

# Perspectives and themes

## What is the play about?

Imagine that you can travel back in time to around 1606. You meet William Shakespeare a few minutes after he has finished writing *Macbeth*. You ask him 'What is the play about?' But, like all great artists, Shakespeare doesn't seem interested in explaining his work. He leaves that up to others. He seems to say: 'Here it is. Read it, perform it, make of it what you will.'

There has been no shortage of responses to that invitation! *Macbeth* has been hugely popular ever since it was first performed. The thousands of productions and millions of words written about it show that there is no single 'right way' of thinking about or performing the play. You will probably have noticed this as you looked at the photographs of different productions in this book.

The play is like a kaleidoscope. Every time it is performed it reveals different shapes, patterns, meanings, interpretations. For example, you could think about *Macbeth* as:

- a play of political and social realism, which shows how an oppressive hierarchical society produces corrupt individuals
- a tragedy in which a great man falls because of a fatal flaw in his character (Macbeth's ambition causes his death)
- a historical thriller with many elements of a fast-moving, action-packed murder story
- a moral tale advising against regicide (the murder of a king); remember, this would have pleased James I
- a psychological study of a murderer's mind, in which Macbeth constantly reveals his troubled innermost thoughts.

There are also various interpretive standpoints that allow different 'readings' of the play. People have interpreted *Macbeth* according to a number of perspectives. These include:

**Feminist perspectives** – looking at the way women are represented

**Cultural materialist perspectives** – looking at the way politics, wealth and power strongly influence every human relationship

**New historicist perspectives** – focusing on the repressive conditions of Shakespeare's own time

**Psychoanalytical perspectives** – looking at the unconscious and the irrational, as well as the impact of repressed sexuality and desire

**Liberal humanist perspectives** – freedom and human progress are the goals of life, and final reconciliation and harmony are possible

- ◆ In pairs, talk about which of the perspectives described above would be most helpful in exploring *Macbeth* further. Then, either individually or together, write the script for a dialogue between two people with different perspectives on the play. Try to show how their conversation develops, and encourage them to agree or disagree with each other about the meaning of *Macbeth*.

## Themes

Another way of answering the question 'What is *Macbeth* about?' is to identify the themes of the play. Themes are ideas or concepts of fundamental importance that recur throughout the play, linking together plot, characters and language. Themes echo, reinforce and comment upon each other – and the whole play – in interesting ways. For example, it is hard to write about appearance and reality in the play without referring to the manifestation of evil or the hidden dangers beneath a pleasing exterior. It is equally difficult to write about kingship and masculinity without talking about the themes of loyalty and ambition.

As you can see, themes are not individual categories but a 'tangle' of ideas and concerns that are interrelated in complex ways. In your writing you should aim to explore the way these themes cross over and illuminate each other, rather than simply listing each of the themes.

You might also like to think about the way the themes work at different levels: the individual level (psychological or personal); the social level (linked to society and nation); and the natural level (the natural or supernatural world). For example, in *Macbeth* you can clearly see how the theme of appearance and reality works across all three of these levels.

The themes of *Macbeth* include the following:

**Ambition** – the ruthless seeking of power by Macbeth, urged on by his equally ambitious wife. It can be thought of as the tragic flaw that causes his downfall ('I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition').

**Evil** – the brooding presence of murderous intention, destroying whatever is good. Macbeth's conscience troubles him, but he commits evil, and finds others to carry out his malign orders (the murders of Duncan, Banquo, Lady Macduff).

**Order and disorder** – the struggle to maintain or destroy social and natural bonds; the destruction of morality and mutual trust ('Uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth').

**Appearance and reality** – evil lurks behind fair looks. Deceit and hypocrisy mean that appearances cannot be trusted. The theme occurs throughout. It is introduced in the first scene as the Witches chant 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'. Later, in Act 1 Scene 5, Lady Macbeth urges Macbeth to 'look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't'.

**Equivocation** – telling half-truths with the intention to mislead ('th'equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth').

**Violence and tyranny** –

warfare, destruction and oppression recur throughout the play.

In the first scene, the Witches speak of 'the battle', and in the second, the wounded Captain reports Macbeth's victory in a bloody war.

Tempted by the prospect of becoming king, Macbeth embarks on a violent journey that makes him Scotland's tyrant. Malcolm expresses the theme with the words: 'Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell.'

**Guilt and conscience** – Macbeth knows what he does is wrong, but he does it nonetheless and suffers agonies of conscience as a result ('O, full of scorpions is my mind').

**Masculinity** – the violent feudal society of hierarchical male power breeds bloody stereotypes of what it is to be a man. 'I dare do all that may become a man', says Macbeth, contemplating murder. But the play offers other visions of manhood: 'But I must also feel it as a man', cries Macduff, weeping at news of his family's murder.

- ◆ Working in small groups, devise a tableau that shows one of the themes of the play. Present your tableau, frozen for one minute, for other groups to guess which theme is being portrayed.
- ◆ Imagine you are asked to explain what *Macbeth* is about by an eight-year-old child, and also by your teacher/lecturer. Write a reply to each of them, using these two pages to help you.



# The contexts of *Macbeth*

One way of thinking about *Macbeth* is to set it in the context of its time: the world that Shakespeare knew. His dramatic imagination was influenced by many features of that world. Layers of dramatic possibilities within the script are built on past performances (such as miracle and morality plays), other literary texts (such as Holinshed's *Chronicles*) and contemporary events or topical concerns (such as the accession of James to the throne and the general interest in witchcraft at the time). This layering gives Shakespeare's plays great depth without limiting them to any single or specific social, religious or political meaning.

## Writing for a king

In 1603, James, King of Scotland and a member of the Stuart dynasty, succeeded Queen Elizabeth I on the English and Irish thrones. Some critics argue that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* partly to flatter the new king (who probably saw a performance in 1606), and that he deliberately included many references to events and issues that would have interested James.

The play has a large focus on kingship, ideas of succession and the health of the nation. *Macbeth* explores the qualities of a good king and the horrors of living in a country ruled by a tyrant. Issues of power and politics are raised through the play's exploration of the sacred power and divine right of kings, the nature of lawful succession, the relationship between England and Scotland, and the dangers of treason and sedition.

*Macbeth* refers to the hanging of traitors and to the Gunpowder Plot of 5 November 1605. The king's escape from being blown up was commemorated by a medal showing a snake concealed by flowers. The Plot may be referred to in Act 2 Scene 3, line 50 ('dire combustion'). Sir Everard Digby, one of the conspirators, was a favourite of James (and possibly mirrored by the treacherous Thane of Cawdor). The play's concern with equivocation may also refer to Henry Garnet, who was accused of treason for involvement in the Gunpowder Plot. He was found to have committed perjury (lying on oath), but in self-defence claimed to have the right to equivocate.

