

Table of Contents

Introductory Material

About This Program	6
The Gunpowder Plot	7
The Story of <i>Macbeth</i>	8
Working with Shakespeare's Language	10
Strategies for Reading Shakespeare	13
Frequently Used Words	14
Preparing for Speaking Parts	16
How to Have a Shakespeare-ience	17
Choosing Your Persona	18
Understanding Improvisation	19
A Gathering of the Clans	20

The Play

Act I	21
Cast of Characters	22
Scenes i and ii <i>or</i> Who's Fair, Who's Foul?	23
Scene iii <i>or</i> Strange Predictions	29
Scenes iv and v <i>or</i> The Plot Thickens	38
Scenes vi and vii <i>or</i> Decisions, Decisions	46
Reacting to Act I	54
Act II	55
Scenes i and ii <i>or</i> The Deed Is Done	56
Scene iii <i>or</i> Whodunit?	66
Scene iv <i>or</i> The King Is Dead, Long Live the King!	76
Reacting to Act II	80

Act III	81
Scenes i and ii <i>or</i> Banquo Must Go	82
Scenes iii and iv <i>or</i> A Ghostly Visitor	94
Scenes v and vi <i>or</i> Discontent Grows	106
Reacting to Act III	112
Act IV	113
Scene i <i>or</i> The Future Foretold	114
Scene ii <i>or</i> Macduff's Punishment	125
Scene iii <i>or</i> Who Do You Trust?	131
Reacting to Act IV	144
Act V	145
Scene i <i>or</i> Deep Sleep	146
Scenes ii, iii, and iv <i>or</i> Branching Out	151
Scenes v and vi <i>or</i> How Does Your Battle Grow?	159
Scenes vii and viii <i>or</i> End Game	164
Reacting to Act V	173
Reacting to the Play	174
Background Information	
Life in 11th-Century Scotland	175
Shakespeare's Life	178
Shakespeare's Theatre	180
Shakespeare's Sources: The Legend of Macbeth	183
Of Witches and Witchcraft	186
Themes and Imagery	188
Image Credits	192

Dr. Robert D. Strickland is Executive Director in the Division of Life Skills and Special Projects for all of the arts disciplines in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools. He received a BS in Music Education from the University of Tennessee, a MA and MFA in Theatre from the University of Miami, and an Ed.D in Educational Leadership from Nova Southeastern University. He is a past President of the Florida Association for Theatre Education and a member of the Florida Department of Education writing team for the theatre teacher certification examination, theatre curriculum frameworks/standards, and theatre course descriptions. He was a senior consultant for developing and writing a high school textbook that received the 1999 Distinguished Book Award from the American Alliance for Theatre Education.

Dr. Strickland has taught at the elementary, secondary, college, and university levels. He received the 1997 Administrator of the Year awards from both the Florida Association for Theatre Education and the Dade Association for Theatre Education. In 2000, Dr. Strickland was awarded the Herbert A. Drew, Jr., Memorial Award for Excellence in Education from Nova Southeastern University.

Dr. Strickland participated in the conceptualization of *Shakespeare-ience*, as well as the writing and editing of the program.

Wim Coleman, a freelance novelist and playwright, has frequently written about Shakespeare for students. Mr. Coleman holds a MA in Teaching in both English and education from Drake University. Coleman has worked as an actor, director, set designer, and scene shop manager. He has taught, directed, and performed in numerous Shakespeare productions and has edited several Shakespeare plays in Perfection Learning's popular *Parallel Text* series. His most recent book for Perfection Learning is *Nine Muses*, a collection of one-act plays based on classical mythology.

Mr. Coleman wrote several background essays for *Macbeth* as well as the informational notes found at the bottom of most pages.

About This Program

This program was designed to help you discover the world of Shakespeare and in particular the story of *Macbeth*. Shakespeare's plays were meant to be seen and heard. In his day, rowdy audiences responded to them with applause, tears, and jeers. Playwrights were more interested in audiences than in readers, so students did not study the plays as they do today.

This book takes the fear out of studying Shakespeare and puts back the fun. Our approach to *Macbeth* is different in several important ways.

- First, you will create a character or persona that will live within the context of the play. You will participate every day, not just on the days you are reading the part of one of the characters with lines in the text.
- You will find that Shakespeare is not that difficult, contrary to what you might have heard. We have provided you with a

number of guiding features, such as on-page plot summaries, word and phrase definitions, and historical insights, to help you with the places that might be troublesome.



- By examining the thoughts of the characters through improvisation and then applying your understanding of the character's actions to the script, you will speak and hear the words of Shakespeare as he intended. You'll find that the words on these pages come to life when the art of theatre is used to study them.

Have fun with this program. While you probably won't mount a full production of *Macbeth*, you *will* learn to use hand and body gestures, expressive speech, and

blocking (stage movements) as you read. If you trust yourself and jump into examining this world through the eyes of Shakespeare's characters and your own personas, you will truly have a Shakespeare-ience.

The Gunpowder Plot

Imagine a plot to blow up the Capitol while the president makes a speech to both branches of Congress. Then suppose that the president himself foils the conspiracy. Americans would breathe a huge sigh of relief — but fear of terrorists would linger. According to historian Garry Wills, *Macbeth* was influenced by a similar situation, known as the Gunpowder Plot.

In 1605, conspirators planned to blow up the English Parliament when all of its members and the royal family were inside.

English Catholics had hoped that King James I would remove the ban on practicing their religion. Instead, restrictions on Catholics were tightened. Catholics who refused to attend the Church of England services were fined. Skipping church could cost as much as 20 pounds — a whole year's wages for some families. Continued refusal to participate in the official state religion resulted in jail sentences. This ongoing persecution fueled the Gunpowder Plot.

Before this plot could be carried out, a mysterious letter fell into the King's hands. The letter warned its recipient (a member of Parliament) to stay away from the House of Lords on November 5. According to legend, the letter's deeper meaning was revealed to James in a flash of divine inspiration. The would-be assassin, Guy Fawkes, was captured



in the cellar below the House of Lords as he waited to ignite a barrel of gunpowder.

As details of the plot were revealed, the whole business seemed increasingly monstrous. For example, the conspirators had participated in a Black Mass (a ceremony used to summon Satan) to ensure the success of their plot. This news intrigued the King, who was fascinated with witchcraft.

Like any good politician, King James turned his brush with disaster into a public relations coup. And he was in need of good public relations. Since James was not comfortable with large crowds, he was not as popular a ruler as his aunt, and predecessor, Queen Elizabeth I.

Macbeth makes many flattering references to the King, who was considered a hero for thwarting the conspiracy. The noble Banquo (who historically never existed) is presented as the King's direct ancestor. And in Act IV, King Edward miraculously heals people by the touch of his hand — a feat which James I was also reputedly able to perform.

Macbeth is clearly one of the most powerful of a group of plays in which Shakespeare explores the nature of evil. In these plays, he appears to be seeking some answer to the ancient riddle of why there is so much evil in the world and why even good people fall prey to it.

Working with Shakespeare's Language

When you first begin reading Shakespeare, you may find his language intimidating and confusing. You will discover, however, that the more Shakespeare you read and the more you know about his writing, the easier it becomes.

Keep in mind that language is a living thing, constantly growing and changing. New words are invented and new definitions for old words are added. Since Shakespeare wrote over 400 years ago, it is not surprising that his work seems challenging to today's readers. To help you with the meaning of the text, unfamiliar words and phrases have been defined for you in the side margins of this book. You may also find a dictionary helpful for this purpose. Beyond the meaning of the words, however, there are stylistic devices that can help you understand Shakespeare.

Blank Verse and Iambic Pentameter

Like most dramatists of his time, Shakespeare frequently used blank verse in his plays. In **blank verse**, the text is written in measured lines that do not rhyme. Look at the following example.

Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?
But yet I'll make assurance double sure
And take my bond of fate. Thou shalt not live,
That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies ...

U / | U / | U / | U / | U /
Then LIVE | MacDUFF | what NEED | I FEAR | of THEE?

U / | U / | U / | U / | U /
But YET | I'll MAKE asSUR | ance DOU | ble SURE ...

The length of a line of verse is measured by counting the stresses. This length is known as the **meter**, and when there are five stresses, as in the preceding lines, the pattern is known as **pentameter**. When the rhythm follows an unstressed/stressed pattern, it is called **iambic**. Much of Shakespeare's work is written in **iambic pentameter**.

Of course, Shakespeare was not rigid about this format. He sometimes varied the lines by putting accents in unusual places, by having lines with more or fewer than ten syllables, and by varying where pauses occur. An actor's interpretation can also add variety. (Only a terrible actor would deliver lines in a way that makes the rhythm sound obvious or repetitious!)

Prose

In addition to verse, Shakespeare wrote speeches in **prose**, which is language without rhythmic structure. Look at the Porter's speech on page 67. If you try beating out an iambic rhythm to this and the Porter's other lines, you'll discover that it doesn't work at all, because they're in prose. But once Macbeth enters on page 69, everybody starts speaking iambic pentameter again, and you'll be able to find that rhythm. Shakespeare often uses prose for comic speeches, to show madness, and for characters of lower social rank such as servants. His upper-class characters generally do not speak in prose. But these weren't hard-and-fast rules as far as Shakespeare was concerned. Many of his servants speak in verse, and some of his noble characters (Hamlet, for example) occasionally speak in prose.

Imagery

Imagery refers to vibrant, colorful language that allows readers or listeners to picture things in their mind's eye and to make an emotional connection with the writing. This highly descriptive language appeals to one or more of the five senses—touch, taste, hearing, smell, and sight. How many sensory images can you find in the following speech?

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke
of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound
it makes,

Nor heaven peep through the blanket
of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!'

In addition to sensory words, images are often conveyed through the use of **figures of speech** such as simile, metaphor, or personification.

A **simile** is a comparison between two unlike things that uses the words *like* or *as*. Look at the following examples.

Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.

Your face, my Thane, is as a book where
men
May read strange matters.

In the first quote, Macbeth's title of king is compared to a loose-fitting robe upon a "dwarfish thief." In the second, Lady Macbeth compares Macbeth's face to a book, too easily read by the people around him.

A **metaphor** is also a comparison between two unlike things, but the words *like* or *as* are left out. In the following quotes, eyes are fools, an owl is a bellman [town crier], and life is wine.

Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other
senses
Or else worth all the rest.

It was the owl that shriek'd, the fatal
bellman,
Which gives the stern'st good-night.
The wine of life is drawn ...

Another type of imagery used extensively by Shakespeare is **personification**, or giving human qualities to inanimate objects or ideas. In the following lines, earth is personified as being able to hear; a bell “invites” Macbeth; and sleep “knits” a skein of cloth.

Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk,
for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts ...

The bell invites me.

Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of
care ...

Contractions

As you know, contractions are words that have been combined by substituting an apostrophe for a letter or letters that have been removed. Contractions were as common in Shakespeare’s time as they are today. For example, we use *it’s* as a contraction for the words *it is*. In Shakespeare’s writing you will discover that *’tis* means the same thing. Many other examples can be found in the list of Frequently Used Words on pages 14-15.

Shakespeare often used the apostrophe to shorten words so that they would fit into the rhythm pattern of a line. This is especially true of verbs ending in *-ed*. Note that in Shakespeare’s plays, the *-ed* at the end of a verb is pronounced as a separate

syllable. Therefore, *walked* would be pronounced as two syllables, *walk•ed*, while *walk’d* would be only one. We have added accent marks (*walkèd*) to help you remember to pronounce *-ed* aloud.

You will learn about other elements of Shakespeare’s language such as **puns** and **irony** as they occur in the text.

Finally, if you can’t figure out every word in the play, don’t get discouraged. The people in Shakespeare’s audience couldn’t either. At that time, language was changing rapidly and standardized spelling, punctuation, grammar, and even dictionaries did not exist. Besides, Shakespeare loved to play with words. He made up new combinations, like *fat-guts* and *mumble-news*. He often changed one part of speech for another, as in “cursing claims and deep *exclaims*.” To make matters worse, the actors probably spoke at a rate of 140 words per minute. But the audience didn’t strain to catch every word. They went to a Shakespeare play for the same reasons we go to a movie—to get caught up in the story and the acting, to have a great laugh, an exciting adventure, or a good cry.

Strategies for Reading Shakespeare

You will find many features in this book designed to help you understand Shakespeare's language. In addition, there are some basic reading strategies that active readers use for all types of text. As you prepare to read *Macbeth*, you may find the following strategic plan useful.

Preview. First, to get a general idea of the events in the play, “read the edges” of the text. Read the summaries at the top of each page. Then skim the definitions and questions in the side margins and examine any images that appear. This will give you a general idea of what the text is about before you actually begin to read it.

Visualize. Try to put yourself into the world of the play by picturing the setting in your mind's eye. Envision how the characters might look and sound as they move within their surroundings. Studying images and reading through the setting and stage directions will help to fire up your imagination.

Read. Read a page using the side notes to help with difficult words and phrases. Go back and reread the page a second time or as many times as necessary until you can understand the text without using the side notes. This may be more difficult in the beginning and take more time than reading

modern writing, but don't be discouraged. Most students find that comprehension becomes easier and easier as the play goes on.

Connect. Active readers often make connections with the text. An event in their reading might remind them of something that happened to them or a friend, or they might see similarities between the text and a movie, book, or TV show they have seen. Also, because Shakespeare is quoted so frequently, readers are likely to come across familiar phrases and sayings.

Evaluate. As you read, evaluate the characters' words and actions and form opinions about them. Do you approve or disapprove of how they act? What are their motives? What are their strengths and weaknesses? Do certain actions make you change your mind about a character?

Enrich. Surround your study of *Macbeth* with humor and high-interest material. The notes at the bottom of most pages and the essays in the front and back of the book provide background information. The Tales from the Stage feature contains colorful theatrical anecdotes. The suggestions for props and in-class staging will also help to immerse you in Shakespeare's world.

Frequently Used Words

The following words and phrases are found frequently in Shakespeare's plays. The more of them you know, the easier your reading will be.

afore	before	enow	enough
alack	expression of sorrow or regret	ere	before
alas	expression of unhappiness, pity, or concern	exeunt	theatre term meaning "everyone leaves the stage"
anon	at once, immediately	fain	willingly
an't	if it	fay	faith
art	are	fie	O
ay, aye	yes	foresworn	denied
bawdy	indecent	hadst	you had (second person singular past tense of the verb "have")
beseech	beg	hap	perhaps
betimes	at times, occasionally	hark you	listen
bid	ask	hast, hath	you have; he, she, it has (second and third person singular of "have")
by my troth	truly	hence	away from this place
coz	cousin; relative	hie	hurry
dost	you do (second-person singular of the verb "do")	humor	mood
doth	he, she, it does (third person singular of the verb "do")	humour	liquid
e'en	even	is't	is it
e'er	ever	knave	rascal

late recently

marry I swear

mine my

nay no

ne'er never

o'er over

oft often

perchance . . . perhaps

pray invite

rest you merry . have a good day

saucy rude

scurvy disgusting

shalt you shall (second-person
singular of "shall")

shrift confession of sins

sirrah sir (a form of address
implying inferiority)

soft wait

spake said

stay stop

straight at once

sup to eat (often the evening
meal)

thee, thou . . . you

thence from that time (or place)
on

thine yours

thither there; to that place

thrice three times

thy your

'tis it is

tut, tush mild expression of
disapproval

'twixt between

wast, wert . . . were

whence where (from what place)

wherefore . . . why

whither where (to what place)

wilt will, must

writ written

ye you

yea yes

yon, yond . . . that

Preparing for Speaking Parts

At least once during your study of *Macbeth*, you will be assigned a speaking part to perform for an upcoming class. In order to feel comfortable in this role and to respect the efforts of other students reading with you, you will need to prepare beforehand. If you are unsure about how to do this, try using the following plan.

