

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
MACBETH



SIR 

IN THE SCHOOL

A study guide by Dr. Lauren Chochinov

Biography

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. While today he is known as one of the world's greatest playwrights and poets, his personal life remains mostly a mystery. At eighteen he married Anne Hathaway, who was 26 at the time, and together they had three children, Susanna (1583), and twins, Hamnet and Judith (1585). Hamnet died in 1596.

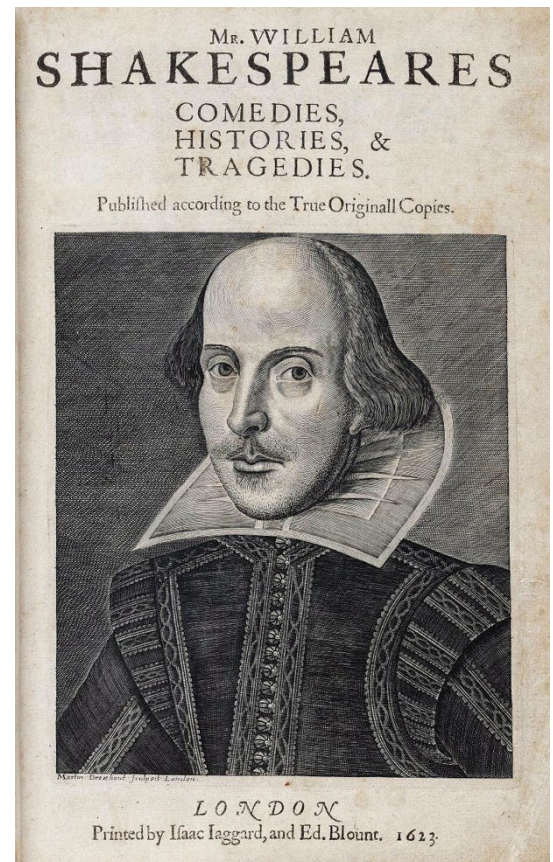
By 1592, Shakespeare was an established playwright and actor in London. During Shakespeare's lifetime, actors were members of acting companies – groups of all-male actors who performed together and shared profits. Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain's Men in 1594 and wrote the majority of his plays exclusively for them. The group's name changed to the King's Men in 1603 after the death of Queen Elizabeth I and the coronation of King James I. In 1613, Shakespeare retired to Stratford-upon-Avon and died three years later on April 23, 1616.

In 1623, a group of Shakespeare's friends published the first volume of his collected works. Known as the *First Folio*, the book contained thirty-six plays, divided into three categories: histories, comedies, and tragedies. A prolific poet, Shakespeare also composed 154 sonnets, as well as other poems.

This concise biography does little to capture the singular brilliance of William Shakespeare. His plays have been performed, adapted, banned, celebrated, and reviled for centuries. In the preface to the First Folio, the book's editors John Heminge and Henry Condell write of their late friend:

Who, as he was a happie imitator of Nature, was a most gentle expresser of it. His mind and hand went together: And what he thought, he uttered with that easinesse, that wee have scarce received from him a blot in his papers. But it is not our province, who onely gather his works, and give them you, to praise him. It is yours that reade him. And there we hope, to your divers capacities, you will finde enough, both to draw, and hold you: for his wit can no more lie hid, then it could be lost. Reade him, therefore; and againe, and againe.¹

Read him, therefore, and again and again. A most welcome assignment!



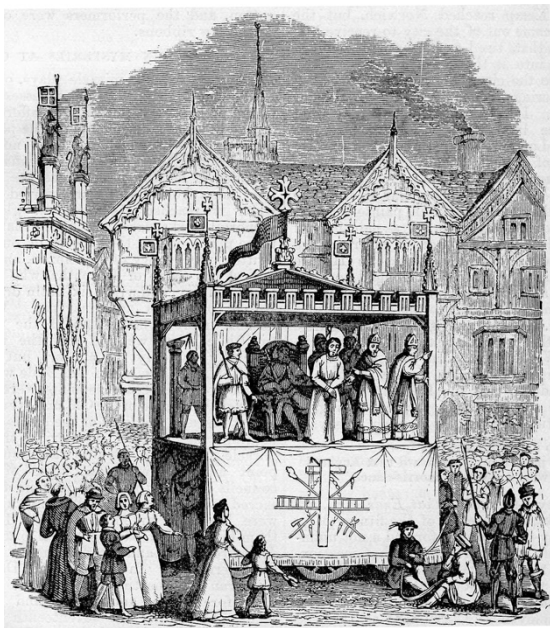
¹ From: <https://www.shakespeare-online.com/biography/firstfolio.html>

Elizabethan Theatre

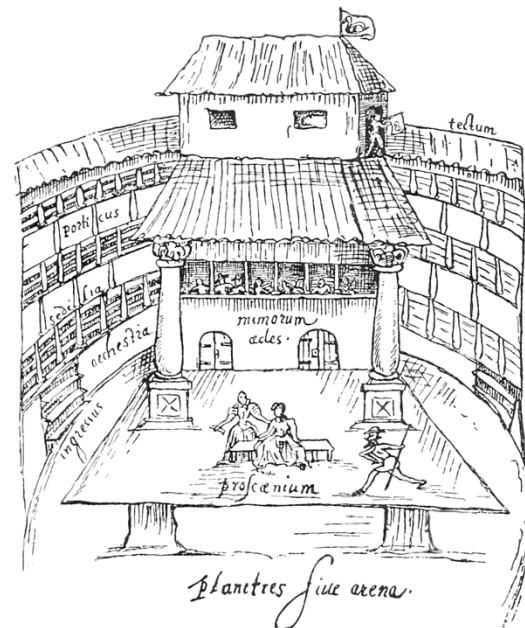
Today, going to the theatre likely evokes images of enclosed buildings where the audience sits at a distance from the stage while professional actors perform. The idea of the theatre as a purpose-built building comes from the Early Modern period. During the Middle Ages, theatre was performed by amateur actors who often used pageant wagons – a stage on wheels – to mount productions of religious plays. These cycle plays were traditionally sponsored by guilds (early unions) and focused almost entirely on stories from the bible or morality tales.