Equivocation is the use of deliberately misleading half-truths; it was seen as a diabolical use of language that distorted the truth and damned men's souls to hell. Equivocation is a major theme of the play and Macbeth is frequently troubled by it, fearing that the Witches may have lied to him.

### ▼ The execution of Henry Garnet.



The theme of kingship and ideas of what makes a good king run through the play. In the activities throughout this book, you have had opportunity to consider Macbeth as a political leader. At times it is also possible to compare him to a warrior like Braveheart, especially in Act 1 Scene 2. Further comparisons can be made between Macbeth and historical tyrants, such as Joseph Stalin and Idi Amin.

- ◆ **Draw a table with two columns. In the first column, list all the qualities of a tyrant. In the second column, list Macbeth's qualities. To what extent does he fit the criteria of a bloody tyrant?**

## Witches and witchcraft

Throughout Shakespeare's life, during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, many people suspected of being witches were cruelly persecuted, and those who were convicted faced the prospect of being burned to death. Hundreds of pamphlets describing the lurid details of many witchcraft trials were printed. They enjoyed enormous sales: the equivalent of today's popular newspapers, or movies and books about the supernatural.

Witches were credited with diabolical powers. For example, they could predict the future, fly, sail in sieves, bring on night in daytime, cause fogs and tempests, and kill animals. In Act I, the First Witch describes how she created a storm to destroy the captain of the *Tiger*. The *Tiger* was a real ship that set sail from England in 1604 and undertook a disastrous voyage on its way to Japan. After suffering storms and navigational errors, it finally returned to England around the time Shakespeare was writing this play. Although the voyage of the *Tiger* was a real event, Shakespeare was more interested in the dramatic and imaginative possibilities of attributing this disaster to witchcraft and spells.

It was also thought that witches cursed their enemies with fatal wasting diseases, induced nightmares and sterility, and could take demonic possession of others. People believed that witches allowed the Devil to suck their blood in exchange for a 'familiar': a bird, reptile or beast as an evil servant. Accused witches were examined for the 'Devil's mark': a red mark on the body from which Satan had sucked blood (some of Shakespeare's audience might have interpreted Lady Macbeth's 'damned spot' as evidence of the Devil's mark). Many of those watching *Macbeth* saw in the play the signs of a man and woman seized by demonic possession: disturbed behaviour, lack of fear and indifference to life. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth fall into trances, have strange visions and invite evil spirits to possess their bodies.

King James was as fascinated by witchcraft as any of his subjects. In 1590, a group of witches tried to kill him by raising a storm to sink his ship. Their plot was discovered and they were brought to trial at North Berwick. James

personally interrogated Dr Fian, a key witness during the trials. The poor doctor was horribly tortured:

*His nails upon all his fingers were riven and pulled off  
... his legs were crushed and beaten together as small  
as might be, and the bones and flesh so bruised that the  
blood and marrow spouted forth in great abundance.*

Fired by his experience of the trial, King James personally investigated other witchcraft cases and, in 1597, he published *Demonologie*, a book on witchcraft. In 1604, an Act of Parliament decreed that anyone found guilty of witchcraft should be executed.

- ◆ **The paragraphs above describe how people in Shakespeare's day understood witchcraft and witches. They also describe how Shakespeare alluded to many of the ideas about evil, the demonic and kingship that preoccupied James I. Re-read this information, then write an opinion article for a local newspaper giving a different perspective on witchcraft and witches. Try to explain why Shakespeare might have included witches in his play about a tyrant-king who murders his way to the throne. Do you think he was influenced by contemporary hysteria about the diabolical powers of witches when he was writing *Macbeth*?**

## Shakespeare's reading

As he wrote *Macbeth*, Shakespeare had at his side a book published in 1587: *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* by Raphael Holinshed. Shakespeare had earlier used Holinshed's *Chronicles* extensively as the source for his English History plays. Now, he found in it the Scottish stories that his imagination would turn into the drama of *Macbeth*. But Shakespeare never slavishly followed any source. Holinshed provided details of events, power politics, characters and motivations. Shakespeare selected, altered and added to them to achieve maximum dramatic effect. Here is an extract from Holinshed's *Chronicles*:

*It fortuned as Macbeth and Banquo journeyed towards  
Forres, where the King then lay, they went sporting by  
the way together without other company save only  
themselves, passing through the woods and fields, when  
suddenly in the midst of a land, there met them three*

women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world, whom when they attentively beheld, wondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said: All hail Macbeth, thane of Glamis (for he had lately entered into that dignity and office by the death of his father Sine). The second of them said: Hail Macbeth, thane of Cawdor. But the third said: All hail Macbeth that hereafter shall be King of Scotland.

As well as writing in dramatic form, Shakespeare invented Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking and death, the banquet scene and Banquo's Ghost, and most of the cauldron scene. He also vividly portrayed the changing relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. He made Lady Macbeth a key character in his story, whereas Holinshed only made a brief comment about her as 'very ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to bear the name of queen'. Unlike Holinshed, Shakespeare did not make Banquo an accomplice to Duncan's murder. Instead, he made the Macbeths solely responsible. This alteration presumably pleased King James because he hated regicides (king-killers) and because he believed he was a descendant of the historical Banquo. See the table below for a summary of the way Shakespeare changed Holinshed's account of *Macbeth*.

Holinshed	Shakespeare
Duncan is an ineffectual king	Duncan is a respected and revered ruler
Macbeth reigns for ten years as a good ruler	Macbeth is a tyrant immediately after he becomes king
Lady Macbeth is described in passing	Lady Macbeth has great prominence in the play
Banquo is an accomplice to Duncan's murder	Banquo is an innocent victim murdered by Macbeth

- ◆ **Step into role as William Shakespeare.** Write out what went through your mind as you rewrote Holinshed. Remember, as a playwright you are always asking yourself: 'How can I put this on stage to greatest dramatic effect?'

## Mystery plays and morality plays

Shakespeare doesn't limit *Macbeth* to the themes or characteristics of medieval plays, but he does remind his audience of these earlier dramatic traditions. He invites them to make connections and activates their experiences of past traditions to bring greater depth to their understanding of *Macbeth*.

