



THE SCOTTISH PLAY – RESOURCE KIT FOR SCHOOLS

For full and continuing updates on the director's vision, see "The Scottish Blog – A Production Diary or Scrapbook" at <http://barcodemacbeth.blogspot.com/>. Teachers and students are encouraged to contribute to the blog with their responses to the commentary, production and original play itself.

The following background notes examine various aspects of *Macbeth*, shedding further light on the Elmwood Players production, and suggesting questions and exercises that might be useful in a classroom context.

SHORT FACTS ABOUT MACBETH

- † Believed to have been composed between 1603 and early 1606, as it seems to celebrate King James I's ancestors and the Stuart accession to the throne in 1603, but also seems to allude strongly to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.
- † The shortest and bloodiest of Shakespeare's tragedies and the last of his great four tragedies to be written, following *Hamlet*, *King Lear* and *Othello*.
- † Also considered to be Shakespeare's darkest work, being the only tragedy in which a supernatural dimension actively conspires against the hero and his kingdom.
- † There have been 14 films made of *Macbeth* (the first in 1908) and three operas, along with numerous adaptations of the story.

Exercises:

- † Can you find evidence in the play to support the composition dates of 1603-1606?
- † How is *Macbeth* similar/different to Shakespeare's other three great tragedies?

THE ELMWOOD PLAYERS PRODUCTION

Macbeth has fascinated audiences for more than 400 years, the archetypal motifs on the dangers of power-lust resonating for generation after generation. Frequently performed in theatres around the world, Shakespeare's play has also found its way into numerous other media and adaptations (an interesting recent BBC adaptation depicted *Macbeth* as a modern-day meat-cleaver wielding chef — a very literal take on the final epitaph for the fallen hero: "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen", Act V, Sc viii).

The Elmwood Players production will combine a modern-day setting with the more traditional, mixing the accessibility of a contemporary context with all the fascinating drama of a medieval horror. Commander of the Scottish forces in present-day Afghanistan, *Macbeth* and *Banquo* are indulging in a post-victory carousal when they encounter the three witches, cunningly dissembling as alluring young dancers at a night-club. From the moment they deliver their fatal prophesy into the hero's ear, *Macbeth* comes under the witches' thrall and is plunged into a phantasmagoric medieval nightmare, spiralling into the murky depths of betrayal, carnage and madness.

While the set is minimal for this production, there will be a strong emphasis on costume, special effects, sound and lighting, to dramatically enhance the supernatural elements and intensify the action.

Exercises:

† *In what other modern contexts might Macbeth work apart from medieval Scotland? What would the differences be?*

† *Examine the costume, special effects, sound and lighting of the Elmwood Players production; how strongly do they contribute to the mood and atmosphere of the play?*

THEMES AND MOTIFS

The Elmwood Players production will highlight and foreground the following themes and motifs commonly associated with *Macbeth*:

- † Vaulting ambition
- † Civilisation and love versus isolation and treachery
- † Upsetting of the natural order
- † The tension between thought/desire and action
- † Polarity — good versus evil, right versus wrong, day versus night
- † Equivocation and Deception — perhaps the most pervasive of the themes in *Macbeth*, this is also the most difficult to grasp in its full significance from a modern-day perspective. It is most neatly summarised in one of the opening lines of the witches, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (Act I, Sc i), which establishes the atmosphere of confusion and ambiguity that reigns throughout the play; and is most colourfully illustrated by the character of the Porter, whose lengthy double-entendre reinforce the theme even in comic relief.



To equivocate means to use ambiguity to conceal the truth — ie. to say one thing but mean another. From the outset many of the characters use double meaning to conceal the truth, to deliberately mislead and confound the listener, especially the witches and their apparitions, whose cryptic prophesying seems to give Macbeth the greatest security only for it to be cruelly snatched away in actuality. “Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be until/Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/ Shall come against him” (Act IV, Sc i) and “none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth” (Act IV, Sc i) both suggest complete invincibility, but the speakers are playing with language to conceal the truth of Macbeth’s demise.