In 1485, Henry Tudor defeated the English king, Richard III, marking an end to the medieval period and the beginning of the Early Modern period also known as the English renaissance. Plays were more secular in theme due to shifting religious beliefs during the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547), and Catholic focus of medieval theatre became undesirable. Members of the aristocracy began sponsoring professional acting troupes who would perform in manor homes and great halls. The first permanent theatre – an enclosed building purposely built for performance – was constructed in 1576 (creatively called The Theatre). Queen Elizabeth I was a great patron of the arts and during her reign (1558-1603), theatre flourished. Playwrights like Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe produced their most famous works thanks to the financial backing of the aristocracy.

Plays were performed during the day to take advantage of the light. Sets were minimal and most of the audience stood during each production, crowding around the stage and often loudly heckling the actors. Due to protests from Puritans – staunch Protestants – theatres could not be built within the London city limits. This is why the most famous theatres of the Elizabethan age were constructed on the south bank of the Thames River. The Globe theatre, where Shakespeare's troupe performed his plays, was built in 1599.



Medieval pageant wagon



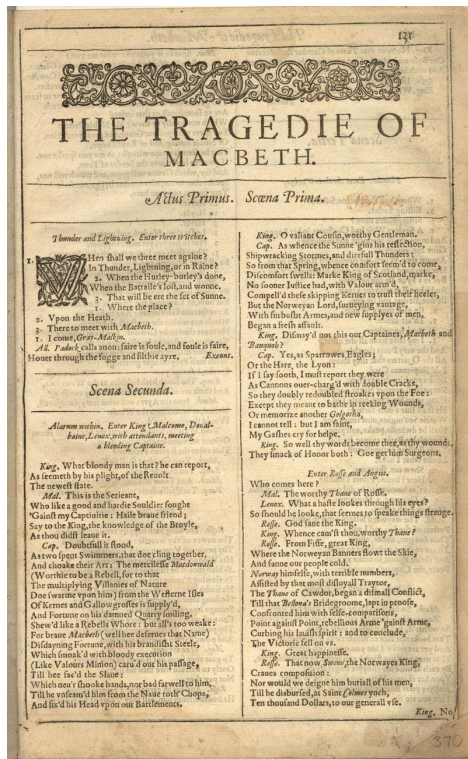
The Swan Theatre (1596)

Performance History

Macbeth is a difficult play to date. It first appears in print in Shakespeare's First Folio (1623) and scholars have long believed that the play was heavily edited between its original composition and this printing. It was likely composed in the early years of James I's reign and performed for the king in 1606.

Like many of Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* has been adapted numerous times over the centuries, often influenced by both the shifting tastes of audiences and socio-political context. In the aftermath of the English Civil War when all the theatres in England were closed (1642-1660), two patent companies divided ownership of all previously existing English plays. The Duke's Company, under the leadership of Sir William Davenant, added songs and dance to *Macbeth* while also expanding the role of Lady Macduff and including more material for the witches.

The play took on new meaning in the twentieth century with the rise of fascism, when its examination of power and violence became especially relevant. *Macbeth* has been adapted countless times in countless settings and mediums. It has been turned into multiple operas, most famously by Giuseppe Verdi in 1847. Film adaptations have also been numerous. From legendary Japanese director Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957), which transported the play's setting to feudal Japan, to the Oscar nominated *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021) starring Denzel Washington, *Macbeth* evolves and endures, finding eternal life on stage and onscreen.



From the first folio



Throne of Blood movie poster (1957)

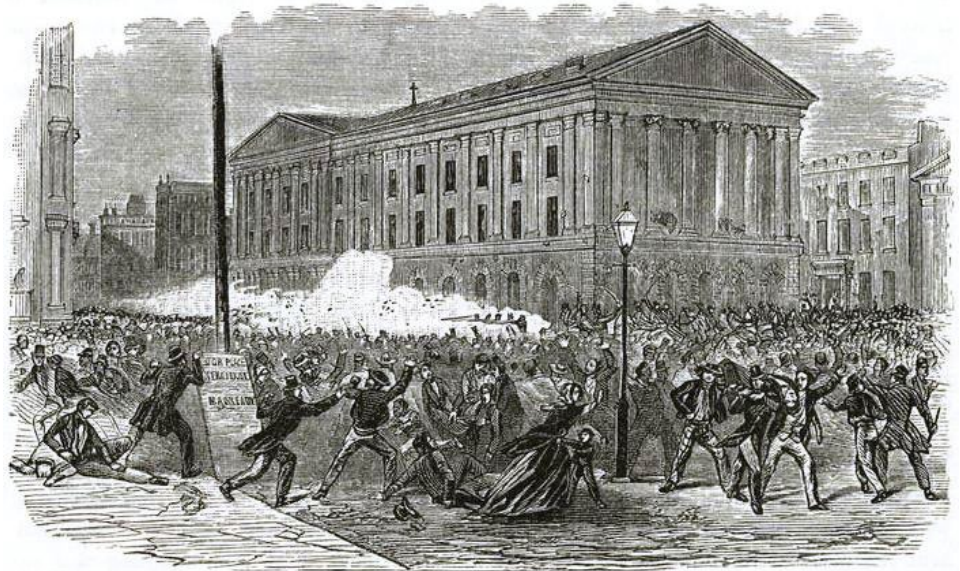
Is the play cursed?