Some critics claim that *Macbeth* shows Shakespeare's recollection of mystery plays, which were dramatised Bible stories immensely popular as entertainment and instruction in the Middle Ages. The mystery play *The Harrowing of Hell* is thought to be the inspiration for the Porter scene in *Macbeth*. In it, Hell is a castle whose gate is guarded by a Porter named Rybald ('ribald' means coarse and vulgar). Christ descends to Hell and hammers on the gate, demanding that Satan release the good souls imprisoned there. In this interpretation of the play, Macduff is the Christ-like figure who knocks at Macbeth's castle door. In Act 5, he enters the castle, kills the devil-tyrant, redeems Scotland and leads its people from darkness into light. Macbeth is singled out as the man who turns his castle and the whole of Scotland into

▼ **The Day of Judgement, from the Guild Chapel in Stratford-upon-Avon.** As a schoolboy, Shakespeare must have seen this painting often.



a type of hell, and Macduff is identified as Scotland's avenger and rescuer, through this reference to *The Harrowing of Hell*.

Medieval morality plays portrayed the human struggle to choose between vice and virtue. They personified a range of Vices (including the seven deadly sins) and Virtues in stories of temptation and conflict between good and evil. The hero, often given a generic name like Everyman or Mankind, must choose between them. Although the Everyman figure is led astray by the Vice figure, and wallows in sinfulness, he repents and is saved at the end of the play. The point of the plays is that although the hero succumbs to sin, God's mercy is always available to one who repents. In this way, the morality plays made the basic elements of Christianity accessible to those who were unable to read the Latin Bible for themselves. They taught people to watch out for the common vices that might tempt them and to have faith in the mercy of God.

- ◆ Use the information above to give a context-based alternative interpretation of *Macbeth*. Consider how Shakespeare might have been influenced by medieval religious drama. You might like to reflect on how Macbeth could be seen as an Everyman figure, tempted to evil by different Vices and heading towards either heaven or hell in the course of the play. Also consider whether the link between Macduff and Christ or Macbeth and the devil-tyrant intensifies the conflict between them.
- ◆ Write a short letter to a younger student telling them about an alternative interpretation of *Macbeth* based on this information. You might like to do more research as you write this letter.

## Tragedy

Tragedies were popular in Shakespeare's England. They dramatised the fall from power of kings, princes and military leaders and the way this affected the fortunes of states and nations. Tragedies contained assassination, bloodshed and revenge, and were written to instruct as well as to entertain. Shakespeare was influenced by

the Roman playwright Seneca (4 BC–AD 65), whose tragedies included soliloquies, ghosts, witches, magic, violent events, wrongs avenged and moral statements.

Shakespeare was also influenced by the development of tragedy as a dramatic form in England. The most significant aspect of this development was the focus on the protagonist, who was responsible for his own downfall and often displayed a fatal flaw or essential trait that contributed to his death. Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy contained sub-plots, spectacle and onstage violence. They also depicted a movement towards isolation and social breakdown – an inevitable sequence of events that led ultimately to the death of the protagonist (and many of the other characters).

- ◆ Find out more about Elizabethan tragedies and the trajectory of the protagonist towards isolation, chaos and death. How would you plot Macbeth's trajectory? Create a diagram or a graph that charts this trajectory. Beneath it write a description of the characteristics that might contribute to the fatal flaw or essential trait that propels Macbeth towards his downfall. How does this add to your understanding of the play?

# Characters

## How are characters created?

The process of creating and developing characters is called 'characterisation'. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare does this in three major ways:

**By their actions** – Macbeth murders Duncan; then he has Banquo and Lady Macduff and her family murdered.

**By what is said about them** – amongst other things, Lady Macbeth is called 'fiend-like'; Macbeth is called 'brave' several times, as well as a 'butcher'.

**Through their own language** – how they speak with each other and, through **soliloquy**, what they say to themselves when alone.

Each of these is equally important. Soliloquies allow us to gain a deep insight into the innermost thoughts of the speaker; but other characters provide us with different views, and their actions are these words made real. Every character has a distinctive voice, and part of Shakespeare's genius is to explore each aspect while allowing that voice to both change (as events affect the character's mind) and remain unique and recognisable.

The Lady Macbeth we see in Act 5 Scene 1, although recognisably the same character from Act 1 Scene 5, has changed profoundly, and we learn this from her words ('Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O'), her actions (the sleepwalking, the obsessive hand-washing) and what is said about her by the Gentlewoman and the Doctor ('I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body').

- ◆ In small groups, discuss how Macbeth and Lady Macbeth change over the course of the play. Which of their actions most influence how you view them? What comments made by other characters about Macbeth and Lady Macbeth tell us most about them?



- ◆ Which speeches by both characters offer the greatest insight into them? Collect key quotations about these characters and the way they change in the course of the play. Display your choice of quotations on a large piece of paper, with images that symbolise these significant moments.



## Macbeth

Although there are exciting moments in the play, much of the drama takes place in Macbeth's mind. He struggles with good and evil, and believes that his fate is decided by the Witches and other sinister forces. When trying to understand Macbeth, it helps to think about how a performer might approach playing the role: what might the actor feel are the motives that drive Macbeth to act in the way he does?

Below are some views of Macbeth by actors who have played the part and by a director. Read through them, then talk with a partner about which you think is the most striking view.

*It was Macbeth as a poet, as the creator of a new vision, rather than as a soldier or a king, that I found most intriguing and mysterious. Charting the progress of a man who redefines himself as he analyses his experience became, for me, the single most important and interesting challenge.*

Simon Russell Beale

*In the last Act he [Macbeth] does, in my view, reach nobility, clarity and strength, a sense of the reality of the consequences of actions.*

Sir Peter Hall

*[He is] a killing machine with an elegant turn of phrase.*

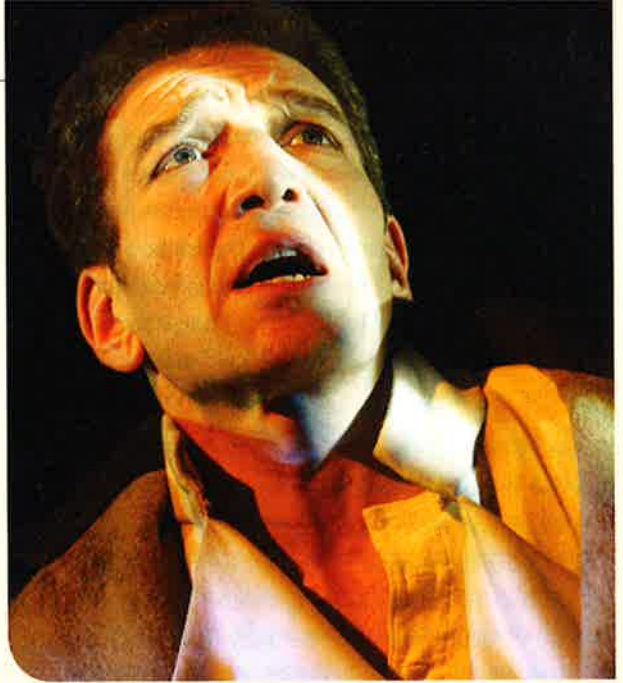
Jonathan Pryce

*I went through the play marking the times he speaks of fear, particularly in relation to himself. He does so in every scene: it is paramount for him; the man is constantly fearful ... The moment before he does the murder he is afraid – the dagger speech is a fearful speech, the utterance of a terrified man. He does the murder for her, and it destroys them both.*

Derek Jacobi

*I see Macbeth as ambitious but capable of darkness. The witches saw something in him, they picked the right person. Witches plus Macbeth equals evil. Was evil there before though, I'm not sure you can say. Is anyone evil without input from others?*

Liam Brennan



- ◆ Rank these quotations in order, with the one that most closely matches your understanding of Macbeth at the top.
- ◆ In small groups, and then with the rest of your class, discuss which of these comments gives you the greatest insight into the character of Macbeth.

