

Classroom Connections

Before the performance...

Dramatizing Violence on Stage: Then and Now

Living during the age of the *Duello*, or formal duel, Shakespeare's actors were trained in swordplay and able to perform rapier and dagger or broadsword battles on stage, as when Macbeth and Macduff battle to the death in *Macbeth*. Theatre spaces were used to present fencing matches so audiences knew the techniques of real fighting and would complain loudly if a fight in a play seemed fake. In today's theatre violence is safely staged through techniques of modern stage combat; actors create physical storytelling that will simulate violence without putting actors at risk. Search with students through the text of *Macbeth* for instances of violence and list them on the board. Then discuss each instance, how it might have been staged during Shakespeare's time and how it might be staged today. What are the differences? Similarities? What is different or the same about how we view violence as a society today compared to Shakespeare's time? How do we handle violence in our movies or TV today?

(Re) Making History

Show scenes from the 1995 film *Braveheart* in class. Ask half the class to research the history of Macbeth, using the article "Don't Know Much About History" from the First Folio Teacher Curriculum Guide. Ask the other half of the class to use Internet resources to find information on the real William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. Ask students to write an edited treatment of the play/movie that would portray the assigned character in a more historically correct light. Ask each group to compare their treatments and list major changes to the play/movie agreed on by all members of the group.

Eye of Newt?

In *Macbeth*, the witches are concocting a potion of nasty-sounding ingredients in their cauldron, including "eye of newt" and "wool of bat." Several of these ingredients are in fact plants rather than the nasty pieces of animals they seem to describe. Have students research the definitions for each of these ingredients, list these ingredients on the board and then discuss what exactly is in the cauldron. Then have students create their own antidote for the witches' potion. What would they throw into their own cauldron to counteract the witches' spell? Why?

Language in *Macbeth*

In *Macbeth* several different styles of language coexist, with the witches' rhyming poetry contrasting the abrasive, jarring and unsure quality of Macbeth's language or the firm forward rhythm of Lady Macbeth. Many scholars have argued that another playwright, Thomas Middleton, actually wrote the witches' scenes, explaining the very different writing styles between these scenes and the rest of the play. First with students track some of the changes in Macbeth's language, from Act I, Scene iii to Act II, Scene ii to Act V, Scene v. How does his language become more frantic in Act II and more resolved in Act V? How big or small do his thoughts seem in each scene? Then track Lady Macbeth's language, from Act I, Scene v to Act II, Scene ii to Act V, Scene i. How does she change through the course of the play? Ask students to explain why she often switches from prose to verse and why she begins and ends the play in prose? Where do her thoughts seem frantic and where do they seem very confident?

Luck Be a Lady

Many productions have portrayed Lady Macbeth as evil and heartless because she's the one who convinces her husband to go through with the murder. Ask students to write responses to the following questions: Have you ever been convinced by a friend to do something that you knew was wrong? How did that make you feel? Who do you feel is more at fault for Duncan's murder—Macbeth or Lady Macbeth? Do you think Lady Macbeth is evil and heartless or a woman who makes a bad choice? Ask students to draw a costume sketch for Lady Macbeth using their responses to the above questions. What does she look like? How does she fit into the world around her? In relation to her husband?

Classroom Connections

...After the performance

Good Humors

In Shakespeare's day there was a common belief that the body was ruled by four elemental fluids that dominated a person's temperament: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. These liquids, or humors, were used as a means of classifying people and their behavior. A healthy, "normal" person would have a perfect balance of all four humors, but an overabundance of any one of them could cause changes in one's personality. As a class, research the qualities of each humor and how they affect human behavior. Ask each student to select a character from *Macbeth* and determine which humor dominates his/her personality, citing evidence from the text that supports the diagnosis.

South of the Border

Conflicts along the borders of neighboring nations have been common throughout history. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare eludes to the border conflict between England and Scotland when, after Malcolm has fled to England upon the death of his father, King Duncan, he returns to Scotland with English troops to battle Macbeth for the crown. The border between England and Scotland was plagued by constant warring, violent disputes and strategic invasions by various rulers for political gain. Divide the class into groups and assign each group a modern border conflict (i.e. Iraq/Iran, Israel/Palestine, Africa, Russia, India/Pakistan) to research. Have each group write a scene-by-scene outline of an updated version of *Macbeth* set against the backdrop of one of these border conflicts. What is daily life like along the border? Why does Malcolm solicit help from that country? How does a country gain from helping Malcolm regain the crown?

Come What, Come May

Read aloud I.iii.38-149 and discuss Macbeth's reaction. Compare his reaction to Lady Macbeth's when she receives the letter from her husband (I.v.1-30). The second half of the witches' prediction comes true because Macbeth and Lady Macbeth conspire to murder the king. Discuss whether Macbeth would have become king if they had not taken matters into their own hands. Pass out horoscopes from a recent newspaper. Ask students to find their horoscope and write a scene in which they take an action based on the horoscope, which makes it come true. Lead students in a discussion about fate and free will. What purpose do predictions and horoscopes serve in our society?

More Language in *Macbeth*

Have students read aloud from selected scenes to experiment with the speed and rhythm of the language throughout the play. What does the language seem to show us about Macbeth's relationships in each scene? Review the short, rhyming verse of the witches in Act IV, Scene i. Why do they rhyme so much? After students have read it aloud once, try clapping out a quick beat together as a class while they reread it. Or, if time allows, play some quick music underneath their reading. What does the beat seem to reveal about the musicality of the verse? How is the language of the witches different from the language of *Macbeth*?

Cause and Effect

Some scholars argue that Macbeth is responsible for his actions in the play, despite many other interpretations that he was simply living out his destiny as described by the Weird Sisters. Have students reflect on The Shakespeare Theatre's production: based on what they saw, which side of this debate did the production seem to support and why? What is the message of the play if Macbeth is responsible for his actions? How does it differ if they are determined "fated"? Divide students into small groups based on their answers and have them search through the text for specific lines and events that support their side of the debate. Bring all groups of similar viewpoints together to compile their findings, then have a member from each larger group present the case. Reflect on the arguments made by each side. Did anyone change their opinion based on the evidence presented?

Double, Double, Buffy's in Trouble

The three witches in *Macbeth* play an important role in its plot, and were popular with Shakespeare's audiences. Ask students to imagine the witches as they might be portrayed in today's culture, perhaps in shows like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* or *Charmed* or movies like *The Craft*. Have students create a setting and costume designs for the witches. What would they use to make their witches' brew? How do they enter and exit? Where do they get their powers? Ask students to share their ideas and designs with the rest of the class.