

A decorative border with intricate floral and vine patterns surrounds the central text.

ADVANCED
LITERATURE

Macbeth
&
Henry V

Our Lady of Victory School

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Macbeth

**The section on Macbeth should be completed by the end of
the first semester.**

Our Lady of Victory Home School Course
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Required Course Materials:

Macbeth, by William Shakespeare. The Pelican Shakespeare. New York:
Penguin, 1999.

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Macbeth, usually dated 1606, is the last of the “great four” Shakespeare tragedies (the others are *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *King Lear*). One of the shortest in the Shakespearean canon, the play deals with two specific subjects—the Stuart dynasty and the occult—dear to the heart of the new King, James I. The son of Mary, Queen of Scots, he was already King James VI of Scotland when he succeeded his distant cousin, Elizabeth I, as ruler of England, in 1603.

In theory, James Stuart’s succession united the two warring kingdoms, but the times were anything but peaceful and stable. Only in Elizabeth’s grandfather’s reign had a long series of civil wars finally been settled. In intervening years, religious calamities had wreaked unparalleled havoc in England, starting with the break from Rome initiated by Elizabeth’s father, Henry VIII, when the Pope refused to grant him a divorce. At first, Henry imagined he could maintain the Church in England with himself as its head, but it soon started to disintegrate. After he died leaving a young son as King, powerful nobles who took over the country continued dismantling the Church’s presence and establishing a protestant Church of England as the official religion. When the boy king died at sixteen, a brief period of Catholic resurgence followed under the rule of his half-sister Mary, but Elizabeth, who became Queen upon Mary’s death, saw political and personal advantages in supporting the new church (for example, to Catholic perception, she was an illegitimate child and, therefore, an illegitimate ruler. Only Mary, the child of Henry’s first marriage, was unequivocally accepted as his legitimate heir). During these successive regimes, the people had been forced to change religions, usually under pain of death, several times during the course of a generation.

After Elizabeth’s 45-year reign (a period of comparative peace), not surprisingly, everyone from the King down was nervous about his own and his family’s safety, about the welfare of the state, and about the stability of the body politic. The uncouth King’s position was insecure—he was unknown, foreign, and possibly Catholic himself. A few months before the appearance of the play *Macbeth*, a major conspiracy had been uncovered, including blowing up the Houses of Parliament while the King and his advisers were in session. The Gunpowder Plot was foiled at the last minute, with the main conspirators caught and subjected to burning at the stake. Not everyone was convinced that Catholics, blamed for the conspiracy, actually had anything to do with it (or, indeed, that there really was such a conspiracy rather than a “staged” event), but Catholics were so discredited as to effectively finish their resistance.

About the Author.

William Shakespeare was born in 1564, early in the reign of Elizabeth I, in Stratford-on-Avon, the son of a glovemaking and a farmer’s daughter. His father, John, was a known recusant (one who refused to take the oath of allegiance to the Church of England and maintained his Catholic faith), and, on the evidence of the plays, especially *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, very likely Shakespeare himself was a Catholic as well: like all Catholics at the time, he would have been obliged to “keep a low profile” about his faith in order to escape the death penalty. He attended Stratford Grammar school, where he received a classical education from fine scholars but did not go to university. He migrated to London as a young man, enjoyed success as an actor-manager-playwright in the newly popular theatre, made enough money to buy a handsome property in his hometown, and retired there, to die in 1616, after a twenty-five year career encompassing about 37 plays, several long narrative poems, and the finest sonnet sequence (154 sonnets) in the English language. Nominally, Shakespeare was a royal servant, and his company—in fact owned by its members—was officially known as “The King’s Men.” *Macbeth* is believed to have been written originally for performance at the king’s court, on the occasion of a state visit by the King of Denmark.

Dramatic Techniques

Plays are written to be performed rather than read; their format limits the playwright to dialogue and stage directions, and their impact depends largely on actors’ and directors’ interpretive skills.

In the case of Shakespeare, however, readers do have some advantages over today's playgoers, who do not have the relevant "education" of the original audiences. Shakespeare and his contemporaries in a flourishing new enterprise, the theatre, were absorbed in the new language they were helping to forge—Modern English—so the language itself was pre-eminent: its nuances, rhythms, and play. His audiences were highly attuned to the same fascination with language: they went to **hear** a play, rather than to **see** one as in our idiom. Today's reader, who has the luxury to experience the play in the study, is in a better position to engage with and enjoy 400-year-old language than is the inexperienced playgoer, who would often literally fail to comprehend. Hence we have the practice, in performances, of cutting or changing difficult language that we readers are able to decode with the help of scholarly aids such as notes and glossaries.