Macbeth appears first in the play as a military hero. King Duncan calls him 'valiant cousin, worthy gentleman', 'noble Macbeth', 'worthiest cousin'. He ends the play as a cruel tyrant, deserted by his soldiers and allies, and finally slain by Macduff. The new king, Malcolm, viewing Macbeth's severed head, dismisses him as 'this dead butcher'.

It is easy to characterise Macbeth as a common murderer; but he is more complex than this – and he changes radically throughout the play. Paradoxically, perhaps, the more he kills, the more aware he becomes of the futility of his actions and even of life itself. Macbeth is revealed as a deeply sensitive man, tortured by his imagination and his conscience. His wife believes him to be a good, and even gentle, man ('too full o'th'milk of human kindness') and he knows that it is wrong to kill Duncan. He struggles to overcome his evil thoughts, but is tempted to criminality by the Witches, by his wife's pressure, and by his own ambition. He murders his way to the throne of Scotland, and then arranges the killing of anyone he suspects to be his enemy.



Conflicting thoughts of good and evil constantly torment Macbeth ('O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!'). But as he is drawn ever deeper into cruel and brutal actions, he strives to harden his responses and to lose 'the taste of fears'. Learning of his wife's death, he reflects despairingly on the emptiness of life, saying that it is 'a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing'.

He finally becomes aware that the Witches have misled him ('be these juggling fiends no more believed'). Even in his despair and weariness he determines to die bravely ('Blow wind, come wrack; / At least we'll die with harness on our back'). He slays Young Siward and, coming face to face with Macduff, still fights defiantly to the end although he realises he has met his nemesis ('Lay on, Macduff, / And damned be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"). Whether Macbeth's final words and actions represent heroic endurance or the snarling of a trapped animal is open for each reader or new performance to decide.



## Lady Macbeth

For many actors and directors, Lady Macbeth is as difficult to define as her husband: she undergoes profound changes over the course of the play, and can be seen as a fiend or a supportive, ambitious wife.

- ◆ **Just as you did with Macbeth, read the comments below and rank them in order, with the one you feel is closest to the truth as number one. After you have done this, discuss them in groups and then with the rest of your class.**

*She had no illusions about the evil she was embracing, but the thrill of it drew her back.*

Judi Dench

*And then she sees the blood ... something happens to her gut. For her, the sight is horrible. It shocks her, the reality of it ... After that we began talking different languages. We who had needed to touch each other all the time grew distant. When he had killed, neither of us wanted to touch each other.*

Sinead Cusack

*I think first and foremost she's a wife, she's a homemaker, she's a very, very intelligent woman. I think that the audience have to have an affection for this woman to be able to see how far she and her husband fall. I think she's a very strong woman who's the backbone, the crutch of Macbeth. In their marriage she's been the backbone of him.*

Allison McKenzie

Lady Macbeth appears first as a supremely confident, dominant figure. She revels in the prospect of Macbeth becoming king, and calls on evil spirits to help her persuade him to kill Duncan. She urges him to use deception to cloak murderous intentions ('look like th'innocent flower; / But be the serpent under't').

When Macbeth's resolve to carry out the murder weakens, she ridicules his masculinity, convincing him to do the deed. She becomes his active accomplice, even returning the bloody daggers to Duncan's bedroom. It is the murder of Duncan that brings the Macbeths most closely together; however, this is also the moment that they begin to move irrevocably apart.



From this point, Lady Macbeth's decline seems inevitable. In Act 3, she begins to feel the emptiness of their achievement, seeing only 'doubtful joy'. She appears increasingly isolated and drained of energy as Macbeth moves away from her into his own troubled thoughts. She becomes more of an audience to Macbeth's words, rather than his partner. Although she rallies at the disastrous banquet, she ends that scene displaying none of her earlier dominance over her husband. Shakespeare does not show Lady Macbeth's decline into nervous breakdown and death, giving only one glimpse of that horrifying process: the torment she experiences in her sleepwalking. She dies off stage, an anti-climax of an event that seems to mark out her decline even more sharply.

◆ **Study the pictures of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in this section. Discuss in groups what each of these pictures conveys about the characters. In the same groups, choose one of the following activities:**

- a *Hot-seating* One person steps into role of Macbeth. Group members ask him questions about why he did what he did. You can do the same with another person taking the role of Lady Macbeth.
- b *A modern duologue* In pairs, write a duologue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth reflecting on their actions and trying to explain their behaviour; or if you prefer, improvise this instead of writing a script. Other members of your

group watch and give feedback, commenting on how true to the spirit of both characters the interpretations are.

- c *Essay planning* Every member of the group writes one essay question each on:
  - Macbeth
  - Lady Macbeth
  - their relationship.

The group chooses the strongest question and plans an answer collectively. Deliver your essay plans as a presentation to the rest of the class. Keep the presentation succinct, using between six and eight slides (each slide representing a different part of the essay). Each slide should contain only key words: it's up to the group to talk the class through the answer in more detail.



# The language of *Macbeth*

## Imagery

Imagery is the use of emotionally charged words and phrases that conjure up vivid mental pictures. These words, phrases and images are a kind of verbal painting that stirs the imagination, deepens dramatic impact and gives insight into character.

*Macbeth* is full of striking visual images. After the disastrous appearance of Banquo's Ghost at the banquet, and knowing that Macduff has turned against him, Macbeth resolves to commit yet more murders: 'I am in blood / Stepped in so far that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (Act 3 Scene 4, lines 136–8). He sees himself wading through a river of blood and is so far in that it does not matter whether he goes on or turns back.

Sometimes an image extends over several lines. For example, in Act 1 Scene 7, lines 25–8, Macbeth soliloquises about whether or not to kill King Duncan, and concludes with an image from horse-riding:

*I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on th'other –*

In this image of rider and horse, Macbeth sees himself like a horseman who urges on his mount by digging his spurs into the horse's sides. But he has no such motivation ('spur') to kill Duncan other than 'Vaulting ambition': like a rider vaulting on to his horse, but misjudging his leap and collapsing in failure on the other side.

