



MACBETH

Presented by Georgia Shakespeare
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Study Guide for Students

Dramatis Personae in Macbeth

Allison Leigh Corke



Witch #1
Lady Macbeth
Ross
Lenox
Murderer #3
Seyton

Sarah Johnson



Witch # 2

Malcolm

Fleance

Lady Macduff

Messenger

Porter

Murderer # 2

Lady

Servant

Craig Thompson



Bloody Captain

Macbeth

Murderer #1

Brian Harrison



Cawdor

Duncan

Banquo

Lenox

Macduff

Witch # 3

Lord

Murderer #4

Doctor



Macbeth and the Witches: Artist, Andrew Fuseli

The Story of Macbeth

The story of *Macbeth* begins with the meeting of three “weird sisters” upon a heath not far from a battlefield in Scotland. The sisters agree to meet again when the battle is “lost and won.” The focus of their next meeting will be to meet with Macbeth, a general in the Scottish army. The battle completed, we meet King Duncan and his son Malcolm, both fresh from that battle, who encounter a bloody Sergeant. The Sergeant reports that Macbeth and Banquo have fought successfully and bravely for the king. Duncan punishes the Thane of Cawdor, who has turned traitor, and gives the title to Macbeth.

Macbeth and Banquo, returning from battle, encounter the three “weird sisters” on the heath. The sisters prophesy that Macbeth will become both Thane of Cawdor and king, and that Banquo will be the father of kings. As the weird sisters disappear, Ross and Angus arrive and greet Macbeth as the new Thane of Cawdor.

Lady Macbeth has received a letter from her husband telling her of the prophecy. When he arrives at his castle, Dunsinane, she pushes him to bring the prophecy to pass by killing the king, who will stay in their home that

night. That evening, Macbeth and Banquo discuss the sister's prophecies, then Macbeth imagines he sees daggers floating around him. After all are in bed, Macbeth kills the sleeping king and, horrified by what he has done, rejoins Lady Macbeth. She takes the daggers from him and smears the sleeping guards with blood to put the blame on them.

As the Macbeths go to clean up, there is a knocking at the gate, which is answered by a drunken porter. Macduff and Lennox arrive and discover the murdered king. Macbeth murders the sleeping guards. The princes, Malcolm and Donalbain, flee because they fear for their lives, and suspicion falls on them. The scene shifts to a conversation between an Old Man and the Thane of Ross, in which they discuss the unnatural state of events that have taken place in Scotland since the murder of King Duncan. Macduff, joins them fresh from a meeting of state and reports that Macbeth has been elected King and he confirms that Malcolm and Donalbain are strongly suspected of killing their father. Meanwhile Macbeth, fearing Banquo and his heirs, arranges to have Banquo and his son, Fleance murdered. Fleance escapes, but that night at a state dinner, Macbeth is haunted by Banquo's ghost.

Tormented, Macbeth seeks the weird sisters again and receives three new prophecies: that he should beware Macduff, that no one of woman born will harm him, and that he will never be vanquished until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. They also show him that Banquo's heirs will eventually rule Scotland. After they leave, Macbeth learns that Macduff has fled to Malcolm in England and he orders Macduff's family murdered. When Macduff learns of the deaths, his intense grief steels his resolve to march on Scotland with a faction of those loyal to the true heir to the throne of Scotland, Malcolm.

Back at the castle, Lady Macbeth sleepwalks, distraught over all that has happened. A doctor can offer no hope for her. Macbeth prepares for the coming battle, but is confident in the protection offered him by his prophecies. Lady Macbeth kills herself. A messenger reports that Birnam Wood appears to be moving toward Dunsinane; in reality, Malcolm's soldiers are using tree branches to disguise their numbers. The battle begins and it seems as though Macbeth will win until, confronted with Macduff, he finds that Macduff was not born of woman, but "from his mother's womb untimely ripped." Macbeth continues the battle, but is killed. Malcolm will become King.

Inspiration for Macbeth

As is usually the case with Shakespeare, the story of Macbeth takes its inspiration from more than one source. Principally, it is inspired by Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. From the prophecy of the "weird sisters" to Macduff's unusual birth, from the murder of Banquo to the moving forest, all the plot elements Shakespeare employs in *Macbeth* are present in *Chronicles*. Shakespeare was well-read, and other sources are likely, such as Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* and Erasmus' *Colloquia*. But there is much speculation that the most interesting inspiration possibly came from King James himself, in his work *Daemonologie*. The King had a keen interest in witchcraft, believed wholeheartedly in its threatening existence, and fancied himself somewhat of a scholar on the subject. Shakespeare, eager to please his new king, would have been aware of all these facts. *Macbeth* was also a timely play, written just after the plot on the new king's life, which would later be called the Gunpowder Plot. This is important since *Macbeth* deals with the downfall of a man who kills a king.