Generations of actors have believed that saying “Macbeth” inside a theatre will cause, at the very least, bad luck. This is why sometimes, *Macbeth* is called the “The Scottish Play,” lest anyone invoke the curse. Stage accidents, deaths, and even a massive riot have been associated with *Macbeth*, as some believe that real witches cursed the play at the time of its earliest performances in the seventeenth century.

One of the most infamous incidents associated with the curse was the Astor Place Riot of 1849. Two rival theatre companies in New York put on productions of *Macbeth* across the street from each other. The American actor, Edwin Forrest, played Macbeth in one and the English actor, William Charles Macready, the other. Throughout the nineteenth century, British actors and theatre managers were commonly seen on American stages. Edwin Forrest was considered one of the first great American theatre actors and was beloved by working-class, anti-British audiences. Macready, however, was very popular amongst New York’s elite and class tensions bubbled over on the evening of May 10th, 1849, when working-class crowds tried to attack the Astor Opera House. The police fired at the crowd, instigating a riot, which resulted in the death of over twenty people and injuring over one hundred.

In reality, the curse of *Macbeth* has far more to do with financial failure than witchcraft. Due to its popularity, *Macbeth* was considered a guaranteed hit for any theatre company. When a theatre company was failing financially, they may have chosen to perform *Macbeth* in order to save themselves from bankruptcy. *Macbeth*, therefore, was sometimes seen as a sign that a theatre company was experiencing financial trouble and desperately trying to stay afloat, hence the “curse” associated with *Macbeth*.

Still, many actors to this day believe that speaking “Macbeth” aloud inside a theatre is bad luck. There are numerous ways to break this curse including leaving the theatre, swearing, spinning in a circle, and much more.



James VI of Scotland and I of England



When Elizabeth I died in 1603, she left behind no heir. Her closest living relative was her cousin, King James VI of Scotland who was the son of Mary Queen of Scots (Elizabeth had Mary beheaded in 1587). The ascension of King James to the throne was met with curiosity and concern. England had never had a Scottish king before, but unlike Elizabeth I, James already had children and heirs, which meant that he offered stability and longevity to the realm. A kingdom without a monarch is at constant risk of invasion. James VI of Scotland seemed to provide a solution to this problem.

James had long been concerned about witchcraft. The Scottish Witchcraft Act was passed in 1563, which made witchcraft an offense punishable by death. James first became concerned about the presence of witches and dark magic in 1590 when a terrible storm forced his ships to Norway while he was on his way home to Scotland with his new bride, Anne of Denmark. He believed that witches had caused the storm, which inspired the Copenhagen witch

trials. Many women were accused and two were burned at the stake.

The Denmark incident was the catalyst for what would become the most infamous witch trials in Scottish history: the North Berwick witch trials. North Berwick, a small town in southern Scotland was the site of Scotland's first witch trials where over seventy people were accused. James VI was present at these trials, which lasted two years. In 1597, James VI published his book *Daemonologie*, a text that discussed different types of magic and demons. The book was republished in England in 1603 when James became King.

This environment of superstition and fear, in addition to the King's book, may have partially inspired Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.



Plot Summary

Three witches meet to discuss their future plans. A battle rages nearby and they decide to reconvene once it ends in order to meet Macbeth. Macbeth, a Scottish nobleman who is loyal to King Duncan, approaches the witches alongside Banquo, a fellow nobleman. The witches call him the Thane of Glamis and the Thane of Cawdor, and tell him that he will be “king hereafter.” They also tell Banquo that though he will not be king, his heirs will someday inherit the throne. Deeply confused, Macbeth tells the witches that although he is the Thane of Glamis, he is not the Thane of Cawdor, but when he asks how they know such a strange prophecy, the witches disappear. Macbeth and Banquo depart and upon arriving at King Duncan’s camp, the King informs him that the Thane of Cawdor is dead and Macbeth will inherit his title. Duncan also makes his eldest son, Malcolm, his heir, which gives Macbeth pause as he begins to wonder if the prophecy is true.

Macbeth writes a letter to Lady Macbeth, his wife, telling her about the witches’ prophecy. She wonders if her husband will be ambitious enough and man enough to do what must be done in order to make the prophecy a reality. When she finds out that Duncan will be staying the night in her home, she wishes that she were a man so she could take steps to guarantee Macbeth’s succession, which can only happen if Duncan is murdered. Once Macbeth and Duncan arrive, Lady Macbeth tries to convince Macbeth to kill the king, but he is hesitant.

Duncan is a good king and Macbeth’s kinsman, so Macbeth is unsure whether or not to kill him. Lady Macbeth is insistent, questioning Macbeth’s manhood. She tells her husband that he should kill Duncan and then together, they will frame Duncan’s servants for the murder. Macbeth finally agrees.

In the middle of the night, Macbeth finds Banquo pondering the witches’ prophecy. Whereas Banquo believes that it is best to always behave honourably, Macbeth claims that he has given no thought to the witches or their words. Once Banquo and his son, Fleance, go to bed, Macbeth imagines that he sees a bloody dagger, a symbol of his ambition and his guilt. He sneaks into Duncan’s bedroom and murders the king.