Examples of how the imagery of the speeches and soliloquies can be illustrated with appropriate pictures can be seen in movies. In Polanski's film of *Macbeth*, for example, a bear-baiting post is used at several points in the play to emphasise the bear-baiting image.

- ◆ In role as a film director, write out your ideas for how the imagery in certain passages might be visualised in a film production. Prepare a screenplay or script to illustrate your ideas.

## Recurring imagery

*Macbeth* is rich in imagery and certain images recur through the play, contributing to its distinctive atmosphere.

### Blood

Images of blood carry great emotional force in *Macbeth*. The play begins and ends with bloody battles, and much blood is shed throughout, from that of 'blood-boltered Banquo' to Lady Macduff and her children. Macbeth is obsessed with blood and imagines himself wading through a river of blood, while Lady Macbeth, sleepwalking, smells blood and tries to rub away the spot of blood on her hands.

### Darkness

Much of the action takes place at night, and the frequent images of darkness create a pervasive sense of evil. The Witches' presence and their spells and incantations heighten this, as does Lady Macbeth's invocation of evil spirits and darkness in Act 1.

### Theatre

Shakespeare's fascination with his own profession provided him with a recurring theme: the world as a stage. On this stage, humans make brief, insignificant appearances to play their parts. Macbeth uses imagery relating to acting and theatre when he hears of the death of his wife in Act 5 Scene 5:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more.*

### Falconry and bear-baiting

Falconry (the art of training and hunting with a falcon) was also used as a key image by Shakespeare. Macbeth calls on 'seeling night' to come and 'Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day', referring to the practice of sewing up hawks' eyes during the training process. Macduff describes the death of his wife and children in 'one fell swoop', referring to the way a falcon descends on its prey.

The bear-baiting that Shakespeare saw near the Globe Theatre also inspired an image for *Macbeth* as he is

surrounded by his enemies and facing death at the end of the play:

*They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly,  
But bear-like I must fight the course.*

### Disease

The Witches' 'fog and filthy air' in the first scene begins the imagery of sickness. This continues in references to the poison that goes in their cauldron and the 'infected' air they ride on. Disease and sickness affects both Scotland, 'the sickly weal', and the Macbeths – Lady Macbeth has a 'mind diseased' and Macbeth describes his mind as 'full of scorpions'.

### Nature

Frequent images of animals, birds and insects are often ominous, and there are recurring images of ferocious creatures. Shakespeare shows how evil overruns Scotland by using images of nature disturbed.

- ◆ Choose one example of recurring imagery in the play and collect as many pictures from magazines or the Internet as you can that represent this. Find quotations from the play that link to the images you have chosen, then think of an appropriate way to display them, such as in a collage.

## Metaphor, simile and personification

Shakespeare's imagery uses metaphor, simile and personification. All are comparisons.

A **simile** compares one thing to another using 'like' or 'as'. Macbeth challenges Banquo's Ghost to approach 'like the rugged Russian bear'; the First Witch threatens the sailor she will 'drain him dry as hay'.

A **metaphor** is also a comparison, suggesting that two dissimilar things are actually the same. Donaldbain says 'There's daggers in men's smiles'.

**Personification** is a special kind of imagery that turns all kinds of things into persons, giving them human feelings or attributes. The bleeding Captain speaks of Macbeth as 'Valour's minion' (bravery's favourite) and of 'Fortune' smiling on the rebel Macdonald. In Act 4, Scotland is described as weeping, diseased and suffering under the evil rule of Macbeth.

- ▼ Imagery of blood recurs throughout the play. After murdering Duncan, Macbeth wonders 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?'. Later, Lady Macbeth asks 'will these hands ne'er be clean?'



## Verse and prose

Shakespeare's audiences expected tragedies to be written in verse, because verse was thought to be appropriate to great men, affairs of state, and moments of emotional or dramatic intensity.

*Macbeth* is written mainly in **blank verse**, which is unrhymed lines that have carefully placed stressed and unstressed syllables. Each line has five feet (groups of syllables) called iambs, each of which has an unstressed (x) and stressed (/) syllable that sounds like a heartbeat (da DUM, da DUM, da DUM, da DUM, da DUM):

x / x / x / x / x /  
So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

The Witches almost always speak in four-beat rhythm (tetrameter), a style appropriate to spells, incantations and the supernatural. The rhythm is the opposite of the heartbeat rhythm described above (DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da):

/ / / /  
Fair is foul, and foul is fair

Shakespeare uses a varied rhythmic pattern throughout the play. He sometimes wrote lines of more or fewer than ten syllables, sometimes changed the pattern of stresses in a line, and sometimes used rhyming couplets for effect. He ensured that the rhythm of the verse was appropriate to the meaning and mood of the speech: reflective, fearful, apprehensive, anguished or confused.

These rhythmic patterns are what distinguish verse from prose, not whether they rhyme. Prose is different from blank verse: it is everyday language with no specific rhythm, metric scheme or rhyme. Shakespeare uses prose to break up the verse in his plays, to signify characters' madness or low status, or to draw attention to changes in plot or character. It is easy to tell the difference: verse passages begin with a capital letter and the lines do not reach the other side of the page, whereas prose passages have lines that reach both sides of the pages and only use capital letters at the beginning of sentences.

Shakespeare also used **caesura** and **enjambement** to add to the rhythm of his blank verse. A caesura is where

the phrasing of the line is broken to create a pause or a break in the dialogue or action. With enjambement, the end of one sentence carries over into the next line of poetry, giving the impression that the phrases are spilling over and building up from one line to the next.

- ◆ **The human heartbeat is the rhythm of iambic pentameter. Put your hand on your heart to hear the basic rhythm of weak and strong stresses.**
- ◆ **Choose a verse speech. Explore ways of speaking it to emphasise the metre (four or five beats). For example, you could clap hands, tap the desk or walk five paces to accompany each line. Then write eight or more lines of your own in the same style.**

## Antithesis and repetition

**Antithesis** is the opposition of ideas, words or phrases against each other. It expresses the conflict that is at the heart of the play. In 'When the battle's lost, and won' and 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' the conflict is shown in 'lost' against 'won', 'fair' against 'foul'. Antithesis is especially powerful in *Macbeth*, where good is set against evil and where deception and false appearances are major themes.