Adding to the complications of reading Shakespeare is the instability of the texts: you may have noticed inconsistencies from one edition of Shakespeare to another. That problem occurs because, during Shakespeare's long career, the plays were not published in our sense of the word. To discourage piracy, actors' scripts consisted of only their own roles, with cues of only two or three words representing the dialogue of other characters, and complex safeguards to prevent these scripts from being pieced together. Typically, there would be only one jealously-guarded complete script—that of the prompter, who may have been Shakespeare himself¹. Yet various illicit versions circulated, reconstructed by actors as well as by audience members. With no copyright provisions, so serious was the problem of rivals' plagiarism that plays weren't generally printed until after their run of stage performances. A few of Shakespeare's plays were published during his lifetime, but no complete collection until the First Folio seven years after his death, obviously not authorized by the playwright. As a result of this history, many different versions, of varying degrees of authenticity, have survived for the use of the scholars whose business it has been, down through the centuries, to bring out editions of the plays.

In Shakespeare's day, the stage was bare, with no curtains and few props; generally stage directions and notations of scenes and acts were added later. The theatre was open-air to provide a light-source. Although some private performances were held indoors, lighting was primitive: imagination, cued by the actors' speeches, had to provide changes in time of day and season, just as imagination had to set the scene itself. Costuming was haphazard: acting companies obtained cast-off clothing from their noble patrons and otherwise contrived what they could. Sound effects were simple but ingenious. Realism in drama, as we understand it, was not technically possible and therefore not expected. Moreover, all the roles were played by male actors; those of younger female characters by young boys. The audience's pleasure was in participating in the creation of the work; the actors' job was to create the context in which the audience's imagination could work. All had to work hard². Productions today never adhere to all these conditions, and therefore they do not deliver the play any more authentically than do we who make literature out of what was originally a script.

Morality

Much of Shakespeare is concerned with adult themes—such as lust, envy, ambition, temptation to serious sin—and the language dealing with this subject-matter can be frank, even gross. We will see these themes in *Macbeth*, which concerns a classic battle between good and evil, and is sometimes referred to as a re-enactment of the Fall. That the play **deals with** immorality does not make it immoral. On the contrary, as always in Shakespeare, evil people get punished in the end, and good-people-gone-wrong always have insight about what they have done—and the chance to repent (although they often don't). The plays were written in a Christian, basically Catholic, context, at a time when Christian values were the norm of society, so the plots and outcomes reflect that reality. Parents need not be concerned that *Macbeth* will lead their children into depravity: rather, it serves as a dreadful warning about the consequences of unbridled ambition and defiance of Divine Law.

¹ He is also believed to have played some lesser roles, such as the Ghost in *Hamlet*.

² For Shakespeare's instructions to the audience in this regard, see the opening Chorus of the play *Henry V* in the appendix.

The Course

Following this Introduction is a brief section on reading Shakespeare, illustrated with examples from *Macbeth*. Then follow fifteen lessons typically consisting of sections addressing these topics—

Background: additional information about the setting, the characters, the references.

Vocabulary: a list to review before reading the scene.

Discussion Questions: questions to review before reading the assignment, so that you may look for answers as you read. If possible, discuss at least some of these questions with your Home Teacher. **(Even if your teacher has not read the play, you will gain insight from such discussions, especially when you attempt explanations.)**

Investigation: suggestions for research and/or further reading. Select at least three of these for completion during your course.

Assignments:

- Short writing assignments for most lessons; essays for Acts 1, 3, and 5.
- memorization—learn by heart a minimum of two short speeches or one longer speech (total at least 20 lines; extra credit for more lines). These will be identified during the course. Recite them to your Home Teacher. You should be not only word-perfect: you should also demonstrate that you clearly understand what you are saying.
- Instead of the speech(es), you may learn and perform a short scene or parts of a longer scene with other students: a minimum of 20 lines per student. Roles may be doubled (one person assuming more than one role, indicating which by such means as changing hats or jackets. For this assignment, the witch scenes are popular with many students.

Course Requirements

- Read the play
- Study the play with the help of the sections in each lesson
- Complete the writing lesson assignments
- Complete at least three of the Investigation assignments
- Complete a short essay for Acts 1, 3, and 5 and a longer essay covering the whole play
- Memorize and recite two short speeches or one long speech as indicated or

—-or—-

Perform a scene with a group, including a minimum of 20 lines of dialogue per participating student.

Reading Shakespeare

Key terms to keep in mind when approaching the task of reading Shakespeare:

- Effort
- Imagination
- Flexibility
- Subtext

Effort*1. Basic Understanding.*

If you know the plot and each character's attitude, you have a general idea of what is being said. Prepare for reading by reviewing the scene-by-scene plot summary.