When he returns to his chamber, he is covered in blood, and Lady Macbeth is furious to discover that he is still holding the murder weapons. She rushes back to the king’s bedroom and places the bloody daggers on his sleeping servants. The next morning, Macduff and Lennox, two noblemen loyal to Duncan, arrive and ask the king’s whereabouts. Macbeth tells Macduff that the king is likely still sleeping, so Macduff goes to check and when he discovers Duncan murdered in his bed, he sounds the alarm.

The entire house is in shock and horror, though Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pretend to be surprised too. Macbeth runs towards the king's bedroom and quickly murders the two servants, claiming he did so in an act of vengeful rage. Malcolm and Donalbain, Duncan's sons, immediately suspect that one of Duncan's noblemen is responsible for the murder and they decide to flee for their own safety.

The gathered council decide that Duncan's servants are the culprits and because Malcolm and Donalbain ran away, they were likely involved in the plot to kill the king too. Macbeth is made king.

Soon, Macbeth invites Banquo and his son, Fleance, for dinner. Banquo is suspicious about Duncan's death because he knows the witches' prophecy. Meanwhile, Macbeth is also suspicious of Banquo for the same reason and arranges to have him and his son killed. Macbeth is becoming increasingly paranoid but keeps the plot to kill Banquo from Lady Macbeth. When hired assassins find Banquo, they kill him, but Fleance runs away.



At the dinner party, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo and screams at him, frightening the other guests. Lady Macbeth tries to reassure them that Macbeth's behaviour is merely the result of a long-time illness. She eventually asks the guests to leave, though Macbeth's paranoia becomes worse and he decides to seek out the Weird Sisters once more.

Hecate, the leader of the witches, is angry that the Weird Sisters have been busy toying with Macbeth without her approval. Meanwhile, many noblemen are now suspicious of Macbeth because there are too many similarities between the murder of Duncan and the murder of Banquo. Macduff is especially determined to unseat Macbeth and tries to raise an army for the cause.

Macbeth visits the Weird Sisters and see three visions. A floating head warns Macbeth to be wary of Macduff. Then, a child tells Macbeth, "none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth" (IV.i.91-92). The third vision prophesizes that "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until/Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/Shall come against him" (IV.i.105-107). Macbeth is relieved by these visions because all men are born of women and, therefore, he believes himself to be invincible. He also knows that forests cannot move and his confidence grows.

The witches disappear once more and Lennox arrives to tell Macbeth that Macduff has run to England. Enraged and threatened by Macduff, Macbeth orders his entire family and household killed. When Macduff hears that his children and wife are dead, he is devastated, but his allies encourage him to turn his grief into anger. He swears vengeance on Macbeth.

Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth tries to wash her hands but cries that she cannot clean herself of her guilt. She is overcome by all the evil deeds she and Macbeth committed and is slowly losing her mind.

Malcolm and his army camp near Birnam Wood while Macbeth remains in his castle. He is not worried because he believes the witches' prophecy. What Macbeth does not know is that Malcolm tells his soldiers to cut down trees and use them as a disguise so Macbeth cannot see their true numbers.

A servant arrives and tells Macbeth that Lady Macbeth is dead and he reacts with apathy. His misdeeds have robbed him of all feeling so that the death of his wife is just another horrible event in a long series of horrible events. A servant interrupts, saying that Birnam Wood seems to be marching – an optical illusion created by soldiers carrying sticks. Macbeth realizes that he has misinterpreted the witches' prophecy and decides to die fighting. Finally, he meets MacDuff but Macbeth says he does not wish to fight because “none of woman born can harm Macbeth.” MacDuff reveals that he was born via cesarian section and once more, Macbeth says that he does not want to fight him especially now that he knows he will likely die by his hand. Macduff accuses Macbeth of cowardice and when Macbeth lunges towards him, Macduff kills him. Malcolm becomes the King of Scotland.

Characters

The Weird Sisters – Three witches who share prophecies with Macbeth and Banquo.

Hecate – A powerful witch.

Duncan – the King of Scotland.

Malcolm – Duncan's eldest son.

Donalbain – Duncan's youngest son.

Macbeth – A Scottish nobleman who begins the play as the Thane of Glamis. He eventually becomes the Thane of Cawdor and following the death of Duncan, King of Scotland.

Lady Macbeth – Macbeth's wife who encourages him to kill King Duncan.

Banquo – a General in Duncan's army and Scottish nobleman.

Fleance – Banquo's son.

Macduff – A Scottish nobleman, loyal to Duncan.

Lady/Lord Macduff – Macduff's wife.

Lennox, Ross, Angus – Scottish nobles.

Quotes²

“What bloody man is that?” – Duncan (I.ii.1)

- The first line spoken by King Duncan in the play evokes one of *Macbeth*'s primary symbols: blood. The world of *Macbeth* is violent and cruel.

“I have begun to plant thee and will labor
To make thee full of growing.” – Duncan (I.iv.33-34)

- Duncan tells Macbeth that he is elevating his status, using the metaphor of plants. He implies that he is responsible for the start of Macbeth's success and will work hard to make him worthy of further success.

“Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty.” – Lady Macbeth (I.v.47-50)

- Upon receiving a letter from Macbeth detailing the prophecy, Lady Macbeth hopes that her husband will be manly enough to kill the king. She uses gendered language, wishing that she herself could do the deed if only everything “womanly” about her could be replaced with more masculine attributes like cruelty.

“Look like th' innocent
flower,
But be the serpent under 't.” (I.v.77-79)

- Lady Macbeth instructs Macbeth on how to behave once King Duncan arrives for dinner. She evokes the imagery of a snake hiding beneath a beautiful flower – danger lurking under the guise of a welcoming host.

