

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
MACBETH
FEBRUARY 9 - MARCH 9, 2025



Dear School Partner,

Welcome to A Noise Within Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome you to the 2024-25 season—a season that we like to call **True Grit**—with stories that delve into the depths of tenacity and determination. In *Macbeth*, a husband and a wife tiptoe the line between ambition and fate, posing the essential question: *how far will a person go in the pursuit of power?*

In this study guide, you will find articles, classroom activities, behind-the-scenes interviews, and other exciting materials, all crafted to align with the Common Core and the California VAPA Standards. This study guide can be enjoyed by teachers and students alike, our hope being that teachers and students enjoy it together!

We offer this study guide as a free resource for contextualizing the show and drawing parallels with our modern world, and you can find guides from our past seasons available for download on our website.

We hope this study guide will prepare you to enjoy the show to its fullest potential and to create a lasting memory of a fantastic day at the theatre. We are happy to have you!

Warmly,

A Noise Within Education



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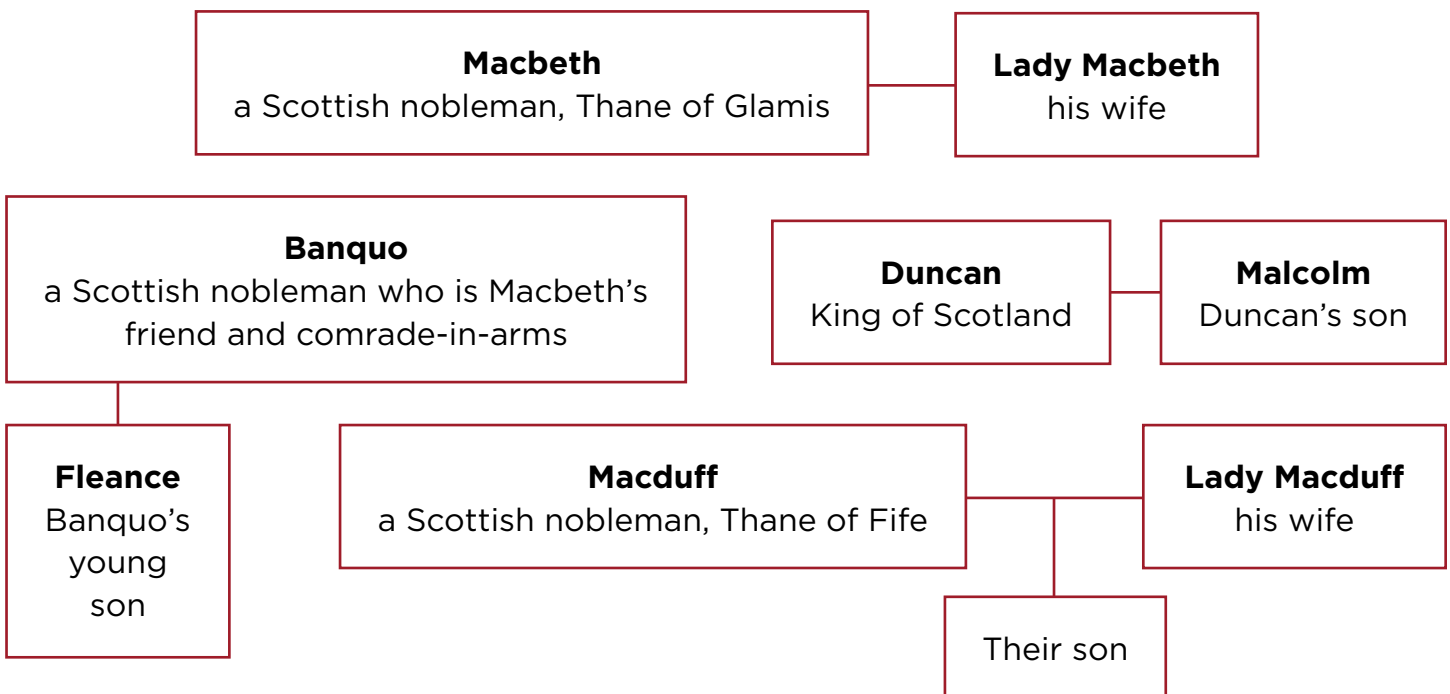
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Macbeth

Out, damned spot! Out, I say!

Central Characters:



The Supernatural:

Three Witches, the Weird Sisters
Three Apparitions

Scottish Lords:

Ross, Menteith, Lennox,
Angus, Caithness

Other Characters:

Seyton, Siward (Earl of Northumberland) and his son, Murderers, a Doctor, a Waiting Woman, the Porter, Lords, Attendants, an Old Man, Soldiers, Messengers

Play Synopsis

Act 1

Sc. 1: Three witches (**the “Weird Sisters”**) come together to discuss where and when they will meet with Macbeth.

Sc. 2: **Duncan, the King of Scotland**, receives word that his troops have defeated the armies of the Thane of Cawdor, who sought to overthrow Duncan. The king learns that two of his Thanes (noblemen), Macbeth and Banquo, distinguished themselves in battle. Duncan announces that he will bestow the title of Thane of Cawdor upon Macbeth.

Sc. 3: **Macbeth and Banquo** encounter the Weird Sisters, who greet Macbeth with his current title (Thane of Glamis), his new title (Thane of Cawdor), and as “King hereafter.” Macbeth demands to know more, but the witches vanish. **Ross** arrives and tells Macbeth that he is now Thane of Cawdor. Shocked, Macbeth wonders privately whether he will also become King, as the witches seemed to prophesy.

Sc. 4: Duncan hears about the execution of the treacherous Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo enter, and Duncan praises them for their valor. He then names **his elder son, Malcolm**, as his heir. Macbeth is dismayed by this news and begins plotting to become King himself.