Shakespeare used **repetition** to give his language great dramatic force. Repeated words, phrases, rhythms and sounds add to the emotional intensity of a scene. This repetition can occur on many levels:

**Repetition of words** Sometimes the same word is repeated in a short space of time in order to increase pace and tension. The following exchange between the Witches illustrates this:

Show!  
Show!  
Show!  
Show his eyes and grieve his heart

At other times a word is repeated throughout a passage so that the idea can be developed or extended:

Still it cried, 'Sleep no more' to all the house;  
'Glamis hath murdered sleep', and therefore Cawdor  
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.

**Repetition of sounds Alliteration** is the repetition of consonants (at the beginning of words): 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' and 'Double, double toil and trouble'.

**Assonance** is the repetition of vowel sounds (in the middle of words):

*Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,  
And thrice again, to make up nine.*

These repetitions are opportunities for actors to intensify emotional impact. Rhyming couplets, which often end long speeches in blank verse or signal the end of a scene, also show this repetition of sound:

*Hear it not Duncan, for it is a knell,  
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.*

**Repetition of patterns Anaphora** is the repetition of the same word at the beginning of successive sentences:

*Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down,  
Though castles topple on their warders' heads,*

**Epistrophe** is the repetition of a word or phrase at the end of a series of sentences or clauses:

*When you durst do it, then **you were a man**.  
And to be more than what **you were**, you would  
Be so much more the **man**.*

**Polyptoton** is repetition of words derived from the same root word, but with different endings or forms:

*But yet I'll make **assurance double sure**  
And take a bond of fate*

- ◆ Turn randomly to any two or three pages of *Macbeth* and identify all the ways in which Shakespeare uses repetition on those pages. Try out different ways of speaking the lines to discover how emphasising or playing down the repetition can contribute to dramatic effect.

## Soliloquies and asides

A **soliloquy** is a monologue, a kind of internal debate spoken by a character who is alone (or assumes they are alone) on stage. It gives the audience direct access to the character's mind, revealing their inner thoughts and motives. Macbeth often 'thinks aloud', expressing doubt,

fear, guilt and confusion. His soliloquy in Act 5 Scene 5 conveys his overwhelming despair, and in Act 1 Scene 5, Lady Macbeth's soliloquy is an impassioned appeal for demonic spirits to possess her.

An **aside** is a brief comment or address to the audience that shows the character's unspoken thoughts, unheard by other characters on stage. The audience is taken into this character's confidence or can see deeper into their motivations and experiences. Asides can also be used for characters to comment on the action as it unfolds.

- ◆ Identify some of the play's soliloquies and asides. Choose one and write notes on how you would speak it on stage to maximise dramatic effect.
- ◆ Copy and complete the table below as a summary of the information in this section.

Quotation	Language use	Its effect and meaning
'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'	Antithesis	The tension and confusion in this antithesis adds to the evil atmosphere and the sense of foreboding in the whole scene.

# Macbeth in performance

## Performance on Shakespeare's stage

Many people believe that because of the references to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, *Macbeth* was first written and performed in 1606 as a tribute to King James I (who was also King James VI of Scotland). The first record of a production was written by Simon Forman, who described a performance he saw at the Globe Theatre on Bankside in 1611. Many of Shakespeare's plays were performed at the Globe, one of the many specially designed outdoor playhouses built at the end of the sixteenth century. They were modelled on the public amphitheatres like the bear-baiting rings that existed in the seedier locations outside the city walls (and the city's jurisdiction).

During Shakespeare's lifetime, plays in outdoor amphitheatres like the Globe were performed in broad daylight during the summer months. So, at 2.00 p.m. people would assemble with food and drink to watch a play with no lighting and no rule of silence for the audience. There were high levels of background noise and interaction during performances, and audience members were free to walk in and out of the theatre.

In the Globe, the audience was positioned on three sides of the stage: the 'groundlings' stood in the pit around the stage, while those who paid more were seated in three levels around the pit. Actors would see around three thousand faces staring up or down at them. The positioning of the audience made it difficult for everyone to hear all that was going on. Inevitably the actors would have their backs to sections of the audience at times. The best place for an actor to stand, especially for a soliloquy or an aside, was at the front of the stage, so that he could directly address almost all of the audience. However, it would be tedious if all the action occurred there!

Shakespeare's use of repetition helped to overcome this problem. Sometimes the same idea is stated or developed in three ways, to allow an actor to address each section of the audience. These repetitions were never simply word-for-word, but were used to create rhythm, accumulate details and build on an idea through different metaphors and imagery. If you spot significant repetition, it may be a clue that Shakespeare intended the character to move around the stage to engage the audience.

▼ This map from 1647 shows the Globe Theatre (the circular building, centre left), built for the second time in 1614 after the first one burnt down. It was mistaken by the artist Wenceslaus Hollar for a bear-baiting pit that was nearby.



- ◆ Look at some of Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's soliloquies and identify where repetition might allow an actor to use the stage space in different ways. Imagine you are on the Globe stage and read out the lines while addressing different parts of your (imaginary) audience. Experiment with other ways of enacting repetition of words or ideas in the soliloquy for dramatic effect.

Shakespeare included many other clues for his actors in his play scripts. These clues are known as 'embedded stage directions' because of the coded instructions they gave to the actors about who to talk to, when to move or gesture and when to exit. Clues about setting, weather, clothing, other characters' appearances and onstage action were also placed in the scripts. In Act 4, when Macbeth sees the Apparitions, eight kings and the Ghost of Banquo, his dramatic exclamations can also be seen as embedded stage directions so that the actor knows how to respond: 'A fourth? Start, eyes!' His words a few lines later could also prompt the actor playing Banquo's Ghost (or prompt the imagination of the audience if no Ghost is present): 'the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me, / And points at them for his.'

Embedded stage directions were invaluable for early modern actors, who had little time to rehearse and not much opportunity to study the whole play before a performance. When a play was written, a scribe would make a copy. This was then cut up and each actor was given a scroll with his speeches stitched together along with basic cues and stage directions. The actors would memorise their lines, taking particular care that they knew their cues so they would understand when to enter and speak. A summary of the play, known as a 'backstage plot', was hung up backstage, so actors would know the main story and the context for their entrances and exits. Players who knew only their parts and a plot summary relied heavily on their cues and embedded stage directions to piece together information about what was going on, who they were addressing and who was going to respond.

The pressured system of rehearsal and performance was confusing for inexperienced actors, especially

young ones, who were sometimes apprenticed to older actors while they were new to the workings of the stage. The apprentices, also known as boy actors, were usually aged between six or seven and thirteen or fourteen, and learned the art of acting from more established actors. Female roles were played by boy actors because women were not allowed to act on stage.

- ◆ Some of the activities throughout this book have asked you to look out for embedded stage directions. Look at these, or find some more, then discuss with a partner what a modern director might say to actors at these points. Are all of them necessary on a modern stage? Would you consider cutting some lines if they are not necessary? How should the actors perform the lines?