“I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me
I would, while it was smiling in my face
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out.” – Lady Macbeth (I.vii.62-66)

- Lady Macbeth reveals her unnatural desires. Here she refers to knowing what it feels like to nurse babies, which seems to indicate that at one time, she had a child or children (who likely died in infancy). When Macbeth goes back on his promise to kill Duncan, she tells him that she would willingly kill her own children if she, like Macbeth, had sworn to commit murder. Throughout the Early Modern period, women were closely associated with not only motherhood, but maternity. They were seen as nurturers (quite literally – hence the repeated references to breast feeding and milk). Lady Macbeth's behaviour is unnatural and unwomanlike as she claims that she would sooner kill a baby than go back on a vow.

In the play, Macbeth has no children, another indication that any children he and Lady Macbeth had died very young. Throughout the play, noblemen with children are a constant threat to Macbeth's

² All quotations from: <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/macbeth/read/>

power, which is why he arranges for multiple murders. The lack of an heir is dangerous, a worry not unfamiliar to England where inheritance played a large role in shaping the history of the nation: from King Henry VIII who so desperately desired a son that he divorced (and killed) his wives, to his daughter, Elizabeth I, who refused to marry and did not produce an heir. The lack of an heir could create a power vacuum, which is very much what occurred after Elizabeth's death. When James I became king, he already had three living children, including two boys. Thus, the Tudor dynasty that began with Henry VIII's father, Henry VII, ended when Elizabeth died childless. James' accession to the throne marked the beginning of the Stuart dynasty, which would last until 1714.

"Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still." – Macbeth (II.i.44-46)

- Throughout the play, Macbeth experiences visions and hallucinations that often provide symbolic insight into his mindset. As he contemplates murdering Duncan, he imagines he sees a dagger in obvious anticipation of what he is about to do. The dagger is both a temptation and a symbol of death.

"Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep.'" – Macbeth (II.ii.47-48)

- In the aftermath of Duncan's murder, Macbeth returns to his room, his hands stained with blood. He tells Lady Macbeth that he thought he heard a voice say that he murdered sleep. Guilt is one of the major themes of the play and even in the early moments after killing Duncan, Macbeth is already paranoid and anxious. Sleeplessness is symbolic of a troubled conscience. While it is true that Macbeth has murdered Duncan, he has also "murdered" his own ability to sleep peacefully.

"The night has been unruly. Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i' th' air, strange screams of
death,
And prophesying, with accents terrible,
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatched to th' woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamored the livelong night. Some say the Earth
Was feverous and did shake." – Lennox (II.iii.61-69)

- The morning after Macbeth murders Duncan, Lennox tells Macbeth that the night was full of terrible weather and unnatural occurrences. Here, the natural world reflects the horrors of Macbeth's actions.

"There's daggers in men's smiles." – Donalbain (II.iv.165)

- Donalbain and Malcolm decide to flee, knowing they will be framed for the murder of their father. Here, Donalbain speaks of distrust. He knows that someone in the household is likely responsible for Duncan's murder. While the noblemen appear loyal, they may be hiding their true villainy behind false support.

"Blood will have blood." – Macbeth (III.iv.151)

- After seeing Banquo's ghost, Macbeth worries that the truth (that he had Banquo murdered) will somehow be revealed. In the play, blood is closely associated with guilt. In this paranoid speech to Lady Macbeth, Macbeth tells her that blood begets more blood. One violent deed will lead to another.

"By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes." – Second Witch (IV.i.44-45)

- The witches often speak in spells and incantations. As Macbeth approaches, the second witch senses him, notably calling him "wicked."

"Out! damned spot!" – Lady Macbeth (V.i.37)

- Lady Macbeth's slow descent into madness is one of the great tragedies in a play full of tragedies. While it is true that she is, arguably, partially responsible for Macbeth's decision to murder Duncan, her guilt eventually consumes her. Just as Macbeth suffers from hallucinations, here Lady Macbeth frantically imagines that she is stained with blood. A stain that cannot be removed. The stain represents her guilt – no matter how often she cleans herself, there is no erasing what has been done.

"To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing." – Macbeth (V.v.22-31)

- Upon learning of his wife's death, Macbeth reacts with near apathy. He speaks about how brief life is and how pointless it is too because everything leads to death. There are multiple metaphors for life in this speech. Macbeth likens life to a candle, quickly extinguished. He also compares life to a play using the imagery on an actor on stage who recites his lines and leaves once the play is over. In the end, Macbeth feels that life is meaningless.

“Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripped.” – Macduff (V.vii.19-20)

- In what can be described as the play’s biggest plot twist, during the final showdown with Macbeth, Macduff reveals that he was born via cesarian section. The witches’ prophecy claimed that “none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth.” While cesarian sections are now a common and safe medical intervention, during the Elizabethan era they would have almost always resulted in the mother’s death. Modern audiences understand that a woman still very much gave birth to Macduff, but for Shakespeare’s audience, the cesarian section is not the same as “natural” childbirth, meaning Macduff was not born of woman.

Glossary and Context

Greymalkin: A cat. In the opening scene of the play, the first witch refers to “Greymalkin,” her familiar. A witch’s familiar was believed to be a small animal companion who performed tasks for its witch or the devil. This is the origin of the superstition relating to crossing the path of a black cat. To interrupt the work of a witch’s familiar, in this case her black cat, is considered bad luck.

Paddock: A frog. The second witch’s familiar.

Thane: A title given to Scottish nobility that connotes land ownership.