Sc. 5: **Lady Macbeth** reads a letter from her husband that describes what has happened. She plans to ensure that Macbeth becomes king, and she invokes the powers of darkness to enter her body and strengthen her. Macbeth arrives and tells her that Duncan will be there soon, and Lady Macbeth begins persuading Macbeth to kill Duncan.

Sc. 6: Duncan arrives and is welcomed by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Sc. 7: While Duncan attends a feast in his honor, Macbeth agonizes over his plan to murder Duncan. Lady Macbeth enters, and Macbeth tells her that they will not continue with their scheme, but she convinces him to change his mind.



Play Synopsis *continued*

Act 2

Sc. 1: Banquo speaks with **his young son, Fleance**, telling him that he feels uneasy. Macbeth enters, and he and Banquo speak about the Weird Sisters. Banquo leaves, and Macbeth sees a dagger suspended in the air as he goes to murder Duncan.

Sc. 2: Lady Macbeth enters, having drugged **Duncan's guards**. Macbeth enters, his hands bloody from murdering Duncan. He has forgotten to leave the daggers beside the guards, but he is too shaken to return, so Lady Macbeth does so. The scene ends with knocking at the door, and Macbeth and Lady Macbeth retire, Macbeth already regretting his deed.

Sc. 3: **The Porter** delivers a humorous soliloquy before opening the door to **Lennox and Macduff**, who have come to escort Duncan to his castle. Lennox tells Macbeth about the strange events of the night while Macduff goes to waken Duncan. He reappears horrified, having found the King murdered. During the commotion that follows, Malcolm, fearing for his life, quickly departs.

Sc. 4: Ross, Macduff, and an Old Man discuss recent events. Macduff informs the others that Macbeth has been named King of Scotland and has gone to attend his coronation at Scone (pronounced "Skoon").

Act 3

Sc. 1: Banquo privately expresses his suspicions of Macbeth. Macbeth enters and urges Banquo to attend a feast that evening. Left alone, Macbeth sends for **two murderers** and commands them to follow Banquo and murder him and Fleance.

Sc. 2: Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that he will not find peace until Banquo and Fleance are dead.

Sc. 3: The murderers ambush Banquo and Fleance. They kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes.

Sc. 4: At the banquet that evening, Macbeth learns from the murderers that Fleance survives. **Banquo's Ghost** appears, though only Macbeth can see him. Lady Macbeth orders the other guests to leave. Macbeth tells his wife that he will seek out the Witches.

Sc. 5: Lennox and another Lord discuss their suspicions about Macbeth and their concerns for Macduff, who has gone to the court of the English King Edward, where Malcolm has taken refuge. Macduff hopes to persuade Malcolm to return with an army to Scotland.

Play Synopsis *continued*

Act 4

Sc. 1: The Witches chant as they add ingredients to a potion. Macbeth arrives and demands to know more about the future. They show him various apparitions that deliver prophecies. Macbeth feels confident but also shaken by what he believes he has learned.

Sc. 2: In Fife, Lady Macduff tells Ross that she is angry that Macduff has gone to England, leaving herself and their children defenseless. Ross leaves, and a Messenger arrives to warn Lady Macduff to flee immediately. She is unable to do so, however, before several murderers enter, with deadly intent.

Sc. 3: Macduff, at the English court, attempts to persuade Malcolm to return to Scotland, but Malcolm tests him by listing all the ways he's unfit to rule. Persuaded by Macduff's sincerity, however, he agrees. Ross enters and tells Macduff that his wife and children have all been murdered at Macbeth's orders.

Act 5

Sc. 1: Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and, observed by a doctor and a waiting woman, reveals her guilt, both in words and with her gesture of obsessively washing her hands.

Sc. 2: The Scottish lords loyal to Malcolm plan to join with him and march upon Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane.

Sc. 3: Macbeth becomes increasingly unhinged as he prepares for battle.

Scenes 4-7: The battle begins and rages on as Macbeth clings to a crazed belief in his own invincibility.

Sc. 8: Macduff confronts Macbeth.

Sc. 9: Malcolm is victorious, and he announces his plan to be crowned **King of Scotland**.

WITCHY FACTS ABOUT **MACBETH**

In Shakespeare's time, there were no women actors. It was thought to be unsuitable for a woman to appear onstage. The women's roles were usually taken by boy and teenage actors whose voices had not changed.

Twelfth Night at the Belasco Theatre. Wikimedia Commons



William Shakespeare

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was an English playwright, poet, and actor who lived and wrote during the Elizabethan (Queen Elizabeth I) and Jacobean (King James I) eras. Born in Stratford-upon-Avon, roughly 100 miles northwest of London, on April 23, 1564, William was the third child of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, and the only son who survived to adulthood. William received an excellent education at the local grammar school, where he would have studied Latin and the works of classical authors, as well as grammar, rhetoric, and history. In 1582 William married Anne (or Agnes) Hathaway, who was eight years older than he, and with whom he had three children: a daughter, Susannah (1583), and twins, Judith and Hamnet (1585). Hamnet died at the age of eleven, most likely of the plague, which reoccurred frequently in England throughout Shakespeare's lifetime (often leading to the mandatory closing of London's theaters).

The first records of William Shakespeare's presence in London date from 1592. His earliest plays, including the *Henry VI* history plays and such early comedies as *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *Love's Labour's Lost*, were performed by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, an acting company in which Shakespeare was an actor and shareholder as well as a playwright. By the mid-1590's, Shakespeare had begun writing his most famous comedies, including *As You Like It*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, and *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as the tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*, which were all major commercial successes. Shakespeare wrote his most powerful tragedies (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*) between 1599 and 1608. In the final years of his playwrighting career, Shakespeare turned to writing the Late Romances (*Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, and *The Tempest*). During these years, Shakespeare also wrote a sonnet sequence; longer narrative poems (the best known is "Venus and Adonis"); and a longer allegorical poem ("The Phoenix and the Turtle"). Throughout his professional career, Shakespeare divided his time between London and Stratford, but he returned to Stratford permanently in 1612 or 1613, a few years before he died, on his 52nd birthday, in 1616.



