfully contemporary a voice. If we study only the historical, or 1564–1616 Shakespeare, we take away all his relevance to our own time and shirk trying to look into the greatest mystery of literature, the mystery of how someone can communicate with times and spaces and cultures so far removed from his own.

Northrop Frye
Northrop Frye on Shakespeare, 1986

Every age creates its own Shakespeare. … Like a portrait whose eyes seem to follow you around the room, engaging your glance from every angle, [his] plays and their characters seem always to be "modern," always to be "us."

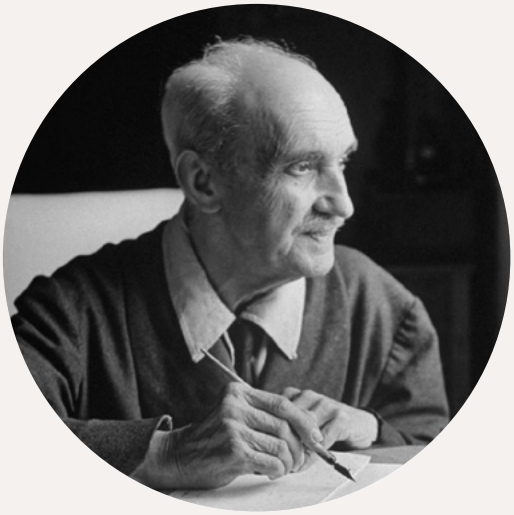
Marjorie Garber
Shakespeare After All, 2004

He is like some saint whose history is to be rendered into all languages, into verse and prose, into songs and pictures and cut up into proverbs; so that the occasion which gave the saint's meaning the form of conversation, or of a prayer, or of a code of laws, is immaterial compared with the universality of its application. … He wrote the airs for all our modern music: He wrote the text of modern life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson
Representative Men, 1841

Shakespeare can illuminate our knowledge of Western attitudes; an analysis of values can also illuminate some dark corners in Shakespeare's work. For Shakespeare, unlike some of his critics, did not unthinkingly adopt the received wisdom of his time. He really probed, dramatically, the subjects of power and legitimacy, his own attitudes towards sex and women; he struggled all his life for a vision of a proper ordering of society.

Marilyn French
Shakespeare's Division of Experience, 1981

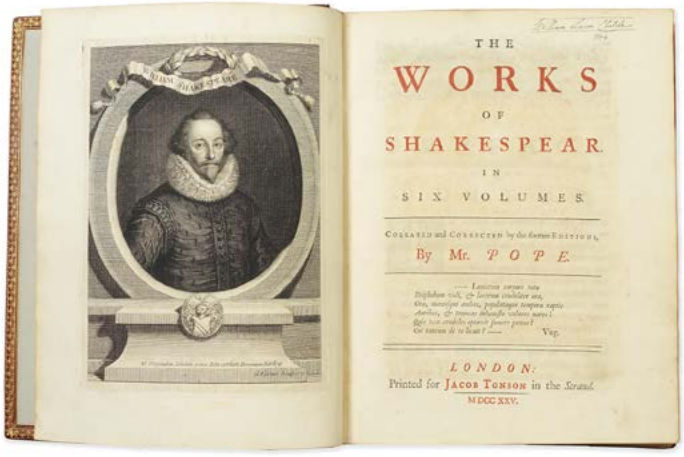


No other poet has given so many-sided an expression to human nature, or rendered so many passions and moods with such an appropriate variety of style, sentiment and accent. If, therefore, we were asked to select one monument of human civilization that should survive to some future age, or be transported to another planet to bear witness to the inhabitants there of what we have been upon earth, we should probably choose the works of Shakespeare.

George Santayana
Interpretations of Poetry and Religion, 1900

The Poetry of Shakespeare was Inspiration indeed: he is not so much an Imitator as an Instrument of Nature; and 'tis not so just to say that he speaks from her, as that she speaks through him.