The Weird Sisters: Another name for the three witches who appear in the play. The word “weird” comes from the Old English “*wyrd*,” which can be loosely defined as “fate.” While the modern meaning of “weird” may seem applicable to the witches, their association with “fate” is evocative of the three Fates from Greek mythology who controlled the destiny of each living mortal (and sometimes the gods themselves). In *Macbeth*, the three witches set in motion a series of events that lead to multiple deaths and massive shifts in power. They are both weird (as in strange) and *wyrd* (inextricably linked to the fates of each character).

Glamis and Cawdor: Two villages in Scotland

Hecate: In Greek mythology, Hecate was a goddess who was commonly associated with magic and witchcraft.

Macbeth: The real Macbeth was an eleventh-century Scottish king. While it is true that he succeeded King Duncan I (who was killed in battle by Macbeth’s soldiers), Shakespeare’s Macbeth bears very little in common with the historical Macbeth.

Banquo: During Shakespeare’s era, Banquo was thought to be a real historical figure and contemporary of the real King Macbeth. King James I believed that Banquo was his direct ancestor, which is likely why Shakespeare included the prophecy concerning Banquo in the play. The witches tell Banquo that his heirs will be king.

Themes

Hamartia – A hero's fatal flaw that leads to a tragic end.

Hubris – Excessive pride.

Nature (natural versus unnatural)

Power

Guilt

Supernatural

Symbols

Blood

Ghosts

Stains

Literary Language

Soliloquy – Thoughts spoken out loud when the character is alone or only speaking to themselves.

- Example: "Is this a dagger which I see before me..." (II.i.44-7)

Monologue – A speech given by one character. They can be alone or speaking to someone else, but they are the only speaker.

- Example: "But screw your courage to the sticking place..." (I.vii.70-82)

Pathetic Fallacy – The projection of human emotions onto inanimate things or animals. This often refers to the weather and how it may reflect the particular circumstances or mood of a scene.

- Example: "Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act/Threatens his bloody stage. By th' clock 'tis day,/ And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp." (II.iv.7-9)

Dramatic Irony – When the audience is aware of information that the characters are not.

- Example: The audience is aware of the witches, but when Macbeth first enters the play, he has no idea that the witches exist or that they plan to speak with him.

Metaphor – A comparison between two things.

- Example: "I have begun to plant thee and will labor/To make thee full of growing" (I.iv.32-33). Duncan discusses the effort he has put into making Macbeth a great man by evoking the imagery of planting and growth.

Simile - A comparison using the words "and" or "as" or "like."

- Example: "Your face, my thane, is as a book where men/May read strange matters" (I.vi.73-74).

Macbeth and the Natural World

From its very first breath, *Macbeth* is a play intrinsically tied to nature. Three witches plan to meet “upon the heath,” Macbeth and Lady Macbeth call to the night sky, and storms rage as Macbeth commits his bloody deed.

Nature is in constant conversation with the play’s characters and their actions. It is a reflection of their moods, their darkest desires, and their sins.

While the examples of pathetic fallacy are numerous, “nature” in *Macbeth* can be defined beyond the physical landscape of the play.

The Great Chain of Being

In the Early Modern period, the universe was understood to exist as an ordered hierarchy. God stood at the top of the chain, and below him was all manner of celestial bodies including angels. Humans were also part of the chain, existing between angels and animals. Each category then had its own subhierarchies. At the top of the human chain was the monarch, followed by nobles, merchants, and finally, peasants. In the household, the father/husband was placed in the highest position of power, followed by the mother/wife, children, and then, servants. The chain was synonymous with order. Any disruption to the chain would be considered “unnatural” and lead to chaos.

A nobleman killing a king, for example, only to become king himself is a breach of the natural order of the world. Macbeth’s actions are, in the Elizabethan sense, quite literally unnatural, as he occupies a position that is not his to occupy. If a nobleman can become king, and the king is considered God’s representative on Earth, what does that say about the power structure of the universe?

The play’s references to “nature” and the “unnatural” are, therefore, twofold. At times, the characters refer to unnatural weather conditions or the behaviour of animals. More often, they refer to human behaviour. As Macbeth considers killing Duncan, he wonders to himself, “...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?” (1.3.134-37). Lady Macbeth often challenges the “nature” of her gender, calling on spirits to “unsex” her, to replace her womanly kindness with masculine cruelty – to allow her to behave antithetically to the way women naturally behave.³

³ Elizabeth I’s speech to her troops at Tilbury provides an interesting glimpse into Early Modern perceptions of gendered bodies and body parts. She famously told her soldiers, “I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.” (<https://www.rmg.co.uk/stories/topics/queen-elizabeth-speech-troops-tilbury>)



The Land

In the medieval myth of The Fisher King, a wounded king rules over a barren land, his injured body the embodiment of his suffering kingdom. This link between a monarch's body and the land offers a compelling metaphor: when the king is healthy, his land prospers. When the king is ill, the land withers and dies. Throughout *Macbeth*, characters personify Scotland, commenting on the country's pain as Macbeth decimates the nobility and brings about Civil War. As Malcolm's faction prepares to face Macbeth, Ross mourns, "Alas, poor country! Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot/Be called our mother, but our grave..." (4.3.166-172).

The land can no longer nurture or provide. It is soaked in blood and betrayed by an unnatural king.