William Shakespeare (painted ca. 1600-1610).
Wikimedia Commons.

William Shakespeare *continued*

Most of Shakespeare's plays were performed in the Globe Theatre, an outdoor theater on the South Bank of the Thames that accommodated approximately 3,000 audience members (including "Groundlings," who stood in the large open yard in front of the stage, and wealthier people who paid to sit in the three gallery levels). Plays were performed most afternoons during the summer months. In the 1990's, a new theatre was built very close to the site of the original Globe theatre that carefully recreated the earlier structure. Renamed Shakespeare's Globe, the theatre today is a thriving venue that hosts plays, conferences, exhibits, and family events year-round for over 1.25 million visitors from around the world each year.

At the time of Shakespeare's death, fewer than half of his plays had been published (and some of those that had been were pirated and inaccurate). Thanks to the hard work of two friends and fellow actors of Shakespeare's—John Heminges and Henry Condell—the First Folio, composed of thirty-six of Shakespeare's plays, was published in 1623. *Macbeth* was one of the plays in the First Folio that had not previously appeared in print, so without the efforts of Heminges, Condell, and many others, this haunting tragedy about the perils of giving in to personal ambition and the lust for power would have been lost to us forever.



Elizabethan Timeline



1558

Queen Elizabeth I ascends the English throne.

1564

Shakespeare is born in Stratford-Upon-Avon, England.

1582

Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway.

1587

Shakespeare arrives in London to pursue theatre.

1603

Queen Elizabeth I dies. King James I ascends the throne.

1599

The Lord Chamberlain's Men build the Globe Theatre.

1594-96

Shakespeare writes *Romeo and Juliet*.

1594

Shakespeare joins the Lord Chamberlain's Men as actor, writer, and part owner.

1606

Shakespeare writes *Macbeth*.

1613

During a performance of *Henry VIII*, a major fire breaks out and burns down the Globe Theatre.

1614

The Globe Theatre is rebuilt.

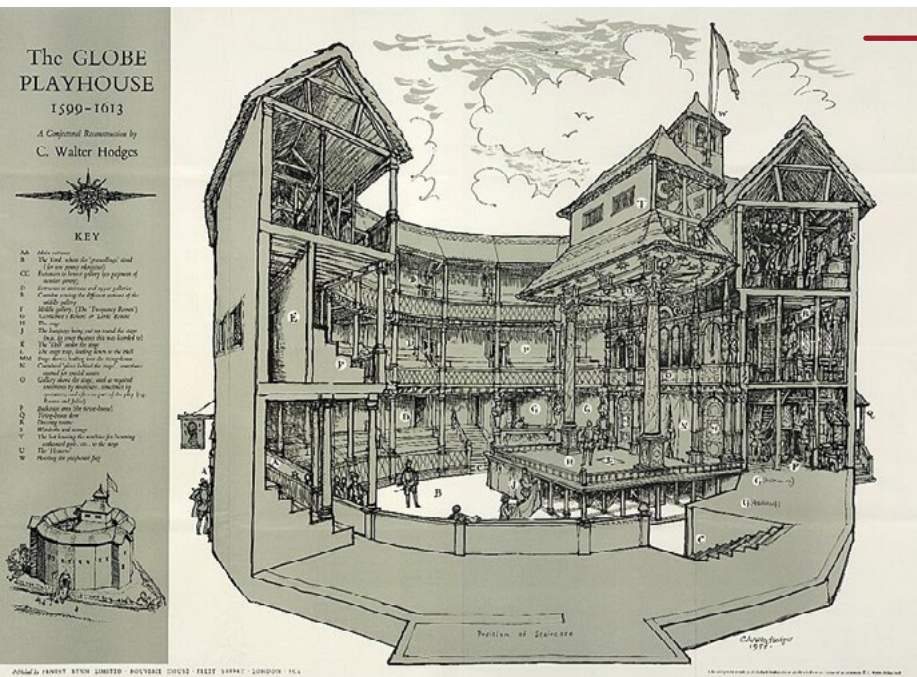
1616

William Shakespeare dies at the age of 52.



1997

The Globe Theatre is reconstructed one street away from its original location.