Alexander Pope
Preface to *The Works of Shakespeare*, 1725



Lots of what we trot out about Shakespeare and iambic pentameter and the divine right of kings and "Merrie England" and his enormous vocabulary blah blah blah is just not true, and just not important. They are the critical equivalent of 'dead-catting' in a meeting or negotiation (placing a dead cat on the table to divert attention from more tricky or substantive issues). They deflect us from investigating the artistic and ideological implications of Shakespeare's silences, inconsistencies and, above all, the sheer and permissive gappiness of his drama. …

Shakespeare's plays are incomplete, woven of what's said and what's unsaid, with holes in between. This is true at the most mundane level: what do Hamlet, or Viola, or Brutus look like? A novelist would probably tell us; Shakespeare the dramatist does not. That means that the clues to personality that we might expect from a novel, or from a film, are not there. If *The Taming of the Shrew*'s Katherine looks vulnerable, or ballsy, or beautiful, that makes a difference to our interpretation of this most ambiguous of plays, and if her imposed husband Petruchio is attractive, or boorish, or nervous, that too has an impact. … That we don't know what characters look like is one symptom of the absence of larger narration and commentary in a play. No authorial or narrative voice tells us more than the speeches of the characters themselves. Stage directions are relatively sparse and almost never tell us how a given action was performed; does Richard II give over his crown, orb and sceptre in Act four of his play to Bolingbroke sadly, gleefully, manically, or in fact not at all? The play's choreography is not spelled out for us, leaving this scene typically open to directorial and readerly imaginations. Shakespeare's construction of his plays tends to imply rather than state; he often shows, rather than tells; most characters and encounters are susceptible to multiple interpretations. It's because we have to fill in the gaps that Shakespeare is so vital. …

Gappiness is Shakespeare's dominant and defining characteristic. And ambiguity is the oxygen of these works, making them alive in unpredictable and changing ways. It's we, and our varied engagement, that make Shakespeare.

Emma Smith
This Is Shakespeare, 2021

Discussion Questions and Activities

REHEARSAL PHOTO: DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

Before the Play

CHOICES AND CONSEQUENCES

"What will you do?"

– Malcolm

Throughout *Macbeth*, the characters are presented with tricky situations. They must make tough decisions, and then they must live with the consequences of their actions. In this activity, students will confront some of the choices made by characters in *Macbeth*, contemplating what they would do if they were in the characters' shoes and the consequences of their choices.

Activity

Your closest friend is persuading you to do something you know is morally wrong. They are pressuring you, saying you'll earn their respect if you do it. What would you do?

a) Stand your ground and provide good reasons why you won't do it.
b) Give in and do it.
c) Try to distract them with a treat.

A crime was committed at your school, and everyone thinks you did it. What would you do?

a) Fight for your innocence.
b) Run away to England.
c) Blame someone else.

You did something wrong, and your best friend knows you did it. You are afraid they are going to snitch on you. What would you do?

a) Avoid your friend.
b) Promise to do whatever your friend wants so they won't tell.
c) Arrange to have them murdered.

A prophecy says you will be the king, but there is already a king — and he has two sons. What would you do?

a) Wait it out. The prophecy will come true in time.
b) Talk to the king — maybe he was planning on naming you the heir!
c) Eliminate anyone in your way to claiming the throne.

Discuss

Think back through your answers to each prompt. What might have been the consequences of each choice you made?

REHEARSAL PHOTO: DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA, MEGHAN KREIDLER AND PETER CHRISTIAN HANSEN (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEIVING

> **"So foul and fair a day I have not seen."**
> – Macbeth

Within both the political intrigue and the supernatural elements of *Macbeth*, there is a common theme of false appearances. In this activity, students will analyze three famous quotes from *Macbeth*, discussing connections and contrasting elements.

Activity

Step One: On a whiteboard or chalkboard, write the following quotes from *Macbeth*:

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair." (Act One, Scene One)

"So from that spring whence comfort seemed to come / Discomfort swells." (Act One, Scene Two)

"Look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't." (Act One, Scene Five)

Step Two: Discuss as a class how the quotes suggest two contradictory things at once.

Step Three: Draw a Venn diagram on a whiteboard or chalkboard. As a class, have volunteers write in the circles what they think is unique about each quote; then, have volunteers write within the intersection about what the quotes have in common. Encourage students to think about both the literal and figurative language. Put those observations into the Venn diagram as well.