Pre-Viewing Discussion Prompts

1. What is “power”?
2. Think about political leaders or politicians – what makes a good leader and what makes a bad leader?
3. Pay specific attention to the characters’ journeys: how does Macbeth begin the play and how does he end the play? How does Lady Macbeth begin the play and how does she end the play? Consider their personalities, their desires, their actions, etc.
4. Do you believe in fate or destiny?
5. Who or what, in your opinion, is the true villain of the play?
6. Themes to consider: power, guilt, blood, the supernatural, nature, corruption

Post-Viewing Discussion Prompts

1. Was Macbeth an evil man corrupted by ambition or a victim of fate?
2. Did your feelings towards Lady Macbeth change throughout the play? How so?
3. How did the setting effect your understanding of the story?
4. How does the play depict the witches? Did this surprise you?
5. Why do you think *Macbeth* is still a relevant story?

Classroom Activities

Writing Activities

- Translate selections into modern English
- Heroes and villains: find examples of heroes and villains in film/literature/video games/TV and consider their character traits. What makes a hero? What makes a villain? Are there similarities and differences? Categorize the characters in *Macbeth* - heroes, villains, or something in between.
- Write a witch’s’ spell in the style of *Macbeth* – look at the imagery used, the poetic form, the symbolism, etc.
- Research context connections: witch trials/hunts, political systems of power, the *Macbeth* curse (examples throughout history), genre in both literature and film (tragedy, horror, etc.)
- Compare Lady Macbeth’s speeches with Elizabeth I’s speech to her troops at Tilbury
- *Macbeth* creative writing prompts:
 - Choose a setting (this can be a place, a time period, etc) and think about what your version of *Macbeth* would look like in that context – what would change? What would stay the same?
 - Re-write the end of the play from MacDuff’s point of view
 - Pick one character and re-write a scene(s) from their point of view

Performance Activities

- Design a solution to the curse of *Macbeth* – secret handshakes, code words, leaving the room, spinning around – get creative to break the curse!
- Ghosts and prophecies on stage: how to stage characters or scenes that are invisible? Some productions include an actor playing the ghost of Banquo in the dinner scene, some do not and Macbeth reacts to empty space. What about the witches’ prophecies?
- Opportunity to learn about dialogue forms: soliloquy, monologue, argument, etc.
- Mock trial: Lady Macbeth or Macbeth accused of murder
- Debate: who is to blame for the ultimate downfall of Macbeth?
 - Macbeth
 - Lady Macbeth
 - The Witches
 - Macduff
 - Banquo

Visual Art Activities

- Film comparison: consider changes in tone, setting, characterization
- Stage craft: design a set (draw/craft) – what are its features, how would you craft these for a stage?
- Create a blueprint of Macbeth’s castle: where was Duncan murdered? Where was the dinner party and ghost of Banquo? Where is Macbeth’s bedroom?
- Costume design (research opportunity: fashion, costume history, etc.)
- Recreate scenes in different forms of media: graphic novels, memes, audio or visual recordings, etc.

Daemonologie⁴

The following are experts from the preface of from *Daemonologie* by James VI and I.

1. Examine seventeenth-century English. Hint: “u” is often used instead of “v”
2. What can we learn about King James from his writing?

How did James divide his book? What is the topic of each chapter?

And for to make this treatise the more pleasaunt and facill, I haue put it in forme of a Dialogue, which I haue diuided into three bookes: The first speaking of Magie in general, and **Necromancie** in special. The second of Sorcerie and Witch-craft: and the thirde, containes a discourse of all these kindes of spirits, & Spectres that appeares & trobles persones: together with a conclusion of the whol work.

According to James, what is his intention for the book?

My intention in this labour, is only to proue two things, as I haue alreadie said: the one, that such diuelish artes haue bene and are. The other, what exact trial and seure punishment they merite: & therefore reason I, what kinde of things are possible to be performed in these arts, & by what naturall causes they may be, not that I touch every particular thing of the Deuils power, for that were infinite:

⁴ Source: <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/25929/pg25929-images.html>

According to James, what can magicians do with their powers?

... speaking of the power of Magiciens, in the first book & sixt Chapter: I say, that they can suddenly cause be brought vnto them, all kindes of daintie disshes, by their familiar spirit: Since as a thiefe he delightes to steale, and as a spirite, he can subillie & suddenlie inough transport the same. Now vnder this *genus* may be comprehended al particulars, depending thereupon; Such as the bringing Wine out of a Wall, (as we haue heard oft to haue bene practised] and such others; which particulars, are sufficientlie proved by the reasons of the general.

What do witches do to men?

I say and proue by diuerse arguments, that Witches can, by the power of their Master, cure or cast on diseases: Now by these same reasones, that proues their power by the Deuil of diseases in generally is aswell proued their power in speciall: as of weakening the nature of some men,

Glossary

Necromancy (*necromancie*) – During the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, magic was divided into different categories. Necromancy was considered dark magic and usually meant the ability to speak with the dead.

Curriculum Connections

ELA

Explore thoughts, ideas, feelings, and experiences:

- Modern connections – examples of tragedies/tragic characters from film or television (compare and contrast)
- Approach the play from a subjective perspective: personal opinions, feelings regarding characters and character motivation
- Shakespearean tragedy: what makes tragedy a tragedy? What are the features of a Shakespearean tragedy?

Understanding Forms and Techniques:

- Analysis of poetic forms, poetic language, vocabulary
- Character analysis based on what is said by the character/what other characters say about the character
- Examples of figurative language: personification, metaphor, simile, symbolism, allusion, etc.
- Creative writing opportunities for annotation and translation, character analysis
- Film study: direction, cinematography, screenplay adaptation
- Incorporation of visual arts/mixed media – storyboards of each scene, turning the play into a graphic novel, experimenting with different forms of media (audio, visual) and adaptation theory

Organize, Record, Evaluate:

- Research suggestions: Shakespeare's sources including *Daemonologie* by James I, Elizabethan theatre, film and literary genres (horror, Shakespeare on film, etc.), witch hunts and witch trials
- Practice research skills and introduce primary sources and secondary sources

Enhance the clarity and artistry of communication:

- Prepare scenes for performance or to be read out loud
- Opportunity for students to practice their debating/argumentative skills

- Possible debate questions:
 - Macbeth is/is not a tragic hero.
 - Lady Macbeth is/is not responsible for Macbeth's downfall.
 - The witches are/are not responsible for Macbeth's downfall.
 - Who should be king (who would make the best leader)?