- ▼ An illustration from 1595 showing the Swan Theatre on Bankside in London. Wealthier people paid to sit in the levels that surrounded the stage on three sides.





Stage sets were limited in terms of scenery and lighting, so Shakespeare included detailed and often poetic descriptions of the time and place in various scenes. Audiences needed to use their imaginations to compensate for the bare stage! However, actors wore lavish costumes and a range of visual and sound effects were used to add spectacle to a performance. For example, animal organs may have been used on stage – including pigs' bladders filled with animal blood – during murder scenes. Cannonballs were rolled along tracks backstage to simulate thunder. Storm scenes such as the opening of *The Tempest*, or the scenes on the heath in *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, were probably accompanied by such sound effects. Bells, trumpets and drums were also used, as were a range of songs, background instrumental music and dance music.

A trapdoor on stage was also used in performances, allowing for such effects as a cauldron ascending with the Apparitions in *Macbeth*. The space above the stage, the upper structure known as the 'heavens', was decorated on the underside with stars and zodiac signs, and used for characters to descend and ascend during a performance.

## Performance after Shakespeare

Since Shakespeare's time, *Macbeth* has always been popular. But like all of Shakespeare's plays, it has been rewritten, revised and adapted through the centuries, reflecting the tastes and the social and political circumstances of different times. Indeed, the playwright Thomas Middleton changed some of the Witches' scenes and further revised the play as early as 1610. It has been altered many times since then.

We might revere Shakespeare today, but writers, actors and audiences from earlier periods felt that his plays needed to be salvaged and rewritten. They 'improved' the perceived flaws in the plays and adapted them to suit the tastes of the day. Sir William Davenant (who claimed to be Shakespeare's illegitimate son) presented a radically changed version of *Macbeth* from that first published in the 1623 First Folio edition of all Shakespeare's plays. A record of this production in 1672 reads:

The Tragedy of Macbeth, altered by Sir William Davenant; being dressed in all its finery, as new clothes, new scenes, machines, as flyings for the witches; with all the singing and dancing ... being all excellently performed being in the nature of an opera.

This version was published soon after the Civil War and, in new scenes, it asked the audience to consider the role of the monarchy. But the changes were so extensive that it could be argued that the play was no longer Shakespeare's at all, but rather something entirely new. Davenant cut the Porter and the Doctors, had Seyton change sides at the end, and altered the language so as not to offend his audience of gentry. Scenes were added: Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff talked together; Macduff's role was greatly enlarged at the expense of Malcolm's; and the Witches turned up to support Macduff against Macbeth.

Davenant's version of the play remained the standard theatre script until the eighteenth century, when the actor David Garrick sought to stage a production of *Macbeth* 'as written by Shakespeare'. However, even Garrick could not resist the temptation of writing a long farewell speech for Macbeth, full of sorrow and self-condemnation. Some critics believe that Garrick's production, staged in 1744, marked a new phase in the play's performance history, a process of returning to the integrity and purity of the 1623 Folio script.

Successive actors and directors continued in this, and looked for new ways to explore Shakespeare's language, as well as to make each production relevant to the values of their society and culture. It seems that every society projects its own values on *Macbeth*. Even Davenant's now-derided version can be seen as a response to the growing interest in opera (it involved much music and dancing) and the political situation of the time.

From early in the twentieth century, the spectacular operatic effects were removed. Staging became simpler, partly in an attempt to return to the plainer values of Shakespeare's own stage. The creative tension between the script and the staging continued to mine rich new

ways of imagining the play, and modern productions have radically reinterpreted and re-presented *Macbeth* in order to explore and stress different aspects of the play.

The Witches, in particular, have proved to be a source of inspiration for directors and actors. They have been presented as creations of Macbeth's mind and as puppet masters controlling each of the characters on stage. They have been shown as children, as a family unit of husband, wife and child, and as ugly old women. Other productions have portrayed them as sexually alluring young women, disruptive young men who merge with other characters, and even refuse collectors. They can be entertainers, dancers, roller-blading teenagers – anything that the director thinks articulates an aspect of the play that will further develop or frame key themes.

There is perhaps less freedom to experiment with the leading characters of *Macbeth* and Lady *Macbeth*, but again, both these parts have drawn radically different interpretations from some of the greatest actors of their age. Both characters challenge those playing the roles to decide whether to make them fully 'human', or to demonise them. Henry Irving's 1888 production was characterised by its dark, sombre atmosphere, and Irving played *Macbeth* as a liar and a murderer. In contrast, in this production Lady *Macbeth* was performed by the renowned Ellen Terry. She played the character as an 'enchanted being', free of malice, a doting wife who simply loved her husband (see the picture bottom right p. 169).

▼ David Garrick in the title role during his 1744 performance of *Macbeth*. Lady *Macbeth* was played by Mrs Pritchard.





Gradually, our understanding of the complexities of human behaviour developed, both through modern clinical medicine and, perhaps even more importantly, through the pioneering work done in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by psychoanalysts such as Breuer, Freud (who wrote a brief study of Lady Macbeth) and Jung. As this understanding grew, artists became increasingly interested in the conscious and subconscious urges of individuals, and *Macbeth* lent itself very easily to interpretations that accentuated the inner lives of the main characters.

The relationship between Macbeth and his wife is fundamental to the play. Macbeth has wide-ranging relationships with almost all the other characters, but Lady Macbeth relates only to her husband. Actors have to decide how to play the relationship between these two characters as they grow estranged from each other.

A crucial aspect is how much they are in love, and some productions have presented their initial relationship as passionate and sensual. One famous remark about the

production that starred Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh as the Macbeths was to remind audiences 'that Macbeth and his Lady were lovers before they were criminals'. Retaining both the light and darkness of each character – the love and criminality, so that one does not extinguish the other – is a challenge that will undoubtedly continue to interest actors and audiences in the future.

Other changes in society, including the rise of left-wing political parties and an increasingly radical feminism, saw productions focusing on areas of the script that emphasised certain political positions. For example, the feminist critic Janet Adelman claimed that Macbeth acts in the way he does because he is insecure about his own masculinity. Other feminist critics believe that the families represented in the play are essentially patriarchal, with children and wives largely absent or inconsequential. The only family we see that has a young (male) child is Macduff's, but his family is abandoned by the patriarch of the house, and then brutally murdered by the patriarch of Scotland.

*Macbeth* resonates with all societies, regardless of culture and time. An all-black adaptation of the play, *Umabatha*, has toured the world. It transformed *Macbeth* into a play about Zulu identity in early nineteenth-century South Africa. Chanting, drumming, and rhythmically beating shields, the huge cast created a tribal *Macbeth* of immense ritual power. The Zulu warriors grieved, rejoiced, welcomed and fought throughout their own unique re-staging of Shakespeare's tragedy.