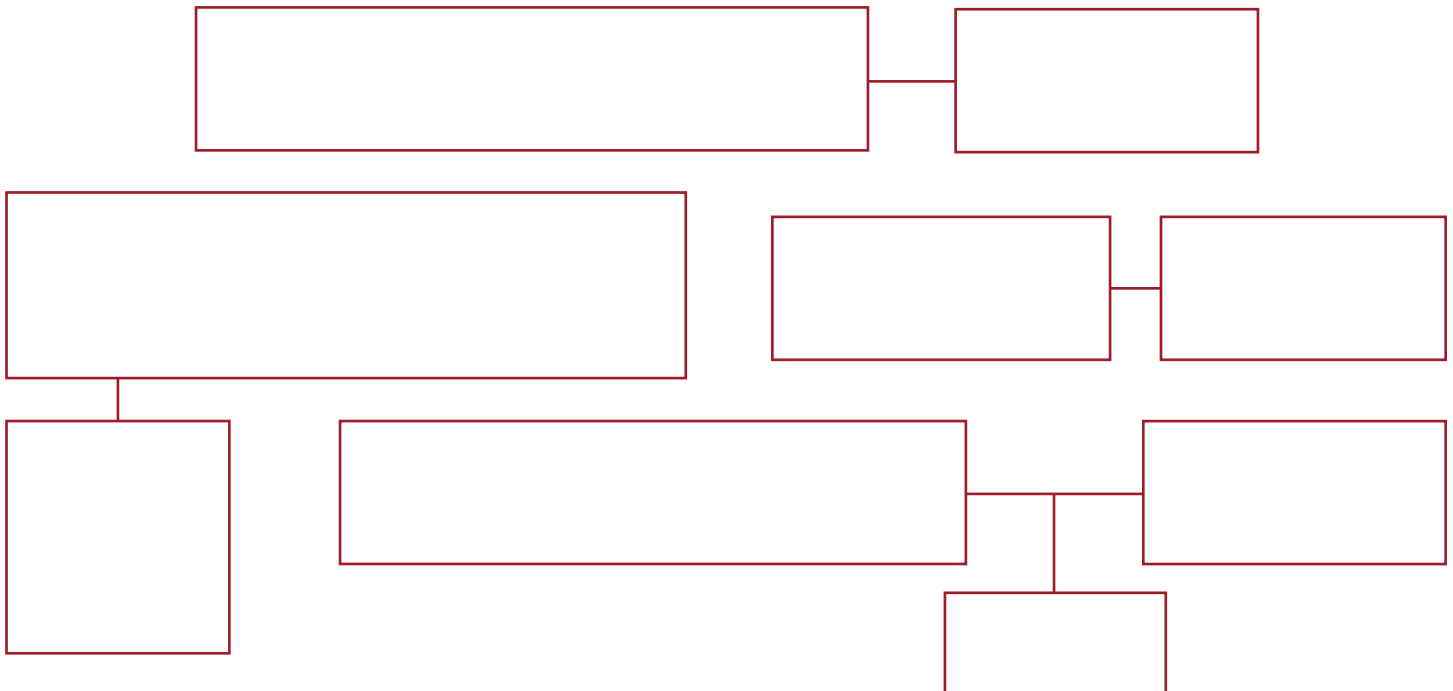


Reconstruction of the Globe Theatre by C. Walter Hodges. Folger Shakespeare Library

Macbeth Character Map

Can you complete the *Macbeth* Character Map on your own? In each box—add one adjective to describe that character!

Central Characters:



The Supernatural:

Scottish Lords:

Other Characters:

Shakespeare's Canon

ACTIVITY

Objective

Investigate the plays in Shakespeare's canon.

Step 1: What is a canon?

A **canon** is a collection of books, poems, plays, or other pieces of writing—usually organized by a tradition, culture, or time period. Sometimes—even writers themselves are known for their own literary canon!

William Shakespeare is one of the most influential and prolific writers in Western literature—and so we can refer to his body of works as Shakespeare's canon!

Shakespeare wrote 38 plays, 154 sonnets, and several narrative poems. There are some mysteries around a few of them and other pieces he may have written or co-written.

Step 2: The Plays

Take a look at Shakespeare's plays in the order in which we think they might have been written.

Circle the plays that you've seen or heard of!

The Two Gentlemen of Verona (1587-1591)

The Merchant of Venice (1596-97)

All's Well That Ends Well (1603-1606)

The Taming of the Shrew (1592)

Henry IV Part 1 (1596-97)

Timon of Athens (estimated 1604-1606)

Henry VI Part II (1591-92)

The Merry Wives of Windsor (1597-1601)

King Lear (1605-06)

Henry VI Part I (1591-92)

Henry IV Part II (1597-98)

Macbeth (1606)

Henry VI Part III (1591-92)

Much Ado About Nothing (1598)

Antony and Cleopatra (1606)

Titus Andronicus (1591-92)

Henry V (1599)

Coriolanus (1608)

Richard III (1592 or 1594)

Julius Caesar (1599)

Pericles (1608)

The Comedy of Errors (1594)

As You Like It (1599)

Cymbeline (1610)

Love's Labour's Lost (1595-96)

Hamlet (1600)

The Winter's Tale (1611)

A Midsummer Night's Dream (1595)

Twelfth Night (1601)

The Tempest (1611)

Romeo and Juliet (1595)

Troilus and Cressida (1601-02)

Henry VIII (1613)

Richard II (1595)

Othello (1604)

The Two Noble Kinsmen (1613-1614)

King John (1596)

Measure for Measure (1604)

Shakespeare's Canon *continued*

Step 3: Research the Canon

Can you research Shakespeare's plays and organize them into the following genres?

The Comedies	The Tragedies	The Histories

Shakespeare's Canon *continued*

Can you use your internet research skills to find the answers to these questions?

How does a Shakespearean comedy typically end? _____

How does a Shakespearean tragedy typically end? _____

Which four plays are sometimes referred to as the 'Problem Plays' and why?

Which of Shakespeare's plays is the longest? _____

Rumor has it that Queen Elizabeth I requested Shakespeare to write which play? Why?

Which play did Shakespeare write for King James I? What clues in the story suggest that?

The First Folio was published in 1623 seven years after Shakespeare's death; which plays were not printed in that folio?

Themes & Motifs



Cuatzo Mesa, C. Unsplash.com

Ambition and Power

Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's mutual ambition leads them to abandon all morality in their blind pursuit of power. Although Macbeth's ambition is often described as his "tragic flaw," Shakespeare actually presents the increasingly ruthless and savage crimes that Macbeth and his wife commit as a series of choices. In the end, both characters are completely detached from their true natures, and from all natural (that is, human) emotions.

In particular, Shakespeare emphasizes in *Macbeth* what happens when ambition distances someone from emotions that we would characterize today as showing empathy: Lady Macbeth is ultimately driven insane by her own efforts to repress all empathic feelings, while Macbeth actually succeeds in repressing his emotions to the point where he is unmoved even by the news of his wife's death.

Fate vs. Free Will

When Macbeth first encounters the Weird Sisters, his reactions to their greetings, and his subsequent response to the news that he has been promoted to Thane of Cawdor, suggest that he has been mulling over these possibilities in the past. And although he says to himself, "If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me / Without my stir," he nevertheless proceeds to take matters literally into his own hands. Shakespeare provides no easy answers to the question of whether Macbeth acts from his own free will or whether he is somehow destined to commit his crimes. In these early scenes, the Weird Sisters certainly seem closer to the three Fates, such as we see in Greek and Norse mythology, than they do to witches. Nevertheless, the question of how much Macbeth is responsible for his own actions is extremely complicated.

Themes & Motifs *continued*

The Supernatural

Although supernatural elements are present in several of Shakespeare's plays, the supernatural is at its most uncanny and malevolent in *Macbeth*. The Weird Sisters (who evoke the three Fates from Greek and Norse mythology) are morally ambiguous characters at best, and frightening at worst, while Banquo's ghost is truly terrifying (and recalls the horrific avenging spirits of Greek mythology known as the Furies). The sense of evil pervades the play so thoroughly that by the mid-1600's the play was thought to be cursed, and some theater professionals treat the play with superstitious caution even to this day.

Witchcraft

During the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, many people from all classes of society believed in witches and witchcraft. The three witches, or Weird (that is, "uncanny" or "strange") Sisters, and their spells, reflect both the fascination and the fear that such figures held within the British imagination. King James I himself had written a treatise on witchcraft in 1597 entitled *Demonologie*, an indication that belief in witches was not limited to the lower or illiterate classes.



WITCHY FACTS ABOUT **MACBETH**

Over the years many superstitions have grown up around Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Even today, some theatre professionals consider it to be risky and even dangerous to perform. Historically, the most common reason given for believing in "the curse of *Macbeth*" has been that Shakespeare was thought to have written actual spells and black magic rituals into the witches' dialogue and their chants. These superstitions persist to this day: many theater actors and crew members refuse to speak the name of Macbeth in a theater unless they're delivering a line from the play.

Themes & Motifs *continued*

Marriage

For centuries, numerous readers, students, scholars, and audience members have tried to understand and define the Macbeths' marriage, but it defies easy categorization. Interestingly, we see few married couples (as opposed to young couples before they marry) in Shakespeare's plays, and those we encounter are typically not happy (for example, *Othello's* Iago and Emilia) or are not happy for very long (*Othello* and Desdemona). In *Macbeth*, however, we see an intimate portrait of a marriage in which both partners are strongly connected by their shared goals and seem, if not especially happy now, to have been so in the recent past. In Lauren Gunderson's play *The Book of Will*, the character Henry Condell (an actor and friend of Shakespeare's) remarks that the Macbeths were "ironically, the happiest couple [Shakespeare] wrote." The line is meant to be funny, and it *is* funny in performance, largely because most of us are aware that the Macbeths end up in separate, brutal places. Nevertheless, Condell isn't entirely wrong, because he speaks to what is clearly a powerful psychological bond between these two characters.

Women's Influence

For well over a century, many scholars and readers have laid blame on Lady Macbeth as the chief instigator of Macbeth's wicked deeds, and the evil manipulator of a vulnerable man who is far too susceptible to her persuasive tactics. The Weird Sisters represent another, uncanny type of female power. Feminist criticism has explored both of these topics, and recent productions of *Macbeth* tend to downplay the idea of Lady Macbeth as a wicked force that preys upon Macbeth, who never would have committed his crimes if his wife hadn't compelled him to. It can be helpful to look at this topic within the play's historical context. Queen Elizabeth I had recently died after ruling England for forty-five years. She had been the longest reigning female monarch in living memory, and she was powerful and respected (and also beloved).

Nevertheless, her extraordinary reign was in stark contrast to the condition of virtually every other woman, of any class, in England at the time: most women had no say in the most important aspects of their lives; they were often compelled to marry someone whom they did not love; they held little economic or other power within society; and they frequently died in childbirth. Given the innate tension in Elizabethan society between a female ruler with ultimate power and every other woman with none, Shakespeare's explorations in *Macbeth* of female power and the social anxiety that it caused would likely not have been possible during Elizabeth's reign.

Themes & Motifs *continued*

Inheritance and Transfer of Power

Although Lady Macbeth recalls her “tender” feelings towards her nursing infant, the Macbeths of Shakespeare’s play apparently have no living children. The Weird Sisters show Macbeth an apparition that he interprets as showing him that Banquo’s descendants will inherit the thrones of Scotland and eventually of other countries as well—a prospect that fills Macbeth with horror and despair. The fact that inheritance of the throne in medieval Scotland did not always pass automatically from father to son explains why so many characters in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* seem unusually preoccupied with questions of inheritance, especially in cases where a king did not have a living male heir.



Above: Queen Elizabeth I by George Gower. Getarchive.net.

Left: Blue Plaque commemorating a visit by William Shakespeare to Marlborough, Wilshire in the 1590's. Flickr.com

Furthermore, in 1606/1607 (when *Macbeth* was most likely written and first performed), English citizens would have had fresh in their minds the anxiety that many of them had felt over the question of who would succeed Queen Elizabeth I, who died in 1603 having never been married, and who therefore left behind no child to inherit the throne. Although she had named James VI of Scotland as her successor (James was, like Elizabeth, a Protestant), many of her subjects were deeply concerned about whether the promised peaceful transfer of power would actually take place, or whether the country would again be plunged into the religious strife and civil war that had characterized the first half of the sixteenth century.

Seen in this context, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* may well have represented the playwright’s efforts to legitimize and strengthen James’s authority. It is worth remembering that Shakespeare’s theater company, previously known as the Lord Chamberlain’s Men because the Lord Chamberlain was their chief patron, became the King’s Men in 1603 because they were favored and financially supported by King James I himself. Shakespeare and his company would have had a vested interest in reinforcing James’s legitimacy. (For more about James’s influence, see the essay “*James I and Macbeth.*”)

Female Power in *Macbeth*

Despite being the fourth shortest Shakespeare play in the entire canon (and by far the shortest of the four major tragedies), *Macbeth* has stirred up a considerable amount of controversy over the centuries. And no topic has proved more contentious than the roles the female characters play in the drama, and particularly the question of the power and influence these characters exert upon Macbeth himself.

As is so often the case with Shakespeare's works, how we understand the characters, and consequently how we choose to perform the plays, often reveals far more about ourselves than these choices reveal about the plays. James Shapiro points out in his book *Shakespeare in a Divided America* (2020) that performance choices often illuminate not only the broader societal values of the time but also the deep-seated anxieties of that time as well. So, for example, attitudes towards *Othello* acquire a particular resonance in pre-Civil War America, and the Cole Porter musical *Kiss Me, Kate* (an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*) was revised to be more reassuring to 1950's audiences who were anxiously attempting to dial back the clock on the freedoms women had acquired during WWII. As for *Macbeth*, Shapiro describes how nineteenth-century American productions of the play became a focal point for concerns about "unfeminine" behavior (among other anxieties).

Writing in 1606, Shakespeare would not have had 21st-century language available to him when questioning the gender binary, but this doesn't mean that he didn't question it. Although women could attend the theatre during Shakespeare's time, they were not permitted to act, which meant that all the female roles were played by boys and teenagers whose voices had not yet changed. Throughout his plays, from comedies to tragedies, Shakespeare regularly takes advantage of this Elizabethan stage convention to play with the gender binary in order to shake up conventional notions of what constituted so-called



Named the youngest self-made billionaire woman by Forbes. Rihanna. Xu, J. Flickr.com

Female Power in *Macbeth* continued

proper masculine or feminine behavior. Think of Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*, in which a boy actor would have played the heroine, Rosalind, a character who then disguises herself as a boy (named Ganymede), who then pretends to be—Rosalind. Surely there were moments when many members of Shakespeare's audience would have lost track of whether they were supposedly watching a man or a woman.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare signals from the opening scene with the three Weird Sisters—who are clearly plotting something, although we don't yet know what—that an ambiguous female power will feature significantly in the play, but it is Lady Macbeth who embodies the most formidable example of that influence. From her first appearance, Lady Macbeth is preoccupied with power, and she describes it in conventionally gendered terms. Macbeth, she muses, is “too full o’ the milk of human kindness,” so she herself calls upon the forces of darkness to “unsex me here,” and to banish the literal milk that is in her own breasts. She invites these malevolent spirits to render her un-female so that she will have the necessary strength to compel Macbeth to do what he must to become King. Her efforts to deny and reject her perceived womanly qualities—her compassion, her empathy, her nurturing impulses—are so unnatural that they eventually drive her mad.

At the same time, Lady Macbeth repeatedly manipulates Macbeth by goading him to act more like a man. She alternates between urging him to behave ruthlessly and, when Macbeth wavers, by infantilizing him and questioning his manhood. This tactic is so persuasive that Macbeth commends his wife for it, saying “Bring forth men-children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males.” He is saying, in effect,



Female Power in *Macbeth* continued

that she's a better man than he is.

Shakespeare's representation of traits that were traditionally thought of as masculine or feminine is highly nuanced, and even though Lady Macbeth is destroyed by her attempts to stifle traditionally feminine qualities, the same is true of Macbeth himself. His speech near the play's conclusion ("My way of life has fallen into the sere") is a mournful acknowledgment of the bleakness of his life, the result of repressing these same qualities in order to gain the type of power and influence that every man supposedly desires. Without kindness or empathy, Macbeth's life becomes a wasteland as barren as the heath where we see the Weird Sisters in the play's opening scene.

Female power in *Macbeth* turns out to be a complex thing, because Shakespeare strongly implies that true female power lies not in manipulating men by playing on their insecurities, or in women denying their own nurturing impulses, but in cultivating qualities of empathy, compassion, and love. Moreover, the playwright suggests that male power also resides in cultivating these same qualities, because without them, even a King will find, as Macbeth does, that "life's but a walking shadow." Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, in repressing their basic humanity, find themselves living a life that is little more than a waking nightmare. While seeming on the surface to be reinforcing the gender binary as it was understood in the time, Shakespeare is in fact saying something far more radical, especially within the historical context of early modern England: the qualities that make us human are not gendered, and suppressing those qualities—especially the ones that are traditionally seen as feminine—hurts us all.



"We Can Do It!" 1942 USA World War II homefront poster.
Wikimedia Commons

Master Shakespeare's Language

ACTIVITY

Objective

Define verse, prose, and trochaic tetrameter.

Step 1: Shakespeare's Language

Do you think the words in a Shakespeare play sound funky? If you think yes, then how does a Shakespeare play sound?

Did you say it sounds like POETRY or MUSIC? Then guess what – you are correct! Most of Shakespeare's plays are written in a type of poetry called verse. Let's discover more about verse – as well as prose and something called trochaic tetrameter. Can you say *trochaic tetrameter* five times fast?

Step 2: The Rhythms

Verse is a kind of poetry that has a set rhythm – Shakespeare really liked a kind of verse rhythm called iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter mimics the rhythm of our natural heartbeat: ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum, ba-dum. Each line has ten syllables with alternating unstressed and stressed syllables. Can you count the syllables in the lines below?

*And wash this filthy witness from your hand.
Why did you bring these daggers from the place?*
—Lady Macbeth (Act 2, Scene 2)

Prose is a kind of writing that is more conversational and does not have a set rhythm. On the page, prose sticks out like a sore thumb – it looks a lot more like the way a page from a book looks. Shakespeare often uses prose for low-status characters – or for high-status characters in crisis. How does the example below look different from our first example?

*Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell gate, he should have
old turning the key.*
—Porter (Act 2, Scene 3)

Trochaic tetrameter is a kind of poetry with a different, choppy rhythm – it has seven or eight syllables in each line – while verse, as we learned above, has ten. Trochaic tetrameter has a distinct, chant-like quality. Which characters in *Macbeth* might call for a chant-like sound?

*Double, double toil and trouble
Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.*
—The Witches (Act 4, Scene 1)

Master Shakespeare's Language *continued*

Step 3: Walk the Talk

Take a look at the excerpts from *Macbeth* below. Can you identify each excerpt as verse, prose, or trochaic tetrameter? Once you've done that, can you rewrite each excerpt in modern speech? Use slang! We might not realize it now—but Shakespeare loved slang and used it in his plays all the time!

*The Weird Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land,
Thus do go about, about,
Thrice to thine and thrice to mine
And thrice again, to make up nine.
Peace, the charm's wound up.*
— The Witches (Act 1, Scene 3)

Your Modern Rewrite:

Verse Prose Trochaic Tetrameter

*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.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?*
— Macbeth (Act 2, Scene 1)

Your Modern Rewrite:

Verse Prose Trochaic Tetrameter

*Out, damned spot, out I say! One. Two. Why
then, 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. The
Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?
What, will these hands ne'er be clean?*
— Lady Macbeth (Act 5, Scene 1)

Your Modern Rewrite:

Verse Prose Trochaic Tetrameter

King James I and *Macbeth*

Often when we think about the character Macbeth, we speak in terms of his tragic flaw, which we typically identify as “ambition,” and while this isn’t wrong, it also doesn’t tell the whole story. In early modern English, the word “ambition” meant a personal desire for power, but also an immoral wish to rise above one’s assigned station. Shakespeare and his contemporaries held a hierarchical view of the world that extended from God at the highest level of authority, down through the King, and then to the family, in which the husband was the head of the household. Any attempt to rise above one’s place, either socially or politically, was to defy God’s ordained hierarchy and was therefore inherently wrong. Macbeth’s overreach, however, is actually sinful as well as politically corrupt, because he murders his kinsman and his King (God’s representative on earth). Macbeth’s action violates the proper order of things so thoroughly that nature itself reacts, as Lennox describes: “The night has been unruly.... / Lamentings heard i’th’air, strange screams of death.... / Some say the earth was feverous and did shake.”

Shakespeare had good reason to emphasize the dire events that resulted from Macbeth’s murder



James I, King of England and Scotland, son of Mary, Queen of Scots. Flickr.com

King James I and *Macbeth* continued

of Duncan, the rightful King. In 1603, James I was crowned King of England at the age of thirty-seven, having already ruled Scotland as King James VI almost since his birth. In 1606, when *Macbeth* was probably written and first performed, English citizens would have had fresh in their minds the anxiety that many of them had felt over the question of who would succeed Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England for forty-five years but died unmarried and childless in 1603. Elizabeth had named James as her successor (James had a legitimate claim to the English throne and was, like Elizabeth, a Protestant), but many of her subjects were deeply concerned about whether the promised peaceful transfer of power would in fact occur peacefully, fearing that their country would instead be plunged into another civil war. Although James ascended the English throne without incident, the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 (in which Guy Fawkes and other English Catholics attempted unsuccessfully to blow up Parliament, and King James I along with it) showed that the country was far from settled even two years into James's reign.

From this historical perspective we can see that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* represents the playwright's efforts to legitimize and strengthen King James I's authority. In Shakespeare's play the Macbeths have no living children (although Lady Macbeth tenderly recalls nursing her infant). The Weird Sisters prophesy to Macbeth and Banquo that Banquo's descendants will become kings, a prospect that later fills Macbeth with horror and despair: "If it be so, / For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind; / For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered." Unlike the Macbeths and many other characters, Banquo was not a historical figure but rather the invention of a Scottish historian who wished to flatter King James V of Scotland (the grandfather of King James I of England). Shakespeare's sources for *Macbeth* also describe Banquo as the ancestor of King James I, and Shakespeare keeps the legend alive in his play.

Shakespeare's theatre company had been known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men because the Lord Chamberlain was their chief patron. In 1603, however, they became The King's Men because they were favored and financially supported by King James I himself. Shakespeare therefore had a very practical reason for reinforcing James's ancestry and his right to rule England. With *Macbeth*, a play that seems to be about the perils of ambition and the kings of Scotland, Shakespeare was actually attempting to prove to the English citizens that they were fortunate indeed to be ruled so wisely and so well by God's anointed King, James I—who just happened to be a descendant of the noble and virtuous Banquo.

Discussion Questions

1. **Fate vs. Free Will:** is Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's downfall caused by fate, or do their choices throughout the play make them responsible for their tragic endings?
2. Macbeth is often labelled as the **protagonist** of the story, with MacDuff, Macolm, and Banquo sometimes labelled as the **antagonists**. Do you agree with these labels? Is Macbeth a typical protagonist? Who is the villain in the story?
3. How do **the Witches** fuel Macbeth's **ambition**? Would Macbeth have pursued power without their prophecies?
4. Do **the apparitions** truly appear or are they creations in Macbeth's mind?
5. As a wife and a woman pursuing power, how does Lady Macbeth challenge **gender norms**? How might Elizabethan audiences have viewed her differently when the play debuted in 1606?
6. If you were to give *Macbeth* a **new title**, what would it be?



WITCHY FACTS ABOUT **MACBETH**

Lin-Manuel Miranda alludes to *Macbeth* in his musical *Hamilton*. In the song "Take a Break," Hamilton begins a letter to his sister-in-law Angelica Schuyler with these words: 'Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day.' I trust you'll understand the reference to / Another Scottish tragedy without my having to name the play.

BACKSTAGE CHRONICLES:

A Conversation with the Costume Designer

Coming Soon

Bonus Material

What to go deeper? ANW Resident Dramaturg Miranda Johnson-Haddad has some recommendations.

Online Resources:

- The website for the Royal Shakespeare Company in the U.K. includes many useful resources for teachers and others who wish to learn more about Shakespeare's plays. For *Macbeth*, see:
 - <https://www.rsc.org.uk/search?q=macbeth>

Books & Text Resources:

- Marjorie Garber's *Shakespeare After All* (2005) offers insightful discussions of Shakespeare's plays by a well-known Harvard professor. Several of Dr. Garber's engaging lectures can also be viewed on YouTube.
- Marjorie Garber's *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers* contains a chapter on *Macbeth* that discusses the curse as well as the presence of the uncanny in the play.
- For historical background on Shakespeare and his plays, see *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, edited by Russ McDonald (second edition, 2001).
- For additional historical background about Shakespeare's plays, see also Gideon Rappaport's *Appreciating Shakespeare* (One Mind Good Press, 2022).
- For information about the source material for Shakespeare's plays, the introductory material in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) is especially thorough.
- Editions: *The Riverside Shakespeare* and *The Arden Shakespeare* (Third Edition) are the ultimate scholarly editions of Shakespeare's works, but the non-academic may find other editions more helpful. Among those, I recommend the David Bevington editions, either the single-volume *Complete Works*, 7th edition or the single paperback editions published by Bantam. I also feel personal loyalty to *The New Folger Shakespeare Library* editions. For a shout-out to the Folger editions in the New York Times on 6/7/20, see:
 - <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/02/magazine/how-shakespeare-paperbacks-made-me-want-to-be-a-writer.html?searchResultPosition=4>

Bonus Material *continued*

- For those who wish to learn more about Shakespeare's biography in relation to his plays, as well as reflections on how Shakespeare's plays continue to feel topical and relevant today, I recommend Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World* (Anniversary edition, 2016) and *Tyrant* (2018), and any of the works by James Shapiro, especially his most recent, *The Playbook* (2024).
- For Shakespeare's hierarchical view of the world, see the succinct and still classic book *The Elizabethan World Picture: A Study of the Idea of Order in Shakespeare, Donne, and Milton*, by E.M.W. Tillyard (1943).
- On Shakespeare's women, an important early feminist study is Juliet Dusinberre's *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women* (2nd edition, 1996). For a discussion of Lady Macbeth and the witches, including references, see the Folger, Third Arden, or David Bevington editions of *Macbeth*.
- To read *Demonologie*, King James I's 1597 treatise on witches and witchcraft, see <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/25929>

Film and Television:

- The 2010 movie directed by Rupert Goold and starring Patrick Stewart is horrifically violent (it literally gave me nightmares), but it's a powerful and highly original interpretation. Stewart is (not surprisingly) excellent as Macbeth, and Lady Macbeth is played by Kate Fleetwood, who appears briefly in *Harry Potter and The Deathly Hallows, part 1*. (NOTE: Extremely graphic violence and some suggestive images.)
- The 2015 version directed by Justin Kurzel and starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard is amazing, and young people will recognize the two lead actors. David Thewlis (who plays Remus Lupin in the *Harry Potter* movies) plays Duncan, and Paddy Considine (from *House of the Dragon*) plays Banquo. (NOTE: Graphic violence and mature content.)
- The 1971 version directed by Roman Polanski includes many fascinating choices that I've never seen done anywhere else (onstage or on film). (NOTE: Graphic violence, disturbing imagery, nudity. In addition, the attack on Lady Macduff's household is especially hard to watch, given that it clearly represents Polanski's imagining of the Manson murders of his wife, Sharon Tate, and others, which had occurred only two years before.)

Bonus Material *continued*

- The 2021 version directed by Joel Coen and starring Denzel Washington and Frances McDormand is a stylish production that includes some interesting choices. Young people may recognize Brendan Gleeson (from the *Harry Potter* franchise) as Duncan and Harry Melling (also from *Harry Potter*, as well as *The Queen's Gambit*) as Malcolm. (NOTE: Although many reviewers found this version to be extremely violent, I actually thought it was one of the *least* violent adaptations I've seen. The fact that it's in black and white inevitably renders the scenes of violence less gory.)
 - **Fun fact:** Actor Wayne Carr, who was hired as Denzel Washington's Shakespeare coach, starred in the 2019 *Othello* at A Noise Within. He also appears in the Coen movie as one of the murderers who kills Lady Macduff and her children. (Despite his scary appearance in that scene, he is in reality a kind, gentle, and lovely person.)

Re-imaginings of Shakespeare's Canon:

- Ian McEwan's *Nutshell* (2017) is a prequel of sorts to *Hamlet* that is told from the point of view of Hamlet as a fetus, during Gertrude's pregnancy. Margaret Atwood's short story "Gertrude Speaks," in *Good Bones and Simple Murders* (1991), tells the story of *Hamlet* from Gertrude's POV.
- Maggie O'Farrell's 2020 novel *Hamnet* tells the story of Shakespeare's wife, Anne (or Agnes) Hathaway and focuses on the death of Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, at the age of eleven. This is truly a beautiful and deeply moving book that provides what I consider to be a long overdue corrective to at least 150 years of sexist assumptions about Anne Hathaway.
- For Shakespearean echoes in the first four *Harry Potter* books, see Miranda Johnson-Haddad, "Harry Potter and the Shakespearean Allusion," in *Reimagining Shakespeare for Children and Young Adults*, ed. Naomi J. Miller (New York: Routledge, 2003). (This volume contains many useful essays that propose various strategies for integrating Shakespeare's works into classrooms, from pre-school through high school.)

ABOUT

A Noise Within

A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.



aNoiseWithin
Classic Theatre, Modern Magic

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