Celebrate and build community:

- Study the inclusion of family and community in the SIR film:
 - The witches and working class characters
 - Macbeth and Lady Macbeth
- Group scene work:
 - The Witches (Act 1 Scene 1)
 - The dinner scene (Act 3 Scene 4)

Drama

Connections to the four essential learning areas in the Drama (DR) Framework:

Theatre History

- Elizabethan theatre and its conceits: acting troops, all-male performers, performance spaces (manor homes and halls)
- Analysis of different productions – both on stage and onscreen
- Shakespearean Tragedy and its influence
- Comparison to other popular Early-Modern plays
- History of stagecraft (costumes and special effects)

Creation and Response

- Discussion of the play as literature in comparison to the play on stage
- Discussion of theatre experiences – the setting (type of stage, set design, costumes, audience participation, incorporation of music or dance, etc.)

Visual Arts

There are many opportunities to meet the four essential learning areas listed in the Visual Arts (VA) Framework.

Set Design:

- Analyzing existing sets/structures
- Considering the previous productions – the evolution of stage craft, set design
- Creation of sets/set design

Costumes:

- Analysis of shifting trends in costuming for *Macbeth* from a historical perspective into modernity
- Costume as character – discussion of how costumes may convey a character's class, nationality, personality, etc.
- Elizabethan theatre and gendered costuming
- Opportunity to design costumes

Film:

- Use SIR's film adaptation to analyze the play
- Comparative work with other film versions
- Study of setting and cinematography
- Local Manitoba film industry: opportunity for further exploration within the community and industry

Resources

The First Folio

- An overview of the First Folio from the Victoria and Albert Museum:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=01Ytsmn4gv4>
- Short documentary on the First Folio by the Folger Library:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WicxFbaSxgE>
- Digital facsimile of the First Folio from the Bodleian Library, Oxford:
<https://firstfolio.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/book.html>
- Boston University's copy of the First Folio (digitized):
<https://archive.org/details/mrvilliamshakes00shak/page/n23/mode/2up>

Shakespeare – General Information

- Detailed information about Shakespeare's life from the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust:
<https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/>
- Virtual tour of the Globe Theatre: <https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/discover/about-us/virtual-tour/>

Contexts

- *Daemonology* by King James I and VI:
<https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/25929>
- Scottish sources on witches from the National Museum of Scotland:
<https://www.nls.uk/learning-zone/literature-and-language/themes-in-focus/witches/>
- Elizabethan Fashion:
<https://fashionhistory.fitnyc.edu/1590-1599/>
- The Astor Place Riot:
<https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/astor-place-riot-macbeth-new-york/>

Great Chain of Being Resources

- Chart explanation
<https://blaakenglish.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/great-chain-of-being-and-the-divine-order.pdf>

- Detailed breakdown of each level of the Great Chain of Being and explanation of the Divine Right of Kings (by James I)
<https://www.bpi.edu/ourpages/auto/2016/11/17/32578084/The%20Great%20Chain%20of%20Being%20and%20King%20James%20Divine%20Right%20of%20Kings.docx?rnd=1480620134772>

Clips from Various Productions

- 1979 Trevor Nunn production starring Ian McKellan and Judy Dench
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lgEshHhnLqU>
- Act 1 Scene 1
 - Comparison between five films:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UWyegNZOqQE&t=13s>
- Act 1 Scene 3
 - Royal Shakespeare Company: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vumgtbMObAA>
 - Globe Theatre: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bM3h0Gb2O20>
- Act 1 Scene 7
 - Simon Godwin's 2024 production: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zl3S_3GrXzM
- Act 2 Scene 1
 - PBS recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pusU90ov8pQ&t=45s>
 - *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021) directed by Joel Coen:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kv_QYZQVGXg
 - Royal Shakespeare Company: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hUEORBWHAVU>
- Act 3 Scene 4
 - Starring Sir Patrick Stewart: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rR7XS9pZoV0>
- Act 5 Scene 1
 - Royal Shakespeare Company: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oKk14heP2Tw>
- Act 5 Scene 5
 - Royal Shakespeare Company: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RltYmcew67I>
 - PBS recording: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNDWBWFrjM>

Notable Film Adaptations

- *Macbeth* (1948) directed by Orson Welles
- *Macbeth* (1971) directed by Roman Polanski
- *Macbeth* (2010) directed by Rupert Goold
- *Macbeth* (2015) directed by Justin Kurzel
- *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (2021) directed by Joel Coen

Teaching Resources

- Resources for teaching *Macbeth* from the Royal Shakespeare Company:
<https://www.rsc.org.uk/shakespeare-learning-zone/macbeth>

- Folger Shakespeare Library teaching resources:
<https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/macbeth/#for-teachers>
- Lesson plans from Shakespeare's Globe Theatre:
<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/learn/secondary-schools/playing-shakespeare-with-deutsche-bank/macbeth-playing-shakespeare/staffroom/#new-teaching-resources>
- Stratford Festival *Macbeth* teacher's guide:
<https://www.stratfordfestival.ca/Learn/Teachers/TeachingResources/PerformancePlus/Macbeth>