The play has also been a rich source of inspiration for artists to reinterpret it in different forms. It has been made into opera, ballet, novels, movies, television programmes, songs, graphic texts, political cartoons and adverts. Now, in the age of the Internet, it has taken on a new life, as bloggers, amateur filmmakers and musicians adapt the text, perform it, and render it in new forms, spreading it to fresh and increasingly diverse audiences. *Macbeth*'s popularity can be explained in a number of ways: it has a relatively straightforward story, strong characters, powerful themes with universal appeal, and an economy of action that makes the plot unfold rapidly. And perhaps the key theme, ambition, resonates with everyone.

## Whose *Macbeth* is it?

We tend to treat the script of *Macbeth* as something untouchable. As you will have seen in the various activities throughout this book, interpreting an episode in a particular way means focusing on certain aspects that we believe exist in the words. It is rare to see productions (other than those in translation) that change Shakespeare's language. But, as mentioned earlier, this has not always been the case.

- ◆ As a class, discuss how much freedom directors and actors should have in adapting *Macbeth*. Should every word remain untouched? Or is it permissible to cut scenes if they are not felt to be necessary (or if they are probably not by Shakespeare), such as the scene featuring Hecate? Is it right to make the play overtly political? Is it possible to keep the interpretation of the play separate from the society in which it is performed? Who judges such adaptations a success – the director, the cast, critics or the audience?



## Macbeth on stage and on film

*Macbeth* is best experienced live, but if you are unable to see a production, or take part in one, there are many different film versions available for you to watch. Take time to find different versions of the text, but remember to view each one actively rather than passively. If you are analysing a movie adaptation of the play, think about:

- camerawork (angles, movement, shot type)
- sound (dialogue, sound effects, music)
- lighting (back light, key light)
- editing (simple cuts, montages, fade-out shots, dissolve cuts).

For each of these, consider what their effect is on the viewer, and how they add to (and sometimes detract from) the original script.

### Write a review

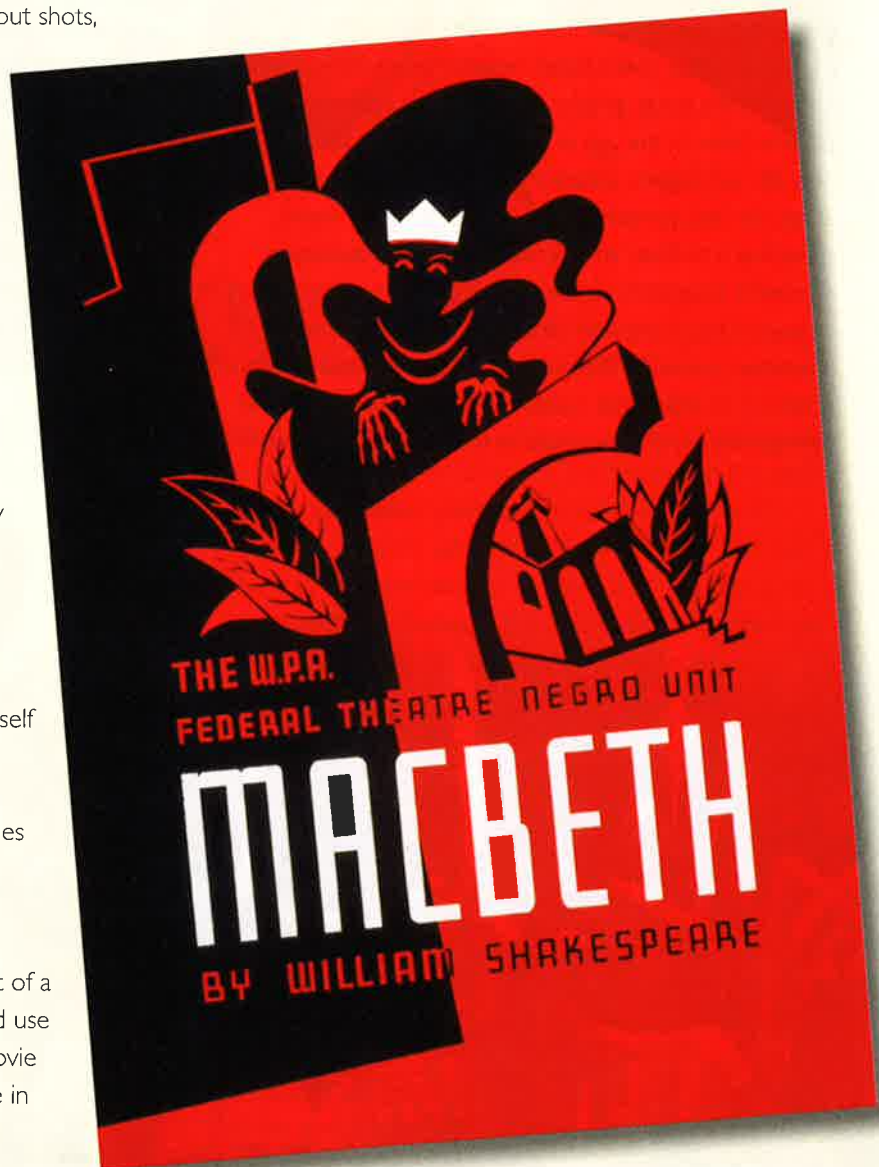
Now try reviewing different versions of *Macbeth*. You could compare and contrast two movie versions, or two play productions. It might help to read film and theatre critics' reviews of past productions to get a sense of what they focus on and their depth of analysis. There are many very different interpretations of this play, so remain open-minded about each.

As you watch the productions, ask yourself what each is saying about its time and its culture. Above all, retain your own distinctive voice as you assess the qualities of the performances you watch.

### Posters

Promotional posters provide a snapshot of a production. Their layout, typography and use of images convey the qualities of the movie or play as well as the period and culture in which it was devised.

- ◆ Look at the posters on these pages, then discuss in groups of three what key elements in *Macbeth* you think each production might highlight.
- ◆ Stay in your groups and design your own poster to promote a production of *Macbeth* that conveys the main values of a particular community. This community could be a school, an area of a town, a financial district or a whole society. Think carefully about the images and text you would include and why are they relevant to *Macbeth*.





黒沢明

蜘蛛

黒沢明脚本 菅原謙二監 岡本小招英恵 藤村 志 朝島隆  
録音矢野口文雄 照明岸田九一郎 音楽持永 昌



"PLAYS LIKE A ROUGHER VERSION OF MIAMI VICE."  
- SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

SAM WORTHINGTON  
MACBETH

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES