

Silly Shakespeare for Students



MACBETH

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with help from

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

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Summary

Macbeth (or *The Tragedy of Macbeth* to give it its full title), believed to be first performed in 1606, is one of Shakespeare's most famous and widely performed plays. Some say that the play is cursed because of the way in which it portrays the witches and so tradition has it that the name of the play should not be spoken in theatre; instead it is referred to simply as 'the Scottish play'.

The Scottish play begins with the brief appearance of a trio of witches who act as the narrators for this version of the play, appearing between each scene. It then moves to a military camp, where the Scottish King Duncan hears the news that his generals, Macbeth, and Banquo, have defeated two separate invading armies—one from Ireland and one from Norway.

Following their battle with these enemy forces, Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches as they cross a moor. The witches prophesise that Macbeth will be made Thane (a rank of Scottish nobility) of Cawdor and eventually King of Scotland. They also prophesise that Macbeth's companion, Banquo, will father a line of Scottish kings, although Banquo will never be king himself. The witches vanish, and Macbeth and Banquo treat their prophecies sceptically until some of King Duncan's men come to thank the two generals for their victories in battle and to tell Macbeth that he has indeed been named Thane of Cawdor. The previous Thane betrayed Scotland by fighting for the Norwegians and Duncan has condemned him to death.

Macbeth is intrigued by the possibility that the

remainder of the witches' prophecy—that he will be crowned king—might be true, but he is uncertain what to expect. He visits with King Duncan, and they plan to dine together at Inverness, Macbeth's castle, that night. Macbeth writes ahead to his wife, Lady Macbeth, telling her all that has happened.

Lady Macbeth suffers none of her husband's uncertainty. She desires the kingship for him and wants him to murder Duncan in order to obtain it. When Macbeth arrives at Inverness, she overrides all of her husband's objections and persuades him to kill the King that very night. He and Lady Macbeth plan to get Duncan's two servants drunk so they will black out; the next morning they will blame the murder on them, who will be defenceless as they will remember nothing. While Duncan is asleep, Macbeth stabs him, despite his doubts and a number of supernatural portents, including a vision of a bloody dagger. When Duncan's death is discovered the next morning, Macbeth kills the servants and easily assumes the kingship. Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain flee to England and Ireland, respectively, fearing that whoever killed Duncan wants to kill them as well.

Fearful of the witches' prophecy that Banquo's heirs will seize the throne, Macbeth hires a group of murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance. They ambush Banquo on his way to a royal feast, but they fail to kill Fleance, who escapes into the night. Macbeth becomes furious: as long as Fleance is alive, he fears that his power remains insecure. At the feast that night, Banquo's ghost visits Macbeth. When he sees the ghost, Macbeth raves fearfully, startling his guests, who include most of the great Scottish nobility. Lady Macbeth tries to neutralize the damage, but Macbeth's kingship incites increasing resistance from his nobles and subjects.

Frightened, Macbeth goes to visit the witches again who show him a sequence of demons and spirits who present him with further prophecies: he must beware of Macduff, a Scottish nobleman who opposed Macbeth's

accession to the throne; he is incapable of being harmed by any man born of woman; and he will be safe until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Castle. Macbeth is relieved and feels secure, because he knows that all men are born of women and that forests cannot move. When he learns that Macduff has fled to England to join Malcolm, Macbeth orders that Macduff's castle be seized, and that Lady Macduff and her children be murdered.

When news of his family's execution reaches Macduff in England, he is stricken with grief and vows revenge. Prince Malcolm, Duncan's son, has succeeded in raising an army in England, and Macduff joins him as he rides to Scotland to challenge Macbeth's forces. The invasion has the support of the Scottish nobles, who are appalled and frightened by Macbeth's tyrannical and murderous behaviour.

Lady Macbeth, meanwhile, becomes plagued with fits of sleepwalking in which she bemoans what she believes to be bloodstains on her hands. Before Macbeth's opponents arrive, Macbeth receives news that she has killed herself. Nevertheless, he awaits the English and fortifies Dunsinane, to which he seems to have withdrawn in order to defend himself, certain that the witches' prophecies guarantee his invincibility. He is struck numb with fear, however, when he learns that the English army is advancing on Dunsinane shielded with branches cut from Birnam Wood. It looks like Birnam Wood is indeed coming to Dunsinane, fulfilling half of the witches' prophecy.

In the battle, the English forces gradually overwhelm his army and castle. On the battlefield, Macbeth encounters the vengeful Macduff, who declares that he was not "of woman born" but was instead "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb (what we now call birth by caesarean section). Though he realizes that he is doomed, Macbeth continues to fight until Macduff kills and beheads him. Malcolm now becomes the King of Scotland.

Playing Style

Although staying true to the original plot, characters, and scenes, this version of *Macbeth* brings humour to the Scottish play and as such the play lends itself to an exaggerated clownish/grotesque playing style. This does not mean to say that the tragedy of the original cannot be conveyed, but this will be done in a much more popular playing style than the traditional.

Unlike the original, this version of *Macbeth* is told through the eyes of the witches. It is their interventions in Scottish life that created the tragedy which they narrate directly to the audience. They are talking directly with the audience, meaning there is no fourth wall. In staging the play fun can be had by having the witches popping up at various places throughout the theatre (including the auditorium), thus adding to the sense of excitement and intimacy of the production.

As in the original, the supernatural elements of the production such as the floating dagger, the ghost and the apparitions will present the biggest directorial challenges (especially when working on a budget). I would advise experimenting in production with simple solutions: hanging the floating dagger on the end of a fishing pole held by a stagehand in full view for example. In order to maintain the 'spooky and gloomy' atmosphere it may be necessary to employ a dry-ice machine at various points throughout the play and a soundtrack should be used to indicate (for example) weather conditions, battle sounds, drums, and fanfares; however, if you wish, you may use the offstage cast to make sound effects 'live'.

On some occasions, you will find the rhyming scheme helpful to the playing, in which case the actors should just 'stand back', enjoy the words and help the audience do the

same. On other occasions, the rhyming scheme will seem stifling and restrictive, in which case, do not be afraid to improvise a little, add your own occasional lines, or do not emphasise the rhymes so much.

Overall, this version should be fun to play and watch. It can be produced with a small budget and should be produced in an 'over the top' manner, which can give you a chance to play with your own ideas of theatricality.

Cast of Characters

DUNCAN:	<i>King of Scotland</i>
MALCOLM & DONALBAIN:	<i>his Sons</i>
MACBETH:	<i>Thane of Glamis</i>
BANQUO:	<i>General of the King's Army</i>
MACDUFF, LENNOX, ROSS, MENTEITH, ANGUS, & CAITHNESS:	<i>Noblemen of Scotland</i>
FLEANCE:	<i>Son to BANQUO</i>
SIWARD:	<i>Earl of Northumberland, General of the English Forces</i>
YOUNG SIWARD:	<i>his Son</i>
SEYTON:	<i>an Officer attending MACBETH</i>
<i>Murderers</i>	
<i>Boy, Son to MACDUFF</i>	
<i>A Scottish Doctor</i>	
<i>A Sergeant</i>	
<i>A Porter</i>	
<i>An Old Man</i>	
LADY MACBETH	
LADY MACDUFF	
HECATE <i>and Three Witches</i>	
<i>Messengers</i>	
<i>The Ghost of BANQUO</i>	
<i>Apparitions</i>	

Act I

SCENE I.

*A desert place. Thunder and lightning.
(Enter three WITCHES)*

FIRST WITCH

Welcome to the Scottish play.

SECOND WITCH

It's "Scottish" cos¹ it rains all day.

THIRD WITCH

It's cold enough to see your breath.

FIRST WITCH

We're waiting here to see Macbeth.

(Pause)

1—Abbreviation for because

SECOND WITCH

Hanging out in bogs² and ditches,

THIRD WITCH

Yes, you've guessed it; we're the witches!

FIRST WITCH

We're here to guide you all the way,

SECOND WITCH

Because we know the end of the play.

THIRD WITCH

We'll help you through the tricky bits,

SECOND WITCH

So you can keep hold of your wits!

THIRD WITCH

To kick things off, we've made a spell,

FIRST WITCH

And to Macbeth we three shall tell

SECOND WITCH

The things that we have seen he'll be,

THIRD WITCH

But we don't do that until scene three.

2—Swamps

FIRST WITCH

We're freezing here out on this heath³

SECOND WITCH

So we'll keep this first scene very brief.

THIRD WITCH

You'll leave us now and meet the King.

WITCHES

They've all just finished battling!

(Exeunt⁴ all)

3—Grasslands

4—A word used in scripts to mean exit for more than one character/actor.

SCENE II.

A military camp near Forres. The sounds of fighting.

*(Enter DUNCAN, MALCOLM, DONALBAIN, LENNOX, ROSS
with Attendants, meeting a bleeding Sergeant)*

DUNCAN

My son . . .

MALCOLM

. . . My King . . .

DONALBAIN

. . . My King . . .

DUNCAN

. . . My son

Tell me, are our battles won?

MALCOLM

This bloodied man knows everything.

DONALBAIN

Come over here and tell the King.

SERGEANT

The Irish came to take our land,

But Macbeth showed a steely⁵ hand.
He ran into the field of battle
And killed them all like they were cattle.
And after that, 'bout half past two,
He killed all the Norwegians too.
I never saw such soldiers go
Like Macbeth and his mate Banquo.

DUNCAN

And what of the Cawdor thane⁶?

MALCOLM

Bad news there, Dad. Ask Donalbain.

DONALBAIN

He always wanted to be a Norse.

ROSS

He fought with them . . .

LENNOX

. . . he did . . . ?

DUNCAN

. . . Of course!

Go find him now, cut off his head,
And make Macbeth that thane instead.

5—Strong and determined

6—A thane is a kind of Scottish lord and Cawdor is an area in Scotland.

LENNOX

He long deserved this big promotion.

ROSS

A man of true and rare devotion.⁷

DUNCAN

In times of boom, in times of bust,
Macbeth's a man we all can trust.

(Exeunt all)

SCENE III.

A heath near Forres. The sound of thunder.

(Enter the three WITCHES)

ALL

Hubble, bubble, toil and trouble.

FIRST WITCH

Get me a Scotch.

SECOND WITCH

Make mine a double.

THIRD WITCH

You sure Macbeth is on his way?

I can't be hanging out here all day.

I can barely feel my feet at all.

FIRST WITCH

I saw it in my crystal ball.

SECOND WITCH

My nose is cold, my eyes are weepy.

FIRST WITCH

Here they come, start looking creepy!

(Enter MACBETH and BANQUO)

MACBETH

I killed them here, I killed them there.

BANQUO

Macbeth, you killed them everywhere.

MACBETH

For my King; a goodly Scot!

BANQUO

They are witches, are they not?

MACBETH

Wrinkled skin and matted hair.

Bearded chins . . .

SECOND WITCH

. . . and we don't care.

FIRST WITCH

We know you are the Thane of Glamis.

THIRD WITCH

I recognise your manly arms.

SECOND WITCH

But Cawdor's crown to you we bring.

FIRST WITCH

And shortly after, you'll be king.

BANQUO

I don't mean any disrespect,

But tell me what can I expect?

FIRST WITCH

Banquo, you are very loyal.

SECOND WITCH

But, unfortunately, you'll never be royal.

THIRD WITCH

Your kids, however, when they're grown,
Will sit upon the Scottish throne.

(Pause)

MACBETH

From where do you three get this stuff?
I'm Thane of Glamis, and that's enough

BANQUO

Tell us how he will be king,
Then tell us more about my thing.

FIRST WITCH

Sorry, love, we've got to go.

SECOND WITCH

Cos basically that's all we know.

THIRD WITCH

Just wait and see what fates will come.

SECOND WITCH

I gotta go and warm my bum.

(WITCHES vanish)

BANQUO

They've gone, they've left, they've vanished, fled.

MACBETH

Do you believe a word they said?

BANQUO

To be a king you shouldn't strive.

The Thane of Cawdor's still alive.

(Enter ROSS and ANGUS)

ROSS

We left the King's impressive shack

With this here note to read to Mac

ANGUS

The Thane of Cawdor's popped his clogs.⁸

Now you will get to wear his togs.⁹

MACBETH

(aside) That's just what the old ladies said:

Now I am Cawdor cos he's dead.

Banquo, do you think it's true?

BANQUO

What those witches said to you?

I don't know, we'll have to see,

That's two things right; two out of three!

8—An idiom that means to die

9—Literally, clothes

MACBETH

If it's meant to be, it probably will.
(*aside*) The King is not a man to kill.

ROSS

Away my lords, the King awaits.

BANQUO

And so do all the tempted fates!

(*Exits*)

FIRST WITCH

I thought that all went very well.

SECOND WITCH

Already Cawdor! Well, who could tell?

THIRD WITCH

That news will start to play on his brain,

SECOND WITCH

As we go to the King again!