The concept of equivocation was of significant social and political import at the time the play was written, associated as it was with the devil and the Jesuits (see also Historical Background). In 17th century England, people believed all things on earth had been named by God or by Adam through God’s authority; to give false names or to pervert language was therefore a sin against God and an abuse of the natural order. Confusion itself was also seen as a tool of the devil, so to create confusion through language was to reveal one’s diabolical influences.

The Jesuits, living in Protestant England, used equivocation to disguise their religion, to escape persecution, imprisonment and death. To lie was also a sin against God, so equivocation was the only means by which they could avoid both lying and telling the truth, which would incriminate them; but in the minds of non-Jesuits, this only strengthened their association with the devil. They were often charged with magic, idolatry and witchcraft. King James' investigators claimed to have found "A Treatise of Equivocation" — a guide to dismantling England's royal government — in the possession of one of the Jesuits involved in the Gunpowder Plot (see Historical Background).

Exercises:

† Have you ever "equivocated"? Discuss with a group.

† Who's the best liar? Try your best to convince a friend by "equivocating" yourself. What do you notice about body language and other physical cues?



HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For his own plot, Shakespeare drew on the historical accounts of King Macbeth by Raphael Holinshed and Scottish philosopher Hector Boece. He combines two historical Scottish figures: Donwald, who, at the instigation of his nagging wife, murdered King Duff in the ninth century, after first drugging his guards; and the actual Macbeth, who was born in 1005.

The real Macbeth's father was a Scottish warlord and his mother is variously said to have been the daughter of King Kenneth II or King Malcolm II.

The character of Lady Macbeth is based on Gruoch (GROO-och), granddaughter of King Kenneth III, who was first married to Gillacomgain and had a son named Lulach, who later became King of Scotland and earned the unfortunate epithet "Lulach the Simple".

Typical of the bloody infighting of the time, Gillacomgain led a coup against Macbeth's father (who was also in fact Gillacomgain's uncle). He and his followers were in turn burnt to death in 1032, probably by Macbeth and his allies. Macbeth then married Gruoch himself and raised Lulach as his stepson.

In 1040, Macbeth and Norse ally Thorfinn defeated and killed Duncan I in battle and split southern and northern Scotland between them. Macbeth was by all accounts a good king — strict but fair — for the first decade of his reign. In 1054 he was defeated by Earl Siward of Northumberland at the Battle of Birnam Wood, Dunsinane, but escaped and continued to reign until three years later when he was killed by Duncan's son Malcolm.

During this period, Gaelic custom favoured primogeniture through the male line — ie. succession to the Scottish throne passed from father to first son or to the male adult next in line if the heir was too young. Had she been born a male, Lady Macbeth would have been in direct line to the throne herself.

THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

Many scholars see a strong connection between Shakespeare's play and the 1605 Gunpowder Plot, when a small group of plotters very nearly blew up the King, the Crown Prince, and all members of the Court and Parliament. In a context in which the monarch was believed to be ordained by God, this was an apocalyptic event, which, if successful, would have heralded the overturning of the natural order.



King James I, who discovered the plot, promoted an official interpretation that it was the result of the devil's influence on the most corrupt and malevolent individuals in the Catholic (or Jesuit) community. James himself was believed to be divinely illuminated by God in uncovering the plot, and this gave him the perfect opportunity to reinforce the standing of his kingdom in God's providence. As did the fact that gunpowder was also believed to be an instrument of the devil.

The event and its aftermath — the trials of the plotters, the rites set up to commemorate their discovery and capture, the official interpretation of all the surrounding circumstances — had such impact upon society that more than 400 years later, English-speaking people's still celebrate the thwarting of the Gunpowder Plot with Guy Fawkes's Day.

Similarly in *Macbeth*, the murder of the King is an apocalyptic event, instigated by the diabolical supernatural forces who use the hero and his wife as their tools. Reminiscent of gunpowder-fuelled explosions, omens foretell of "dire combustion and confus'd events" and Macbeth says of the crime's revelation, "Confusion hath now made his masterpiece". Confusion was the principle of the devil's reign, as order was of God's.

Exercises:

† Plot the historical background on a timeline or create Macbeth's family tree.