Step Four: Lead a classroom discussion with the following prompts.

Discuss

- Looking at the middle of our Venn diagram, what do these quotes have in common? How do all three quotes consider outward appearances?
- In your own words, how would you define the concept of a "false appearance"?
- What are examples of appearances being different than reality in books or media? Why do you think this difference is often seen in villainous characters?
- What are some examples of how appearances can be different than reality in our world today? How do you see this online? Within nature?

THE ANIMAL WORLD OF *MACBETH*

"What beast was't, then?"

– Lady Macbeth

Throughout *Macbeth*, playwright William Shakespeare uses animals as symbols and allusions to reflect on power struggles and social hierarchies. In this activity, students will work together to discuss why Shakespeare connects animals to certain characters and situations.

Activity

Step One: Have students get into small groups and answer the following questions about the list of animal groupings below.

Prompts

- What adjectives would you use to describe each of these animals?
- What role do these animals play within the natural world? Are they considered predators or prey?
- What physical features or unique abilities do they have?

Animals

- Bear, rhinoceros and tiger
- Wren and owl
- Serpent and worm
- Lion

Step Two: Assign each small group one of the following quotes from *Macbeth* and have them underline the animal references.

"Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear, / The armed rhinoceros, or th'Hyrcan tiger, / Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves / Shall never tremble."

– Macbeth while challenging Banquo's ghost in Act Three, Scene Four

"For the poor wren, / The most diminutive of birds, will fight, / Her young ones in her nest, against the owl."

– Lady Macduff while concerned about the safety of her children in Act Four, Scene Two

"There the grown serpent lies; / the worm that's fled / Hath nature that in time will venom breed, / No teeth for th'present"

– Macbeth after Banquo's death and Banquo's son has escaped in Act Three, Scene Four

"Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care / Who chafes, who frets or where conspirers are. / Macbeth shall never vanquished be"

– An Apparition's cryptic message in Act Four, Scene One

IMAGE: COURTESY OF VICTORIAN SHAKESPEARE ILLUSTRATION ARCHIVE

Step Three: After reading their assigned quote, have each small group discuss the following questions.

Discuss

- Which character is referenced with each animal? What is the metaphor?
- What does the animal reference(s) tell us about the character and their situation?
- What does the animal imagery tell us about what might happen to the character?

Step Four: Have students share their findings with the class. Then, lead a classroom discussion with the following questions.

Discuss

- Why do you think Shakespeare uses well-known animals as allusions for different characters throughout *Macbeth*?
- Considering the quotes we explored today, do you have any predictions about the characters and events that will happen in the play?

REHEARSAL PHOTO: PETER CHRISTIAN HANSEN AND DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

REHEARSAL PHOTO: MEGHAN KREIDLER, DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA AND JOE DOWLING (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

After the Play

INVESTIGATE THE ROYAL CRIME SCENE

> **"Ring the alarum-bell. Murder, and treason!"**
> – Macduff

Duncan, the King of Scotland, has been murdered, and you need to help solve the mystery! In this activity, students will work in small groups to recount how the murder happened in Act Two of *Macbeth* and build a case as to why certain characters became suspects.

Activity

Step One: Have students get into groups of four or five. Then, assign each group one of the three following suspicious duos: the Macbeths, the Guards, or Malcom and Donalbain.

Step Two: Instruct each small group to build a case against their suspects by writing down answers to the Who, What, Where, How and Why of the case:

- **Who** was murdered? What was their relationship to your assigned suspects?
- **What** happened the night of the murder? What were your suspects doing at the time?
- **Where** did the murder take place? Where were your suspects? Do they have an alibi?
- **How** did the murder happen? How could your suspects have been involved?
- **Why** would your assigned suspects want to commit the murder? What is their motive?

Step Three: Each group presents their findings out loud to another small group or to the class. Encourage the groups to cross-examine their evidence: Did any groups remember a detail (or "clue") that the other group didn't write down? Who has the most compelling evidence, and can they persuade the other group?