Comprehend. Make sure you understand the meaning of what your character says. If you are unsure, use the reading strategies on page 13.

Analyze. Determine your character's attitude during the scene. What mood is he in? Does this mood change during the scene? Are her thoughts and what she says the same? Or does she say one thing and mean another? What is your character's motivation? What does he want? What is his attitude toward other characters in the scene? Is there a conflict? What is it?

Plan. Decide how you will use your body and voice to create your character. What gestures will you use? Where and when will you move? How will you use your voice? Changes in the tempo (fast, slow); pitch (high, low); and quality (nasal, raspy, etc.) of your voice can help the audience understand your character. If needed, you can put sticky notes in your text to remind you of where you want to change your voice or move.

Practice. You probably won't have a chance to rehearse with others in your scene, but you should still practice your own part. Ask a friend or family member to read lines with you and/or videotape you. You can also practice reading your part into a tape recorder.

Warm Up. Here are a few exercises to make your voice and body more flexible and responsive.

- Stand tall and inhale on a count of four; hold your breath for a count of four; and then exhale on a count of eight. Make sure that your shoulders are relaxed and do not rise up as you breathe. Your lower stomach area should be slowly moving out as you inhale, and in as you exhale.
- Next, repeat the same exercise and while you are exhaling, hum the letter M. You will feel a tingle in your face from the vibration of the sound. After you have done this several times, try a few tongue twisters. Here is one to start with:

Amidst the mists and coldest frosts,
With stoutest wrists and loudest boasts,
He thrusts his fists against the post
And still insists he sees the ghosts.

- Stand tall with your feet shoulder-width apart. Bend over slowly and reach for or touch the floor. Relax and breathe. Bend your knees more and then straighten your legs slowly. Slowly round up your body to a standing position. Repeat the whole exercise twice.

Act and React. As you present your scene, remember to face the audience and speak loudly enough to be heard throughout the room. Holding your book and your head up as you read will help your voice project out to the audience. Finally, listen, really listen, to what the other characters are saying so that you can respond realistically and pick up cues promptly.

How to Have a Shakespeare-ience

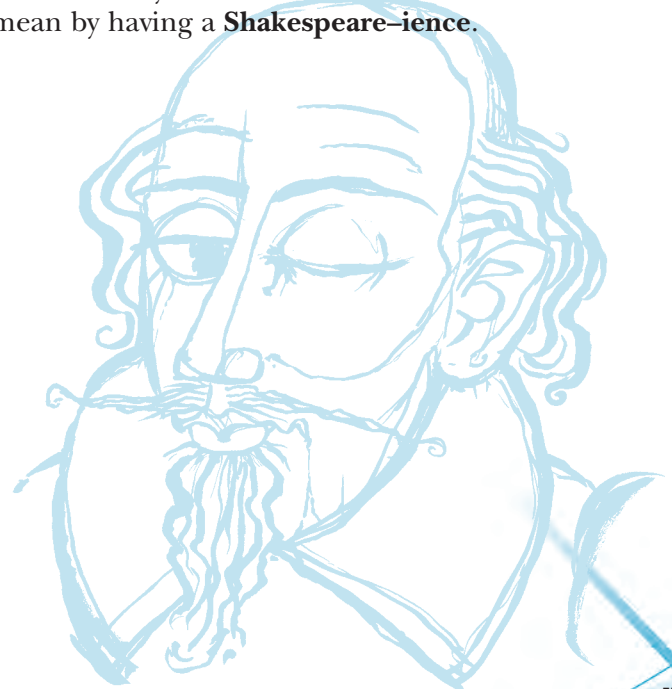
There is an old saying that to really understand someone you need to walk a mile in his or her shoes. This study of *Macbeth* borrows from that old adage by asking you to study the play by becoming a character from 11th-century Scotland. You will “walk” for many days in that person’s “shoes.”

By seeing the world of 11th-century Scotland through eyes other than your own, you will gain a new perspective and interact with other characters that shape that world. Not all of the characters that you create actually speak within the text of the play, but all are affected by the circumstances and actions of the speaking characters. So you may not be Macbeth, but you may be his attendant or one of his spies. You may not be Lady Macbeth, but you may be a cook or one of Lady Macbeth’s waiting gentlewomen.

Each of you will be part of the action of the play, and from time to time will be called upon to be one of the traditional speaking characters as well. In addition, you will be creating events and situations that are only implied by the action of the play. For example, there is a banquet to honor King Duncan at Macbeth’s castle. If you were a servant to the Macbeth’s, what would your duties be in preparing for the festivities? And if you were to create a scene that happens just before or just after the banquet with the other servants, what do you think

would be the focus of that scene? And, as the story of the play unfolds, how do the various events that take place affect you and your world?

You will be discovering what life was like in Scotland hundreds of years ago. The creation of your character, or **persona**, as we will call it throughout the rest of the book, will be based on elements in the text, historical information, human nature, and your imagination. You will discover the events that influenced the lives of the people in Macbeth’s Scotland and ultimately played important roles in the unfolding of this story. By being immersed this way in the story and the play, you will be experiencing *Macbeth* as if you were there. This is what we mean by having a **Shakespeare-ience**.



Choosing Your Persona

As you can see by the following list, there were many kinds of people that made up the population of 11th-century Scotland. Your teacher will either assign one of these personas to you or ask you to choose one from the list. In either case, you will begin with only a name or occupation. It will be your job to develop your persona and turn him or her into a complete character. You will begin by answering questions and developing a personality profile. As the play progresses, you will find questions and directions, labeled **Persona Journal** and **Persona Action**, which will guide you. Remember that you are always to respond and react as your persona would.

Your stay in 11th-century Scotland will be

ruled by the following assumptions. 1) Assume that almost all characters listed below can be either male or female. Therefore, it is not necessary to limit persona choices to traditional gender roles. 2) Assume that all members of a clan travel with their leader or someone appointed by him. 3) To avoid crowding the acting area, some Persona Action directions will call for **representatives** from clans. Either in a clan meeting, or as your teacher directs, decide how representatives can be chosen so that everyone has equal time on stage. 4) Some directions will call for “in place” reactions which means that you will react, but stay in your “clan homeand.”

Citizens of 11th-Century Scotland

Cook	Wine Maker	Candle Maker	Merchant	Monk
Guard	Stable Keeper	Serf/Peasant/Slave	Dye Worker	Abbot
Watchman	Potter	Carpenter	Hosier	Clerk
Attendant	Farmer	Blacksmith	Oar & Boat Maker	Landowner
Messenger	Ox-goad	Beekeeper	Craftsman	Grain Dealer
Secretary	Mule Train Driver	Shepherd	Baker	Armor Maker
Copyist	Tailor	Hunter	Soldier	Cooper
Maid	Furrier	Tax Collector	Officer	Butcher
Physician	Shoemaker	Rent Collector	Lord	Porter
Seamstress	Tanner	Jeweler	Nobleman	Estate Manager
Laundress	Mill Worker	Goldsmith	Noblewoman	Ploughman
Weaver	Ale/Mead Maker	Scribe	Sheriff	Reaper
Embroiderer	Roofer	Soap Maker	Servant	
Musician	Stone Mason	Fishmonger	Priest	
Artist	Iron/Lead Worker	Fisherman	Abbess	
Ink Maker	Wood Carver	Cabinet Maker	Nun	

Understanding Improvisation

It is possible that you have heard the word improvisation in connection to theatre, music, stand-up comedy, or dance. Improvisation may sometimes be referred to as role-playing. In this study of *Macbeth*, improvisation exercises before each scene will be used as a discovery tool to explore the characters and the events in the play.

Literally, to improvise is to speak or act out a situation without a script or preconceived way of presenting the scene. You are given the framework of the situation such as the conflict and the characters, and without advanced planning, you make up the scene's dialogue spontaneously. You must find a way to resolve conflicts and overcome obstacles in order to accomplish the objectives of the characters. Direct your concentration toward the situation and the other participants while keeping an open mind about what your character is experiencing. In addition, be receptive to any new information introduced by your partner(s). React honestly.

Improvisation trains people to think on different levels. It helps develop imagination, concentration, self-esteem, self-confidence, observation skills, listening skills, problem-solving skills, and thinking skills.

The following exercises will introduce you to the process of improvisation.

Partner Activities

- A fortune teller says that you are going to achieve great things; try to get him/her to tell you more.
- You think your husband/boyfriend could be more of an achiever by breaking some rules; try to convince him of this.
- Try to persuade someone you know that it's in his/her best interests to betray a mutual acquaintance.

- You've committed a crime, and a police detective seems to suspect you; try to convince him/her of your innocence.
- You're a wartime general. Someone wants to join your army, but you think he/she might be a spy for the other side; test his/her loyalty.

Group Activities

With a group of seven to ten students, improvise waiting in an express checkout line (only ten items) at a grocery store. One customer has more than ten items, and his/her friend keeps bringing more items as you wait. This is the checkout person's first day after completing training.

With a group of ten to fifteen students, improvise a situation where a local radio station is doing a remote location set-up, and as a promotion is giving away tickets to an upcoming concert. There are only three pairs of tickets to give away, and more than ten people show up to win them. Each person must convince the DJ to give him or her the tickets.

Macbeth Warm-ups

- Macbeth and Lady Macbeth talk for the first time about their desire to be King and Queen—and how they might achieve this.
- Just before his execution, the Thane of Cawdor confesses his treachery and asks the King's forgiveness.
- Banquo confides in his son, Fleance, that he thinks Macbeth might be a murderer.
- Malcolm, son of the slain King Duncan, asks the King of England for help in overthrowing Macbeth.
- Macduff turns down Macbeth's invitation to his banquet.
- A messenger brings Lady Macbeth news of the slaughter of Macduff's family; what is her reaction?

A Gathering of the Clans

Just as Shakespeare took liberties with historical facts to write *Macbeth* (see Life in 11th-century Scotland, page 175), the following improvisation takes historical liberties to establish an environment for this introductory exercise. These conditions will allow you to experience as a group, certain aspects of life in Scotland during the 11th-century. Before the exercise, your teacher will assign you to one of four clans – Clan Macbeth (headed by Macbeth), Clan Macduff (headed by Macduff), Clan Stuart (headed by Banquo), or Clan Canmore (headed by King Duncan). You will also receive a clan history and current status report.

Scotland is at war with the King of Norway as well as the traitorous Macdonwald and his clan. The other Scottish clans have gathered in Forres at the command of King Duncan. It is a cloudy, overcast late morning as you enter the large courtyard of the castle. Keep in mind the occupation and/or social status of your persona, and remember, that although you have joined forces to fight a common enemy, as a rule, each clan is highly independent, territorial, and suspicious of other clans. In fact, the word *clannish* means “tending to associate only with a select group of similar background or status.” As the clans begin to gather and talk, a series of four messengers arrive with news from the battlefield. (The messages will be supplied by your teacher.)

As you hear the news from each messenger, improvise a reaction and enter into conversations with other members of your clan as well as people from other clans. You look around to see what is taking place, and “in persona,” you begin to move and join with your specific clan members to celebrate. Gradually, four distinct groups begin to form – Clan Macbeth moves to the side of the classroom closest to the door, Clan Canmore goes to the opposite side of the room, Clan Macduff groups at the back of the classroom, and Clan Stuart locates at the front of the classroom. Finally, the King arrives. Safe within the protection of your clan, you hear what the King says, and you talk with other members of your clan—commenting on how the news impacts you.

When the activity ends, answer the following questions in your **Persona Journal**.

- How did you react to the news from the first three messengers?
- How does the King’s message impact you and your clan?
- Which other clan do you now feel closest to and why?

Were you surprised by the reactions of others in your clan? In the other clans?

Setting the Scene

MACBETH

Act I, scenes i and ii or Who's Fair, Who's Foul?

Critical Query: What do you learn about Macbeth in these scenes?

Special Effects

- Thunder
- Lightning
- Call to Arms

From the Prop Box

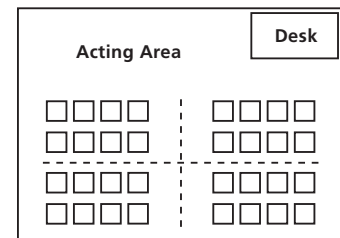
- “Blood-stained” rag for Captain’s head
- Crown for Duncan
- Swords (plastic or foam — in general main actors will be armed throughout the play)
- Ribbons of four different colors (plaid if possible). Each clan wears its own color.
- Beards and/or fright wigs for the witches
- Clan banners on poles
(NOTE: All props are optional, based on your teacher’s instruction.)

Behind the Scene: The Tragic Hero

A **tragedy** is a serious work of literature that narrates the events leading to the downfall of a **tragic hero**, who is usually of noble birth and in almost every way displays noble qualities. His downfall is a result of a **tragic flaw** or fatal character weakness. As the play progresses, consider whether Macbeth fits this definition and what his fatal flaw might be.

Classroom Set Design

Move desks back to allow space for an acting area. The classroom should be divided into four sections, one for each clan. These clan “homelands” should remain the same throughout the play. Clan banners may be created and put on the walls to identify each area.



Warm-up Improv 1

You and a friend decide to call a future predicting hotline for advice. You are given very good news, but your friend is given very bad news. Help him/her deal with this news.

Warm-up Improv 2

(Use after page 24) You are a member of a sports team or squad. During the event you are injured and helped to the locker room. Several members of your team bring you the news that your team has won.

Three witches gather amidst the crack of thunder and the flash of lightning. A fierce battle rages nearby. The witches plan to seek out one of the generals, a Scottish nobleman named Macbeth. They exit muttering ominous chants.

ACT I.

Scene i. Scotland. An Open Place

[Thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES.]

FIRST WITCH. When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

SECOND WITCH. When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

THIRD WITCH. That will be ere the set of sun.

FIRST WITCH. Where the place?

SECOND WITCH. Upon the heath.

THIRD WITCH. There to meet with Macbeth.

* **FIRST WITCH.** I come, Graymalkin!

SECOND WITCH. Paddock calls.

THIRD WITCH. Anon.

ALL. Fair is foul, and foul is fair,
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

[Exeunt.]



* **Witches' "Familiars"** witches were said to keep "familiars"—animal companions that helped them with their magic. The first witch's familiar is "Graymalkin"—a gray cat. The second witch's is "Paddock"—a toad. Later in the play we learn that the third witch's familiar is named Harpier. Some scholars believe that Harpier is an owl, others a raven.

1-2 When...rain: Witches were thought to have been more active in stormy weather.

3 hurlyburly: commotion or turmoil

5 ere: before

7 heath: barren land, covered with small shrubs

9 Anon: right away

PERSONA JOURNAL

Assume that you have seen the witches previously. Tell where you saw them and what they looked like. What were they doing?

King Duncan enters a military camp with his two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain. The King asks for a battle report from a wounded soldier who tells of the intense fighting between the rebellious forces of the traitor Macdonwald and the brave Macbeth.

SCENE ii. A Camp Near Forres

[*Alarum within. Enter DUNCAN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN, LENNOX, with ATTENDANTS, meeting a bleeding CAPTAIN.*]

DUNCAN. What bloody man is that? He can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
The newest state.

MALCOLM. This is the sergeant
Who like a good and hardy soldier fought
'Gainst my captivity.—Hail, brave friend!
Say to the King the knowledge of the broil
As thou didst leave it.

CAPTAIN. Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald—
Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him—from the Western Isles
Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied;
And fortune, on his damn'd quarrel smiling,
Show'd like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak;
For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carved out his passage

Stratford Festival (Canada)
production of *Macbeth*,
1983



PERSONA ACTION

Representatives from the Canmore clan enter with Duncan. All other Canmores stand and react to events in this scene.

1-3 He can...state: He can tell us the latest news (**newest state**) from the battlefield.

3 sergeant: soldier or officer, during this time period meaning the same as captain

6 broil: battle

? How serious are the captain's injuries? How would you convey this to the audience?

8 spent: tired

9 choke their art: prevent each other from swimming

10-19 Macdonwald was well suited for the role of traitor because of his evilness (**multiplying villainies**). His troops consisted of light infantry (**kerns**) and more heavily-armed soldiers (**gallowglasses**) recruited from Ireland and the Hebrides (**Western Isles**). At first it seemed that luck smiled on his cause, but then, like a fickle woman, luck abandoned him. And Macbeth, waving his blood-stained sword, fought his way through to the front and challenged Macdonwald.

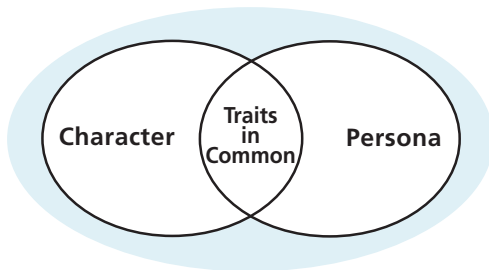
PERSONA JOURNAL

What do you know about the battle?

Reacting to Act I

Analysis

1. Do you believe some things are fated to happen, no matter what? Or do you believe that your actions can change the course of your life? Explain your answer.
2. If you were having your fortune told, what questions would you ask the teller?
3. Why do you think Shakespeare used a scene with three witches to begin this play? How might this beginning prepare the audience for what is to come?
4. Why do you think Macbeth and Banquo do not seem afraid of the witches?
5. In your opinion, what is Lady Macbeth's attitude toward her husband? Give examples from the text to support your answer.
6. What is Macbeth's opinion of Banquo?
7. Do you agree with King Duncan that you cannot tell what people are really like just by looking at them? Reread King Duncan's speech in Act I, scene iv, lines 11-21, and discuss why you think Shakespeare had Duncan say this just before Macbeth enters.
8. Using a Venn diagram, select a major character from the first act and compare your persona to that character.



9. Using a graphic organizer like the one at the top of the next column, list the steps of Lady Macbeth's plan to kill King Duncan and blame it on someone else.

The first step has been done for you. Next to each step, write possible things that could go wrong.

Steps in the Plan	What Could Go Wrong
Greet Duncan and provide a great banquet. He will sleep well after a large meal with drink.	Duncan decides not to drink.

Literary Elements

1. Shakespeare allows his characters to reveal their innermost thoughts and feelings to the audience through speeches called **soliloquies**. Find an example of this in Act I. Explain why you think Shakespeare wrote the soliloquy for this character in this particular location of the text.
2. **Images** of blood and darkness run through the entire play of Macbeth. Find as many examples of this imagery as possible in Act I.

Writing

1. Write a news report about the recent battles. Refer to the information that was presented to King Duncan by the Captain and Ross.
2. Imagine that you are the sailor's wife or the sailor that the witches refer to in Act I, scene iii. Write your version of the events the witches speak about.
3. Act I, scene v begins with Lady Macbeth reading the ending of a letter from her husband, Macbeth. Keeping true to all of the information you have from the play so far, write the beginning of the letter. Remember to tell Lady Macbeth about the recent battle.

Reacting to the Play

Analysis

1. Why do you think the witches chose Macbeth for their victim? Would Banquo have served their purpose just as well?
2. Throughout the text, there are references to double meanings and opposites. In Act I, scene i, the witches say “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” In Act I, scene iii, Macbeth echoes that with “So foul and fair a day I have not seen.” Find more examples of double meanings and opposites in the text. Why do you think Shakespeare carefully weaves these references throughout the play?
3. If Macbeth had not killed Duncan, do you think that he would still have become king?
4. Did the Macbeths really care for each other or were they only interested in themselves? Defend your answer with examples from the play.
5. Where is Fleance? What do you think happened to him?
6. Review your answer to the first writing activity on page 144. By the end of the play, do you think that Scotland is being ruled by the person best suited to be king? Explain your answer.
7. What do you think was Macbeth’s biggest mistake?
8. In your opinion, who or what is ultimately responsible for Macbeth’s death?

9. Identify some situations in today’s world where the struggle for power has led to violence. Can you name some world leaders, past or present, that resemble Macbeth in their methods to gain control and remain in power?

Literary Elements

1. What do you think is the overriding message, or **theme**, of the play?
2. Along with blood and darkness, what other strands of **imagery** do you find in the play? Give examples to support your answer.
3. Review the definition of the **tragic hero** on page 23. How does Macbeth fit this definition? What is his tragic flaw?

Writing

1. Write a short parody of Macbeth.
2. Choose one scene from the play and rewrite the dialogue in modern English.
3. Who is the stronger character, Macbeth or Lady Macbeth? Write an opinion essay that explains your choice.
4. Who would get your vote to be the next King of Scotland after Macbeth? Write an essay explaining your preference.
5. Examine Macbeth’s downfall by writing an essay comparing Macbeth’s reputation in Act I with his reputation at the end of the play.

Life in 11th-Century Scotland

Shakespeare played fast and loose with historical facts in *Macbeth*. Almost nothing in the “Scots tragedy” actually happened as Shakespeare wrote it. Still, the real Scotland of Macbeth’s time was as troubled, violent, and fascinating as anything the Bard dreamed up. The following account is how things *really* occurred.

Scotland is divided into three main regions—the rocky, mountainous Highlands to the north, the hilly Southern Uplands, and the Lowlands between them. Macbeth himself was a Highlander, possibly of Viking (Scandinavian) ancestry. As King, he completed the job of uniting these regions into a single Scottish nation.

If you lived in any of these regions during the 11th century, you wouldn’t have spoken Shakespeare’s English. You probably would have spoken Gaelic, a language

that came to Scotland from Ireland. A few Scottish Highlanders still speak Gaelic today. Some of today’s English words come from Gaelic—including *bog*, *slogan*, and *whisky*.

Since the Romans had brought Christianity to Scotland many centuries before, you would probably have been a Christian—a member of the Celtic Christian church. On the other hand, you might have believed in a pagan religion instead.

Macbeth himself worshipped the gods of Scandinavia before he converted to Christianity.

In Macbeth’s Scotland, you would have belonged to one of several classes. Nobles were divided in family groups called clans.

The highest nobles, of course, were the king and queen.

Next in line were lords called mormaers, who ruled vast territories.

Macbeth was the mormaer of the province of Moray before he became king.



Ranking below the nobility were free commoners and people who lived in virtual slavery.