† What is the playwright's point of view on plots to overthrow the monarchy? Is Shakespeare being didactic, trying to persuade the audience of a particular viewpoint?

THE WITCHES

The witches' fortunes have waxed and waned in the 400-odd years since *Macbeth* was first performed. Discounted as embarrassingly anachronistic by some modern producers who don't quite know what to do with them, they have often been marginalised as shadowy symbols of Macbeth's inner ambition, guilt and self-deception, with the figure of Witch Queen Hecate cut altogether.

To ignore the witches, however, is to ignore their importance to 17th century audiences. So pervasive was the fear of witches at this time that King James I added to the witchcraft laws a decree of death for those who:

Take up any dead man, woman, or child out of his, her, or their grave or any other place where the dead body resteth — or the skin, bone, or any other part of any dead person — to be employed or used in any manner of witchcraft, sorcery, charm, or enchantment.

This is precisely what the witches in *Macbeth* do, as revealed in their incantations in Act IV, Sc i, when they use necromancy (the prediction of the future by the supposed communication with the dead) to tell Macbeth his fate.

In fact, most of the major conspiracies against King James during his reign were believed to involve witchcraft, including the Gunpowder Plot. There are strong parallels between the devil inciting Jesuit plotters against King James and the witches subtly prompting Macbeth to regicide, giving the devil dominion over Scotland until Macbeth is finally vanquished in the end. Through the witches we therefore see the dramatization of what were considered very real and potent threats to the realm.

The Elmwood Players production gives full weight to the witches as devilish agents with their own terrifying agenda. The Macbeths are in the witches' thrall — a diabolical enchantment from which they wake too late. The pervasive influence of the witches and their Queen is also made explicit by having them act the role of attendants within the castle. Following the “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” equivocation — ie what's good is bad and what's bad is good — these witches will be young and attractive women rather than the old hags so frequently depicted, but will exude pure evil!



Exercises:

† Are the witches still believable to a 21st century audience?

† In light of modern-day characters such as “Buffy” and “Angel”, how do you respond to the supernatural element in *Macbeth*?

WHO WEARS THE PANTS? CHARACTERISATION OF THE MACBETHS

Just who — and what — are the Macbeths? Do they exercise free will or are they merely the tools of a malignant supernatural force? Why does Macbeth kill the King when he is depicted as a heroic and loyal thane at the beginning of the play? Is he dominated by a ruthless and ambitious wife? Are they both mad, or do they simply have a catastrophically poor grasp of consequences?

Exercises:

† How important are the following factors in Macbeth's decision to commit regicide?

- Personal ambition
- Lady Macbeth's urging
- The witches enthralling Macbeth

† The idea that somehow Macbeth is wearing the wrong clothes is mentioned several times (see quotes following) — what was Shakespeare trying to say?

Macbeth: “The thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me
In borrow’d robes?” Act I, Sc iii

Banquo: “New horrors come upon him,
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould
But with the aid of use.” Act I, Sc iii

Angus: “...now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.” Act V, Sc ii

† Near the end of the play, Macbeth utters the following
speech; put this into modern language:

“I have lived long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.”
Act V, Sc iii

† Lady Macbeth calls on dark forces to make her evil
enough to help Macbeth kill Duncan — how successful was
she? The murder took place but later on, a long while after
Duncan's murder, she is frequently caught sleepwalking.



MACBETH IN PERFORMANCE

Though it is among the best-known of Shakespeare's plays and considered to be one of the greatest tragedies, performances of *Macbeth* frequently fail. In fact, many critics believe the only completely successful modern performance of the play was the 1955 production starring Laurence Olivier.

One reason cited for this is the declining dramatic interest of acts four and five. After the electrifying intensity of the opening acts — particularly the crackling exchanges between Macbeth and his wife — the play loses some of its pace and energy as it shifts scene to England, introduces new characters and goes on at length over the question of a genuine Scottish heir. Macbeth and his wife, who create such dynamism between them in the play's opening scenes, are not seen together at all in the final acts.

The challenge for the director, then, is to maintain audience interest throughout the play and make it sizzle from beginning to end. To solve the dilemma, many directors heavily edit the second half of the play, but this can also create the problem of a “front-heavy” production, where not enough happens in the second half to balance the first.

For the Elmwood Players production the original script has been cut from 24,000 words (including stage directions) to 12,000, reducing it from a 2.5 hour production to 90 minutes. This stems from a deliberate directorial decision to “show” rather than “tell” what happens in some of the slower scenes and to create a sense of escalating tension towards the play's dénouement.

Exercises:

† How successful do you think this production has been in sustaining the interest of its audience? Plot your engagement in the performance on an XY graph and rate your overall enjoyment of the play on a cline. Explain your response.

† Do you think the edited version of the Elmwood Players production enhances or detracts from Shakespeare's original intentions for the play?

† Share your thoughts on the success or otherwise of the Elmwood Players production on "The Scottish Blog", <http://barcodemacbeth.blogspot.com/>

UNLUCKY FOR SOME

"The Scottish Play", "The Bard's Play", "Mackers" — these are all euphemisms used to ward off the perceived curse of *Macbeth*. Reputedly trailing death and disaster since its very first performance, *Macbeth* continues to strike fear into the hearts of superstitious thespians, who refuse to call it by name when in a theatre (either on stage, back stage or in the dressing room) or even accept roles in it. Fires, injuries, deaths, malfunctioning props and theatre closures have famously plagued numerous performances. In a 1938 Stratford Festival season, one actor had both legs broken after being hit by his own car in a car-park; Lady Macbeth drove her car into a store window; and Macduff had to be replaced by an understudy after falling off his horse. In a 1942 production, starring and directed by John Gielgud, there were no fewer than four fatalities — two of the witches, Duncan, and the set designer all died during its run. The set was repainted and used for a light comedy, and the principal actor of that play also died!

There are various theories on the source of the curse: some believe it may be caused by the use of actual spells in the witches' scenes; some that Shakespeare borrowed these lines from a coven of witches who were greatly offended and cursed the play; some that the original prop master stole a cauldron from a coven and the coven cursed it in revenge of the theft.

More rational explanations are that the superstition began in the old days of stock companies which struggled at all times to remain in business. In a last ditch attempt to boost ticket sales, the companies would frequently announce a production of *Macbeth* — a crowd favourite — but it would be insufficient to rescue them from financial ruin, hence, the play became inextricably associated with the demise of theatre companies and out-of-work actors. The play also includes more fight scenes and other such opportunities for accidents than the average play, and the backstage area of old theatres was a prime setting for disasters, especially where swords and daggers were concerned.

If one should accidentally mention the title of the play while in the theatre, there are counter-rituals to ward off evil. The most familiar is to leave the room, turn around three times to the right, spit over your left shoulder, then knock on the door and ask for permission to re-enter.

At any rate, any theatre worth its salt has a theatre ghost.... If you are extra observant, you might just discover Elmwood's!

See <http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A78882> for an excellent summary of the curse of Macbeth. Another useful reference is *The curse of Macbeth and other theatrical superstitions: an investigation*, by Richard Huggett (1981).

Exercises:

† What superstitions do you believe in and why?

† Try saying “Macbeth” repeatedly in the Elmwood Auditorium and see if anything bad befalls you!



THE CASTLE

The medieval castle was designed as an impregnable defence against one's enemies — a bastion, safe haven and place of protection. It was also an important social centre, where knights and lords reinforced their allegiances by playing host to their peers; it was a particular privilege to host the King, and the responsibility of being a good host was at the heart of medieval society. As with other aspects in *Macbeth* where the natural order is turned on its head, the function of the Macbeths' castle is also perverted and Macbeth becomes the very antithesis of the good host — murdering his own guests as they sleep. Evil has penetrated the castle walls and more danger lurks within than out!

In the Elmwood Players production, a deliberate effect of the set will be to make the audience feel they are within Macbeth's castle walls — uncertain guests at the banquet feast and horror that unfolds.

Exercises:

† Produce a piece of creative writing or static image on one of the following:

- The moment of King Duncan's murder
- Dawn at Macbeth's castle
- Double, double toil and trouble
- Lady Macbeth's bedchamber
- Battle and bloodshed