Fears and Superstitions

During the reign of James I (1603-1625), an act of Parliament passed the following law, excerpted here: "if any person shall use any invocation or conjuration of any evil or wicked spirit...or shall consult, covenant with, entertain, employ, feed or reward any evil or cursed spirit to or for any intent or purpose ...or shall use, practice, or exercise any sort of witchcraft, sorcery, charm or enchantment...that every such person being convicted shall suffer death."

Many people in Shakespeare's day believed in the presence of witches and feared what they believed were forces of the supernatural at work around them. Women who lived alone were the primary target, and thousands of them were tortured and executed upon accusation of witchcraft. Woe to any woman whose neighbor's child, cattle or crop sickened and died. These events provided all that was necessary to cast suspicion.

The Role of the Weird Sisters

Shakespeare gives a child-like quality to the language of the weird sisters of our story. Notice the the nursery –song quality of the rhyming couplets in “Fair is foul and foul is fair, hover through the fog and filthy air,” “When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning or in rain?,” and “By the pricking of my thumbs, something wicked this way comes.” Within the larger themes of the play, which might be listed as honor vs. dishonor, courage vs. cowardice, ambition vs. acceptance, and free choice vs. fate, it becomes clear that the function of the weird sisters is to focus on the last of these, choice vs. fate, and bring it to our attention. Isaac Asimov points out in his *Guide to Shakespeare* that the word used to describe the sister’s, “weird,” comes from the Gaelic word “wyrd,” meaning fate. “All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter,” uttered by the third sister in the third scene of Act I, is the catalyst which propels Macbeth forward. While each choice is made willingly, it can be argued that had he never met the sisters three, he might never have thought to seize the throne at all.

Is The Play Cursed?

An old theatre superstition says you must never utter the name Macbeth in a theatre unless you are performing the play. There are many stories attesting to the potency of the supposed curse, and generations of theatre folk use only the play’s nickname, “the Scottish play.” How did *Macbeth* come to be tagged the “the cursed” play?

Historic anecdotes about the curse abound. The 19th century actor William Rignold found himself staring down a black cat in the middle of “is this a dagger I see before me” and was convinced of its evil portent. Just before his Drury Lane production closed, Rignold was stabbed in the chest, rather seriously.

One of the more famous anecdotes concerns Lawrence Olivier. Sitting in the theatre on a break from rehearsing *Macbeth* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1955, Olivier rose from his set and, hearing a thud behind him, turned to see that a weighted sandbag had fallen into it. Had it landed on his head, he felt certain he would have been killed.

And how does the curse affect Macbeth's queen? Consider Diana Wynard, who decided, in a 1948 production, that her Lady Macbeth should sleepwalk with her eyes shut. Her first night audience gasped in horror as Diana fell fifteen feet from the stage, picked herself up, dusted herself off, and went on with the show.

Perhaps the truth of Macbeth's curse stems from the many battle scenes in the play which increase the risk that an actor will be injured during a performance. However, many theatre people are unwilling to risk saying the name and finding out!

Life in a Medieval Castle

Written by Phillip Warner

Medieval Castle life was "a blend of brutality and debauchery."

Castle environment and life style

Castles were cold and damp. Castles had no systematic heating system, so cold was usually countered with layers of clothing, with the rich having fur-lined clothes, the poor using wool if they could get it. Most castles were dark, with a few home made lanterns providing the minimal and adequate lighting. Burning torches were reserved for festivities.

Rich people slept naked, using blankets and bed drapes if they had them to keep the cold out. The poor slept in clothes they wore all day and used plants like nettles as draught excluders.

Combat style

When not actually at war, the male inhabitants of a castle were constantly honing their combat skills through various means, notably tournaments, hunting, archery contests and even trials by combat or other personal grudge matches, some of which were to the death, and all of which could result in serious injury or fatality by accident. Much of castle life involved versions of the above as deliberate training for battle, but also as exercise, recreation and spectator sport. Hunts involved dogs of course, which tended to be larger than most breeds today, and which lived and ate with the humans.

Diet and eating habits

Bread (which was coarse) was the most important element of the diet and was communally baked in a single large oven, the finest quality being reserved for the lord of the castle and his family, the other varying degrees of bread (one largely composed of rye, another made from ground peas and beans) went to the rest of the staff by rank.. Reliance on a single grain crop meant that a bad harvest or diseased produce could devastate the entire community. Four-day-old bread was used as “trenchers” or plates, on which other food was served.

Meat was central to the diet, and one of the key uses of bread was to mop up the vast amount of grease and juices, which came from it. Beef, mutton and pork were the dominant meats, either fresh or salted in the winter.

Game such as venison and many varieties of birds, including grouse and pheasant, were common.

Other staples included milk, cheese, bacon and eggs. Fish (sea and fresh water) would be salted and/or stale unless the region abounded in them.

Ceremonial meals might center on the boar’s head, a stuffed swan or peacocks. Presentation was very important. The difference between the fare offered at such meals and that served regularly is stark, suggesting that people would massively overindulge at such festivities. By contrast, everyday breakfast would probably be bread, beer and a little salt fish, most dinners being the same except for the substitution of cured meat or cheese in place of the fish. Dinner is what we would call lunch and was the main meal of the day. Supper would generally be around 5pm, there being little artificial light to extend the day except in times of festivity.

Wine was reserved for royalty and the very wealthy unless the region grew grapes. The ordinary people drank ale, as did their social superiors, though this was sweet and without the bitterness of hops. It was also a key source of nutrition (being, effectively, liquid bread) and was of a high alcoholic content. Mead (made from honey) and hard cider were also common and potent. Water was not a standard beverage, partly because it was rarely clean enough to drink in an untreated (fermented) state.

Medieval food was brightly colored; meats etc. dyed yellow (saffron), red (sandalwood), green (mint and parsley) and black (charcoal) were particularly popular.

Hygiene

There were no forks. Eating was with knives and hands, and there were few scruples about hygiene, with people eating off each other's trenchers and sharing leftovers. Everyone had their own knife, which would be wiped and returned to its sheath on the belt or girdle after eating. There were spoons, but hands did most of the work, and hand washing before and after the meal was thus crucial and often ceremonial. At feasts, servants would pour water over the guests' hands from a ewer into bowls, the ewer being replenished from a large leather container (also used to store documents) called a budget. Tablecloths were used to wipe the hands and mouth. Bathing was thought to undermine health, and was thus engaged in very infrequently.

Toilets emptied into the moat or into underground cisterns, some of which have been mistaken for dungeons. True dungeons however, were relatively uncommon in medieval castles. Some toilets involved plumbing, others were holes in external rooms, which jutted out over the side of the castle.

Privacy

There wasn't any, or at least there was precious little, particularly for anyone except the lord's immediate family. Eating and sleeping were conducted in public. Castle life centered on the great hall where eating and sleeping took place for all but the most powerful few.

Castle Jobs and status

Much of the work was concerned with combat; black smiths shod horses and worked on armor, others worked on bows or cut flights for arrows. The cooper worked and repaired barrels which would be used to store and clean chain mail (rolling them in sand) when not storing liquid. The fuller cleaned cloth and prepared it for dying. The porter could be a man of power, or a simpleton used only for carrying burdens.

Other jobs include, the salter, the almoner (who looked after the cupboard), the biller (who made axes), the bolter (who sifted flour), the fuster (who worked on saddles), the lorimer (who made straps), the spencer, (who dispensed supplies). Other jobs like cobblers were day laborers with more independence but less status in the castle. All of the above were superior to

the peasants whose more basic labors kept the castle running and its inhabitants alive.

Weaponry

In the 11th century, warfare was waged by the creed “might makes right.” It was the era of the impact weapon, when the mace, ax, pike, dagger, ball and chain, shield and broadsword held sway. A warrior could use his sword, mace or ax to best an opponent to the ground, and open up a “chink in the armor,” and then dispatch him with a dagger. The wise soldier did well to protect his eyes, armpits and groin. In Scotland, the type of broadsword a worthy Thane used was called a claymore. The claymore was a huge broadsword, sometimes with a basket hilt. Skills were kept sharpened in the arena during a tournament; mock battles made grand spectacle of jousting and trial by combat kept the knights ready for battle. Below is a claymore broadsword.



Historical Timetable

1000	1100	1200	1300	1400	1500	1600
1040		1215	1306		1542	1605 <i>Macbeth performed</i>
<i>Macbeth Kills Duncan</i>		<i>Signing of the Magna Carta</i>	<i>Robert the Bruce crowned King</i>		<i>Mary Queen of Scots reigns</i>	
1068						1564
<i>Malcolm invades England</i>						<i>birth of Shakespeare</i>

FROM THE CROWNING OF MACBETH TO SHAKESPEARE'S PLAY

1040 The real Macbeth kills Duncan and takes The Scottish throne.	1542 the troubled reign of Mary Queen of Scots, mother to James I of England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales begins.
1057 Duncan's son, Malcolm III defeats and Kills Macbeth.	1558 Elizabeth I becomes Queen of England, Ireland and Wales.
1066 Margaret of Wessex, wife to Malcolm III, introduces a powerful English Influence on Scotland.	1564 William Shakespeare is born.
1068 Malcolm III invades England.	1567 Mary's 15-month-old son, James VI Is crowned King of Scotland.
1091-1153 The sons of Malcolm III rule over Scotland.	1587 Mary, Queen of Scots is executed after 20 years imprisonment.
1215 The Magna Carta is signed by England's King John.	1603 Elizabeth I dies, James VI of Scotland Becomes James I of England, Ireland Scotland and Wales.

1371
Robert the Bruce, whose way was paved
By William Wallace, is crowned King of
Scotland.

1605
The Gunpowder plot is thwarted.

1371
Robert II, first of the Stuart monarchs
of Scotland, is crowned King.

1605-07
Shakespeare's *Tragedy of Macbeth*
Performed.

Pre-Show Discussion/Activity

1. Discuss with your class the theme of *ambition*. Encourage your students to provide contemporary examples of this quality. Are people that are ambitious evil? Is it a positive attribute in the right context?
2. What is *fate*? Is it something that we can control or is it unavoidable? Encourage students to discuss the nature of *fate* in their own experience and how it has impacted their lives.
3. *Improvisation*: Divide the class into small groups, and give each a card one of the following situations on it:
 - Situation 1: While walking home together, two close friends are told by a reliable source that each will get the thing he or she covets more than anything else: a date, a car, or ticket to a rock concert or one-of-a-kind sporting event. Big problem: There are *two* friends and only one car, date.etc
 - Situation 2: An ambitious man sees a way to become the head of his company or country; however, the only way he can accomplish this goal is illegally. He is however a loyal employee, and is cautious and indecisive as to whether he should pursue his goal *illegally*. He shares his ambition with his equally ambitious wife, who says, "just do it."
 - Situation 3: Several longtime friends get together for dinner. After dessert there is a power "blackout," when the lights come back on, one of the guests screams that his money has been taken.

Give each group five minutes to brainstorm a few scenarios that would result if these situations were actually to take place. Each group should then take fifteen minutes to create a short presentation based on one of these scenarios. Once the scenarios have been presented, explain that these situations are similar to ones that will be presented in the play *Macbeth*.

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Post-Show Activities

1. Tossing Lines

Push back the desks in your classroom. Make a small circle with eight chairs at the front of the classroom. Ask for eight volunteers and give each of them an index card with the following lines from *Macbeth*:

“Fair is foul and foul is fair”

“If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me without my stir.”

Look like th’ innocent flower,
But be the serpent under’t”

“Is this a dagger before me, the handle toward my hand?”

“Naught's had, all's spent, where our desire is got without content”

“The flighty purpose never is o’ertook unless the deed go with it.”

“Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there weep our sad bosom’s empty.”

“Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more.”

Give each student time to become familiar with their quotation, and then have them speak or shout it for the benefit of the entire class. After each volunteer has been heard with their "line," give them a tennis ball to toss. He/she is to shout out their line, then toss the ball to another person in the circle. The recipient calls out their line, and passes the ball to another volunteer in the circle, and so on. After several tries at this, drop the balls and have the entire class join in and speak each line as a chorus.

Sixty second Macbeth: *

Pick nine volunteers: Three witches, a Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Duncan, Banquo, Macduff and boy Macduff. Condense each of those character's parts into "highlight's" For example Macbeth's part could be condensed in to the following sequence of "highlights."

"So foul and fair a day I have not seen"
"If chance will have me king, then chance will crown me."
"If it were done when tis done"
"Is this a dagger that I see before me?"
"Blood will have blood."
"Out, out brief candle."
"Lay on Macduff."

Each of the nine characters mentioned can have their part broken down in this way with Macbeth's part the largest. Once the parts have been assigned and rehearsed, try to do this "condensed" version of Macbeth in less than a minute! Don't rush, but pick up your cues!

*-Exercise developed by Christopher D. Renino,
Shakespeare Set Free, Folger Shakespeare Library 1993



Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth 1888

Study Guide Creation:

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