Being the King of Scotland was a dangerous job. During one period before Macbeth was king, seven Scottish kings in a row were murdered. When a king died (rarely of natural causes), the new king was elected by a rather confusing custom called tanistry. In order to be elected king under tanistry, a nobleman had to be liked and respected by his peers. It helped to be a good warrior. A reputation for ruthlessness didn't hurt either.

For example, Macbeth is thought to have avenged his father's murder by burning a treacherous cousin to death. He later slew King Duncan in battle (not in his sleep) in order to get himself elected king. Such violent deeds were considered quite proper in 11th century Scotland. In fact, Macbeth was regarded as a just and peaceable king.

Even so, King Macbeth had plenty of worries. Scotland was constantly under threat of invasion from Norsemen, Danes, and the English. Macbeth also lived in danger of rebellion among his own subjects—a quarrelsome mix of peoples that included Picts, Scots, and Celts.

So kings and nobles always had to be ready to fight. Medieval warfare required physical strength as well as skill. Soldiers wore heavy suits of mail—flexible, cloth-like armor made from tiny loops of iron. They carried massive, double-edged, iron swords perfected by the Vikings. These swords were used for slashing, not thrusting or

stabbing—which was a good thing, since mail was easily pierced by a direct stab.

Bagpipes, which had been played for many centuries before Macbeth's time, were great spirit-raisers for Scottish warriors. The pipes' shrill martial music stirred the blood and readied men for battle. In fact, the bagpipe itself has sometimes been called a weapon of war.

If you were a commoner or peasant, you had other things to think about than war. Just surviving in the rugged Scottish countryside was no easy task. People mined, did metalwork and blacksmithing, fished, and raised large flocks of sheep and cattle.

If you were a woman, you would have spent a lot of your time spinning thread from wool or linen. Since spinning wheels had not yet come to Scotland, you would have used a tool called a drop spindle. First, you would pull out strands of wool or linen, then attach them to the spindle. Then you would drop the spinning spindle so that the strands twisted together into thread.

This was a time-consuming task because a lot of thread was needed. Miles of it were used to make even a simple jacket. So spinning was an important activity that wasn't restricted to women or commoners. Even some noblemen are said to have done it.

The Scottish were also skilled weavers and embroiderers, and made attractive, patterned clothing from the thread they spun. Not much is known about Scottish clothing of this period, since no examples have survived. Nobles of the time might have

worn plaid to show what clan they belonged to. But the famous Highland kilt would not appear for several more centuries.

Jewelry, very important in Scottish life, was made by both male and female commoners. Handsome brooches were used to fasten clothing, and both men and women wore necklaces.

Along with semi-precious jewels, necklaces were strung with amber, bits of bone, and glass beads. Depending on your religion, you might have worn either a Christian crucifix or the image of a Norse god on a necklace. You might even have worn both if you believed in both the Christian and Norse religions—as Macbeth himself may have done during part of his life.

If you were a commoner, making clothes and jewelry could be a source of income. But you wouldn't sell your wares for money. Coins wouldn't be used in Scotland until the 12th century. Instead, you would have traded or bartered your crafted goods.

You also would have done most of your cooking out-of-doors. A cauldron of pottery or metal (not unlike the one used by the witches in *Macbeth*) was held by chains over a bed of embers. To adjust the heat, you raised or lowered the cauldron.

You could cook several things at once in a cauldron. While you were boiling or roasting meat, you could also cook vegetables—either by putting them in a cloth bag and into the cauldron, or by steaming them above the cauldron.

Commoners' ovens were also out-of-doors. The walls of these ovens were made of stones, with a single slab of rock across the top. Grassy soil was piled around the stone walls for insulation. The top slab was either covered with soil or left bare for use as a stove. Kings and nobles had similar ovens inside their castles.

Despite all his historical inaccuracies, Shakespeare did get one thing right. At the end of *Macbeth*, he hints that Scotland is in for some serious changes now that Malcolm has become king. Indeed, Scotland changed a great deal after Macbeth's death.

Macbeth's successor, Malcolm III, had lived for many years in England and was married to an English princess named Margaret. Even though Malcolm frequently raided and invaded England, Malcolm and his queen began to bring English ways and customs to Scotland. Little by little, English would replace Gaelic as Scotland's first language. As the centuries passed, Scotland would struggle and often fight to maintain its separate identity—both culturally and politically.

By Shakespeare's time, Scotland and England were coming closer together—especially when a Scotsman named James became King of England in 1603. In 1707, after centuries of war and bloodshed, Scotland, England, and Wales all became part of a single nation called the Kingdom of Great Britain. Scottish independence had come to an end.

Shakespeare's Sources: The Legend of Macbeth

The overwhelming presence of evil in *Macbeth* raises an interesting question: Just how wicked was the historical Macbeth? Shakespeare was not a writer to let the facts stand in the way of a good story; the real Macbeth was not the murderous tyrant portrayed in his play.

According to less biased accounts, Macbeth ruled Scotland wisely and effectively from 1040 to 1057. His people prospered during his reign, and he brought an end to a long conflict between the Scottish Church and the Pope. Macbeth and his wife generously supported monasteries, and he even made a pilgrimage to

Rome. Perhaps most significantly, he was the last Scottish king to devote himself to the language and traditions of the Celts, a people who periodically dominated the British Isles throughout antiquity.

Macbeth *did* kill his predecessor Duncan. But he did so in open combat, not while Duncan lay asleep. Moreover, Duncan was not the pious and kind ruler Shakespeare made him out to be. He ruled for only six years, and according to contemporary accounts, he did so very badly. He was cruel and aggressive, involving Scotland in a long war that caused his people great suffering.

Perhaps worst of all, he was simply not very capable. When Macbeth defeated Duncan and assumed the throne, the Scottish people rightly expected better times.

So Shakespeare did with Macbeth as he had already done with Richard III—he took a basically decent ruler and demonized him. But Shakespeare did not create this murderous, tyrannical Macbeth from scratch. Much of the legend had been around for many years. Why and how did it come about?

According to a familiar saying, history is always written by victors. When Macbeth was killed by Malcolm, Duncan's family was permanently restored to the throne. Not surprisingly, this line of royalty was anxious to have its legitimacy honored. Any kind words historians had to say about Macbeth were repressed. Even Shakespeare had political reasons for giving a negative portrayal of Macbeth. King James I traced his lineage back not only to the mythical Banquo but also to Duncan himself.



Ornament from a Celtic illuminated manuscript



The story of Macbeth's meeting with the three witches was probably invented by the historian Hector Boece (ca. 1465–1536). By Shakespeare's time, the story was accepted as historical fact.

Holinshed's *Chronicles*
(1577)

Three centuries after Macbeth's reign, a historian named Hector Boece described Macbeth as a bloodthirsty monster. This account was largely accepted by Raphael Holinshed in his 1587 book *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Ireland*.

Shakespeare used Holinshed's *Chronicles* as a source of information for all his plays dealing with British history, and *Macbeth* was no exception. Holinshed told of the witches' prophecies and the accession of Banquo's descendants to the throne of Scotland. But as dramatists will, Shakespeare took liberties with his source. He combined Holinshed's account of Macbeth's rise to power with the story of Donwald, an earlier Scottish tyrant who murdered King Duffe.

Macbeth Timeline

- 1039** King Duncan marches north to put down Tofin's rebellion; Macbeth kills Duncan at Bothgowanan
- 1050** Macbeth and his wife are the first Scottish rulers to make a large gift to the Church
- 1054** Siward defeats Macbeth in battle; Macbeth flees to the north
- 1056** Macduff slays Macbeth
- 1057** Malcolm Canmore becomes King of Scotland

There Shakespeare found some of the most gripping elements of his drama. Like Shakespeare's Macbeth, Donwald committed

his initial crime by night while the King was a guest in his castle—a violation of the sacred rules of hospitality. Like Macbeth, Donwald was goaded to action by his ambitious and iron-willed wife.



A Scottish king is crowned at Scone, where the country's Celtic ruler traditionally assumed the throne.

Holinshed's
Chronicles (1577)

However freely Shakespeare may have played with historical facts, he was reasonably faithful to the feudal, Celtic politics of Macbeth's time. Today's audiences may be surprised by Macbeth's alarm in Act I when he hears Duncan declare his own eldest son, Malcolm, the heir to the Scottish throne. We are used to royal succession by *primogeniture*. This system automatically makes the eldest child (typically a male) the heir to all of a parent's property—including a crown. So why *wouldn't* Malcolm rule after his father's death?

In Scotland, the kingship was *elective*. A group of nobles (called *thanes*) were eligible to rule because they were descendants of Kenneth Mac Alpine. This was the man who,

in the 9th century, united Scotland and became its first king. When a king died, a new ruler was elected from among the thanes. This system, while simple, seldom ran smoothly. Rebellion and assassination were common. Few Scottish kings died of old age.

So when Shakespeare's Duncan names Malcolm the Prince of Cumberland, he ignores the normal process of succession. According to both history and legend, Macbeth had a stronger claim to the throne than young Malcolm. Assassination would have been an acceptable means of correcting this wrong—although the deceitful murder in Shakespeare's play would certainly have offended the Celtic warrior spirit.



Scottish castle with moat, drawbridge, and towers

Shakespeare was also correct in suggesting that an era of Scottish history ended with Macbeth's death. His successor Malcolm III was educated in England and sought military alliances with the English. After England was defeated by Normandy's William the Conqueror in 1066, Malcolm replaced the old Celtic ways with the new Anglo-Norman culture. Eventually, his successors thought of themselves as more French than Celt. And with the accession of James I to the English throne in 1603, Scotland finally became part of Great Britain.

Excerpt from Holinshed's *Chronicles*

Meeting the Witches

[It happened that] as Makbeth and Banquho journed towards Fores, where the king [Duncan] then laie, they went sporting by the waie together without other company, save onlie themselves, passing thorough the woods and fields, when suddenlie in the middest of a laund, there met them three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world, whome when they attentivelie beheld, woodering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said; All haile Makbeth, thane of Glammiss (for he had latelie entered into that dignitie and office by the death of his father Sinell). The second of them said; Haile Makbeth thane of Cawder. But the third said; All haile Makbeth that heereafter shalt be king of Scotland.

Murdering the King

Donwald...conceived such an inward malice towards the king (though he shewed it not outwardlie at the first), that the same continued still boiling in his stomach, and ceased not, till through setting on of his wife...hee found meanes to murder the king within the forsaid castell of Fores where he used to sojourne. For the king being in that countrie, was accustomed to lie most commonlie within the same castell, having a speciall trust in Donwald, as a man whom he never suspected.

Of Witches and Witchcraft

Poor King James had a lot of trouble with witches.

His first run-in was in 1590. He was then Scotland's King James VI and hadn't yet become England's King James I. While he was sailing home from Denmark with his new wife, Queen Anne, a group of witches supposedly conjured up a storm to sink his ship. When he and the queen survived, the witches allegedly used a wax doll to cast a fatal spell on him. Again, they failed.

More and more plots against his life followed—and most of them were said to involve witchcraft.

Things didn't settle down when he became the king of England. In 1605 came the notorious Gunpowder Plot. In it, Catholic conspirators almost succeeded in blowing up King James and the entire English government with explosives. (See page 7.)

Now, using gunpowder to commit assassination may not exactly sound supernatural. But gunpowder itself was believed to be invented by the devil. And the plot was said to be hatched during a Black Mass.

Small wonder that James I was obsessed by witchcraft. He even wrote a book about it called *Demonology*.

Witches were nothing new in the times of King James. Nor were they to be found only in the British Isles. Stories of people—especially women—with dangerous, supernatural powers can be found in all places and cultures. And they go all the way back to ancient times.

The Ancient Greeks told the story of a beautiful witch named Medea. Medea used

magic against her own father and brothers to save the life of her lover, the hero Jason. Later, when Jason wanted to marry another woman, Medea slew his would-be bride with a magical dress and crown.

The Old Testament also contains many references to witches. According to the book of 1 Samuel, King Saul went to the Witch of Endor to summon a spirit for advice. And the book of Exodus includes the famous commandment, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live."

But it was only with the coming of Christianity that fear of witches became widespread. The leaders of the early Christian church assured their followers that witches were powerless and not to be feared. Even so, uneducated Christians grew more and more fearful of witches as their religion spread through Europe. Between the 12th and 15th centuries, the church itself was determined to stamp out witchcraft.

Accused witches were thought to commit all kinds of unholy crimes, including the worship of Satan and the practice of necromancy. Necromancy involved the use of human corpses or body parts to cast spells.

King James wrote about necromancy in *Demonology*. He said that witches dismembered "dead corpses...to make powders thereof, mixing such other things there-amongst as he gives unto them."

Shakespeare had read James' book and refers to necromancy in *Macbeth*. On page 31 the second witch boasts, "Here I have a pilot's thumb, / Wrack'd as homeward he did come." And of course, it was typically

witch-like behavior to hang around a battlefield, where human corpses were in hearty supply.

The very idea of such practices terrified ordinary people. Unfortunately, they resorted to equally terrifying practices to get rid of witches.

Imagine yourself a European peasant during medieval times or the Renaissance. You're walking down the road one day, and a grouchy old neighbor woman says something nasty to you. Then, a day or two later, one of your children takes sick. You come to the conclusion that the woman's nasty remark was some kind of evil spell.

If you told all this to the proper authorities, the woman might very well be charged with witchcraft—and possibly tortured and executed.

Of course, she might first be tested for innocence or guilt. But such tests were often quite horrible. In a trial by fire, a suspected witch had to walk a distance of nine feet while carrying a red-hot iron in her bare hand. Her hand would then be bandaged, and the bandage removed after three days. If the hand was badly scarred, this would be proof of witchcraft.

In a trial by water, a suspected witch was bound hand and foot and thrown into a river. Water was thought to be holy and pure. So if the suspect floated, it meant that the water had rejected her as something evil. Therefore, she was truly a witch, and deserved to be killed.

If she sank, it meant that the water had accepted her, which proved her innocence.

Of course, this wasn't much help if the suspect happened to drown.

Many people were executed for witchcraft—sometimes by hanging, sometimes by burning at the stake. By far the majority of those were women.

Why were women so much more often accused of witchcraft than men? "The reason is easy," wrote King James, "for as that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in those gross snares of the Devil ..."

The last great outburst of witch hysteria took place in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1692. This became the topic of another important play, Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Thirty people were convicted of witchcraft, and nineteen were hanged.

During the three centuries since then, executions for witchcraft have become almost unheard-of. People tend to be increasingly wary of weird accusations based on superstitious beliefs.

Late in life, King James himself came to doubt the reality of witchcraft and black magic. Even so, he continued to believe that the very *idea* of witchcraft held tremendous power over the human imagination. Today, we can still feel some of that awful power in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Themes and Imagery

THEMES IN MACBETH

A **theme** is an author's ongoing topic, idea, or concern. Below is just a sampling of three themes (the problem of evil; the power of guilt and fear; illusion and reality) that Shakespeare deals with in this thematically rich play.

The Problem of Evil

In his four greatest tragedies—*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*—Shakespeare seems obsessed with the problem of evil, and asks the sorts of questions we all ask about it: Why is there evil in the world? What drives people to commit evil deeds? Is good stronger than evil? By taking us into the mind of a murderer, *Macbeth* explores such questions with great intensity.

What starts Macbeth and Lady Macbeth on their murderous careers? Ambition is the trigger. Their dialogue hints that they discussed the possibility of killing Duncan even before the action of the play began.

Macbeth may yield to evil, but he is not a completely evil man. So before he kills Duncan, he hopes that one murder will fulfill his ambitions. Then he can be a good king and a good man.

But evil doesn't work that way. The Elizabethans believed in a "chain of vice," by which crime leads to more crime, and murder leads to more murder. Macbeth fully realizes this after he's seen Banquo's ghost: "It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood" (III, iv).

From that time on, Macbeth's evil deeds

seem to have a will of their own. He can't stop himself from carrying out ever more monstrous crimes: "I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (III, iv). And Macbeth's crimes grow worse and worse. He begins by slaying a king in his sleep, and eventually orders the deaths of women and children. Late in the play, characters hint that Macbeth has committed atrocities too horrible to describe: "Each new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face..." (IV, iii).

The Power of Guilt and Fear

Elizabethans believed that the "chain of vice" led to "remorse of conscience." And it's something of a scholarly cliché that Macbeth is tortured by a bad conscience.

There can be no doubt that Macbeth is tortured by his own evil deeds. He cannot sleep, and he becomes desperately lonely. Late in the play, he can trust no one, and complains that "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have ..." (V, iii). He becomes increasingly estranged even from his wife, until he finally lacks the capacity to even grieve at the news of her death: "She should have died hereafter" (V, v).

What of Lady Macbeth? As tough and ruthless as she seems at the beginning of the play, Macbeth's wife is capable of genuine compassion. In II, ii, she can't bring herself to murder Duncan because he looks like her father. And as she slips into madness later in

the play, she is haunted by pity for her husband's victims: "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?" (V, i). Less imaginative than her husband, Lady Macbeth is nevertheless more vulnerable than he is to "remorse of conscience."

Illusion and Reality

In life, things are often not what they seem. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is one of the world's great artistic statements of this idea.

In the very first scene, the witches tell us exactly what to expect: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair..." Illusion and paradox will abound in the world of this play. (A **paradox** is when a statement or idea seems contradictory and impossible—and yet, somehow, might really be true.) Macbeth eerily echoes the witches' words with his very first line: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen."

Illusions and deceptions keep piling up after that. In Act I, King Duncan learns that his trusted friend, the Thane of Cawdor, has rebelled against him. "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face," sighs Duncan (I, iv). Or as the old saying puts it, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Duncan doesn't learn this lesson well enough to save himself from the seemingly trustworthy Macbeth.

Even Macbeth's castle is deceptive in appearance. Far from being dank, gloomy, and forbidding (as it is often designed—incorrectly—in productions), it is actually a cheerful place—at least at first. "This castle hath a pleasant seat," (I, iv) observes Duncan.

Who would guess that those walls harbor a diabolical plot? And who would guess that Macbeth and his wife—the perfect host and hostess—are planning to murder their royal guest?

Even before he murders Duncan, the hyper-imaginative Macbeth has trouble telling illusion from reality, complaining that "nothing is but what is not" (I, iii). And is that a real knife hovering in the air before he murders Duncan, or just a "dagger of the mind" (II, i)? And is that really the slain Banquo at his feast, or just a hallucination?

Macbeth is goaded on by the witches, who are agents of illusion as well as evil. They assure Macbeth that his downfall will come only with two miracles. They promise that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth"—and also, that "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him" (IV, i).

Neither of these "miracles" really happens. Birnam Wood only appears to move toward Dunsinane when Malcolm's soldiers carry branches from its trees. And the other prophecy is but a trick with words. Macduff, who kills Macbeth, is not the offspring of some goddess or monster, but an ordinary mortal who was from his "mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (V, vii). In our own time, countless babies come into the world by cesarean section; nobody claims that they are not "of woman born." The witches use illusions, half-truths, and outright lies to spread evil in the world.

By the end of the play, Macbeth is a mystery even to himself. The one thing he knows for certain is that he is lost in a world of lies and illusions: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more” (V, v).

IMAGERY

Imagery refers to sensory language. Shakespeare often uses vivid imagery to develop his thematic ideas. Consider how the following images (night and darkness; sleep and death; clothing; violence and bloodshed) reflect on the themes discussed above.

Macbeth is full of images of night and darkness. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth summon darkness to hide their misdeeds. Upon receiving news of the witches’ prophecies, Lady Macbeth exclaims, “Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife see not the wound it makes ...” (I, v). “Stars, hide your fires,” cries Macbeth, soon after meeting the witches—for he desperately hopes that darkness can hide his crimes even from himself: “The eye wink at the hand, yet let that be, / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (I, iv).

As if obeying Macbeth and his wife, darkness descends with a vengeance after Duncan’s death. As Ross observes, “By th’ clock, ’tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp” (II, iv). Scotland will not see daylight again until Macbeth’s violent rule has ended.

Sleep and Death

Upon killing Duncan, Macbeth hears a voice exclaim, “Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep” (II, ii). And from that time on, Macbeth sleeps little if at all, as Lady Macbeth observes after the banquet scene: “You lack the season of all natures, sleep” (III, iv).

Like all insomniacs, Macbeth can’t stop thinking and talking about sleep. Perversely, he hopes that his next crime will make it possible for him to sleep again. “Thou shalt not live,” he says of Macduff, “That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies, / And sleep in spite of thunder” (IV, i).

The imagery of the play often links sleep with death. After Lady Macbeth drugs Duncan’s guards, they sleep so soundly “That death and nature do contend about them / Whether they live or die” (I, ii). When Macbeth is afraid to return to the scene of Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth scolds him, “The sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures” (II, ii). And after finding Duncan’s corpse, Macduff cries out to everybody in the castle, “Shake off this downy sleep, death’s counterfeit, / And look on death itself!” (II, iii).

Clothing

Macbeth is a usurper and tyrant at heart, even before he becomes king. So the titles and honors that come to him during the play don’t suit him well. Shakespeare suggests this with images of ill-fitting clothing.

In I, iii, when Ross and Angus arrive to tell Macbeth that he is now the Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth replies, “Why do you dress me / In borrow’d robes?” In the same scene, Banquo observes of Macbeth, “New honours come upon him, / Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould / But with the aid of use.” And as the rebel armies close in on Macbeth, Angus observes, “Now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe / Upon a dwarfish thief” (V, ii).

In an odd episode late in the play, Macbeth has trouble deciding what clothes to wear. He asks an attendant bring him his armor so he can go into the battle, then begins to put it on over his regal clothing. But when he’s partly dressed in his armor, he commands, “Pull’t off, I say,” then, “Bring it after me” (V, iii). This indecision suggests Macbeth’s discomfort with what he’s become—not a king or a soldier, but a vicious killer.

Violence and Bloodshed

Duncan’s first line in I, ii (“What bloody man is that?”) tips us off that Macbeth is going to be an unusually violent play. Indeed, starting with Duncan’s line, the word “blood” occurs in one form or another about 40 times in the text.

Beginning with Duncan’s murder, seven characters die violent deaths—including Lady Macbeth, who commits suicide. Appropriately, much of the play’s imagery evokes violence and bloodshed.

To fill us with horror at Macbeth’s crimes against the innocent, violent imagery is sometimes linked to images of children and babies. For example, Lady Macbeth imagines killing her own infant: “I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums / And dash’d the brains out . . .” (I, vii).

Macbeth’s hyperactive imagination leads him to envision truly apocalyptic bloodshed and violence. (*Apocalyptic* means having to do with the end of the world.) Were he to try to wash his hands clean, he imagines that he would fill the oceans with blood: “This my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas in incarnadine, / Making the green one red” (II, ii).

Near the end of the play, Macbeth is exhausted from his own reign of terror. “I have supp’d full with horrors,” he says (V, v). We in the audience may feel that we have, too.