Step Four: Create a jury by having one student representative from each small group come to the front of the classroom. Hold a vote: The jury should raise their hands to decide which suspicious duo really killed the king, based on the evidence.

THAT WITCHCORE AESTHETIC

"What are these, / So withered and so wild in their attire, /
That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth, / And yet are on't?"

– Banquo

In approaching a production of *Macbeth*, one of the big decisions to make is about the Weïrd Sisters. Where do they come from? What are their powers? What do they look like? Are they even real? In this activity, students will mine the text of *Macbeth* for clues about the Weïrd Sisters and then design their own versions of the characters based on their close reading.

Activity

Step One: As a class, discuss the aesthetic of the Weïrd Sisters in the Guthrie production. What choices were made by the director, costume designer, movement director and actors to create the Weïrd Sisters you saw onstage?

Step Two: In groups or as a class, do a close reading of the scenes with the Weïrd Sisters (particularly Act One, Scene One and Act One, Scene Three) to make a list of qualities of the Weïrd Sisters, pulling direct quotes when possible. Consider both what other people say about them as well as how they describe themselves.

Step Three: Using your brainstormed list as inspiration, each student should create a mood board with images that represent their idea of the Weïrd Sisters.

Step Four: In groups or in front of the class, students can share their mood boards, articulating why those images spoke to them.

REHEARSAL PHOTO: MEGHAN KREIDLER AND DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

FIGHTING WITH MYSELF

> **"Speak, I charge you."**
> – Macbeth

One of the best ways for students to uncover the magic of Shakespeare's language is to speak it out loud. In this activity, students will work on one of Macbeth's monologues. They will speak the words aloud, discover possible meanings and dig into the different arguments that Macbeth is making as he fights with himself.

Activity

Step One: Hand out copies of Macbeth's speech with the glossary on the following pages.

Step Two: As a class, have students take turns reading the speech, switching speakers at each full stop (period, semicolon or question mark). If there is enough space in the classroom, it can be helpful to do this in a circle.

Step Three: Students reflect on what they just heard. The class should identify any unfamiliar words, using the glossary to define them, and talk about the meaning of the words in the sentence.

Step Four: Read the speech together again, switching speakers at each full stop. Ask students to share any new ideas or anything they heard differently this time.

Step Five: Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one part of the speech. Students in each group should do a close reading of their sections of text, looking specifically at Macbeth's arguments. What is he arguing in each line? What is he wrestling with? When does he feel sure of himself, and when is he confused and/or emotional?

Step Six: Each group shares their findings with the class.

Step Seven: Read the speech as a group one last time. Discuss Macbeth's journey through the speech. How do his arguments change? What does he decide? Why?

REHEARSAL PHOTO: JOE DOWLING, MEGHAN KREIDLER AND DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

MACBETH'S SPEECH
Act One, Scene Seven

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence and catch
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all — here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases,

We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases,
We still have judgment here that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends the ingredience of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:

To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan

Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off.
And pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubins horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur

That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other — How now? What news?

REHEARSAL PHOTO: PETER CHRISTIAN HANSEN AND DANIEL JOSÉ MOLINA (JOSHUA CUMMINS)

Act One, Scene Seven Glossary

Terms are listed in the order they appear in the text and read from top to bottom by column.

It
Duncan's murder

Trammel up
Tangle in a net

Consequence
Result of the murder

Surcease
Death

Shoal
A sandbank or sandbar that makes the water shallow

Have judgement
Will be judged

Commends
Recommends

Ingredience
Ingredients

Chalice
Wine goblet

He's
Duncan is

Kinsman
Familial relation

Faculties
Powers as the king

Clear
Pure

Meek
Quietly and gently

Great office
Role as the king

Taking-off
Death

Striding
Standing over with legs apart

Cherubins
An order of angels

Sightless couriers
Invisible messengers; here, the wind

The horrid deed
Duncan's murder

Spur
A spiked wheel used to urge on a horse

Vaulting
Leaping onto a horse's back

O'erleaps
Jumps over

For Further Reading and Understanding

EDITIONS OF THE PLAY

Macbeth, edited by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason. The Arden Shakespeare, 2015.

Macbeth, edited by A.R. Braunmuller. The New Cambridge Shakespeare, 2008.

Macbeth, edited by Nicholas Brooke. The Oxford Shakespeare, 2008.

ON SHAKESPEARE

All the Words on Stage: A Complete Pronunciation Dictionary for the Plays of William Shakepeare by Louis Scheeder and Shane Ann Younts. Smith and Kraus, 2002.

Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare (two volumes) by Isaac Asimov. Avenel Books, 1970.

The Great White Bard: How to Love Shakespeare While Talking About Race by Farah Karim-Cooper. Vikings, 2023.

Lectures on Shakespeare by W.H. Auden. Princeton University Press, 2000.

Passing Strange: Shakespeare, Race and Contemporary America by Ayanna Thompson. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Prefaces to Shakespeare by Harley Granville-Barker. Princeton University Press, 1947.

Shakespeare After All by Marjorie Garber. Pantheon Books, 2004.

Shakespeare in a Divided America: What His Plays Tells Us About Our Past and Future by James Shapiro. Penguin Press, 2020.

Shakespeare: The Biography by Peter Ackroyd. Knopf Doubleday, 2006.

Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human by Harold Bloom. Riverhead Books, 1998.

Shakespeare's Words: A Glossary and Language Companion by David Crystal and Ben Crystal. Penguin Books, 2002.

This Is Shakespeare by Emma Smith. Vintage Books, 2021.

ON *MACBETH*'S SUPERSTITION

Light Thickens by Ngaio Marsh. Little, Brown and Company, 1982. A murder mystery set during a production of *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare's Demonology: A Dictionary by Jo Ann Esra and Marion Gibson. The Arden Shakespeare, 2017.

Supernatural on Stage: Ghosts and Superstitions of the Theatre by Richard Huggett. Taplinger Publishing Company, 1975.

FILMS

Macbeth, directed by Orson Welles. 1948. Featuring Orson Welles as Macbeth, Jeanette Nolan as Lady Macbeth and Roddy McDowall as Malcolm. 107 minutes.

Throne of Blood, an adaptation set in medieval Japan. 1957. Directed by Akira Kurosawa, featuring Toshirô Mifune as Taketoki Washizu and Isuzu Yamada as Lady Asaji Washizu. 110 minutes.

Macbeth, an adaptation directed by Roman Polanski. 1971. Featuring Jon Finch as Macbeth and Francesca Annis as Lady Macbeth. 140 minutes.

Macbeth, a television adaptation of a Royal Shakespeare Company stage production. 1979. Directed by Philip Casson, featuring Ian McKellen as Macbeth, Judi Dench as Lady Macbeth and Roger Rees as Malcolm. 145 minutes.

Macbeth, an adaptation set in the ganglands of Melbourne, Australia. 2006. Directed by Geoffrey Wright, featuring Sam Worthington as Macbeth and Victoria Hill as Lady Macbeth. 109 minutes.

Macbeth, directed by Justin Kurzel. 2015. Featuring Michael Fassbender as Macbeth and Marion Cotillard as Lady Macbeth. 113 minutes.

The Tragedy of Macbeth, an adaptation directed by Joel Coen. 2021. Featuring Denzel Washington as Macbeth and Frances McDormand as Lady Macbeth. 105 minutes.

WEBSITES

Folger Shakespeare Library

A wealth of resources, including lesson plans, study guides and interactive activities.

folger.edu

Internet Shakespeare Editions

A collection of material on Shakespeare and his plays, including an extensive archive of productions and production materials.

internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/index.html

PlayShakespeare.com: The Ultimate Free Shakespeare Resource

After registration, receive access to the full texts of the plays, synopses, the First Folio and study aids. An accompanying smartphone app features full texts of the plays and additional tools.

playshakespeare.com

Shakespeare Uncovered

A series that goes in-depth into one play or genre per episode. A host with a personal tie to the play investigates the text and its interpretations and visits companies in rehearsal and in performance. Episodes may be available online or on DVD. *Macbeth* was hosted by Ethan Hawke in the first series, January 2013.

pbs.org/wnet/shakespeare-uncovered