2. Unpack specific meaning as you read.

The following are effective strategies:

1. Plan on reading everything at least twice.
2. **Copy out the cast list or "dramatis personae"** on a card or paper and keep it by you as you read, adding brief comments to help you keep track of characters.
3. Keep the diagram of *Macbeth* circles handy as you read.
4. **Make reading notes** to save yourself the trouble of going over the same ground again.
5. **Consult the footnotes.** Check them frequently the first time you read, and make notes on the individual lines as you go. This way, you will save yourself much time and trouble.
6. Look up meanings of words that still don't make sense or seem questionable in context. Over a period of 400 years, meanings change. If you don't possess a comprehensive, first-rate dictionary that lists obsolete words and older meanings of current words, many are available on the Internet or on CD-Rom at reasonable prices. Some words are "false friends"; they are still in use, but the meaning has changed. (For example, in the speech "translated" below (10), in the phrase "*jump the life to come*," "jump" means "risk" or "take a chance on").
7. Determine the pronunciation ("Glamis," Macbeth's original title, is pronounced "Glahmz"—one syllable, as you can confirm by checking the meter) and stress (for example, *-ed* endings are sounded out where meter demands).
8. Remember that word-order is frequently inverted and that phrases may be interposed and/or transposed for effects such as meter, esthetics, dramatic tension.
9. Mark the text to indicate what to emphasize, when to pause, where to raise and lower the voice. Use the margins for comment, analysis.
10. Put a passage into today's language, but for maximum comprehension, do this "translation" yourself, rather than reading someone else's. (For example, Macbeth's soliloquy at the beginning of Act 1, Scene 7 : "If this is going to be done, it would be better to get it done quickly. If the assassination were the end of the matter--if only this blow [against Duncan] were all there is to it as far as this world is concerned, we'd take our chances on the next world. But in fact, we do have to worry about the here-and-now; our bloody deeds catch up with us and eventually pay us back ["what goes around comes around"]. Impartial justice delivers the drink we poisoned [for someone else] to our own lips . . .)
11. **Make Reading Notes** and summarize action, characters as you go.
12. Understand that this is a slow process at first: be patient; it pays off. You may need to read the same passage or scene more than once. Second and subsequent readings will be easier and more enjoyable because you have already done the decoding.

3. *When first reading Shakespeare, read silently to yourself as if preparing to read aloud.*

Don't start out reading as if this were a novel. Think of yourself as an actor with a script, considering, as well, how a director would *block* the scene ("choreograph" the placement, movements, and timing of the actors).

4. *When reading Shakespeare aloud, read deliberately, as slowly as you can without exaggeration.*

Reading aloud enables you to experience more fully the beauty of the language. Almost invariably, in your audience's opinion, you will read faster than you imagine. You want your audience to appreciate your reading, not to be always conscious that you're in a hurry to get it over with. The same principles apply when you are reading to yourself.

5. *Don't recite in a mechanical way.*

In Shakespeare plays, many of the lines are in blank verse (unrhymed iambic pentameter, a meter consisting of five stressed and five unstressed beats per line). But don't assume that the natural break comes at the end of the line; infer the meaning, and place your emphasis accordingly. Watch the punctuation, making slight pauses for commas, a little longer pauses for semicolons and colons, and still longer pauses for full stops or periods.

6. *If the lines rhyme, check to see whether the sense requires emphasis on the rhyme.*

Sometimes, it's important to hear the rhymes. Rhyming couplets may occur as special markers, for instance at the ends of scenes. In that case, slight emphasis would be appropriate. (For example, at the end of Act 2, Scene 1, "Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell, / That summons thee to heaven or to hell.")

7. Watch performances (*after* reading). There are several good performances of *Macbeth* available on video. All of them make cuts and/or change the order of scenes. You will enjoy and appreciate them far more after you are familiar with the play. Don't be tempted to substitute watching for reading. Nearly all filmed versions make cuts and changes, particularly in the sequence in which scenes appear.

Imagination

In addition to the discussion in the Introduction about engaging your imagination and about the limitations of the Shakespearean theatre, you need to consider some further points that were second nature to the original audiences. The circumstances of Shakespeare's world were, of course, very different from your own. The political realities included a powerful monarchy and a limited parliament, a hierarchy in which everyone had a set place, and, for most people, little or no personal autonomy. They lived under constant threat of invasion from many directions. The New World was still to be explored. In the field of medicine, physiology and psychology were understood in terms of four "humors" or bodily fluids corresponding to four elements of the material cosmos. Sanitation was primitive: wastes from pit toilets (known as "jakes" or "privies") were disposed of by uncovered sewage canal ("kennel"). Life expectancy was short; plague was widespread; disease was untreatable. Marriage was frequently decided by parents or, for the powerful and wealthy, a matter of expedient alliances. Personal privacy was almost non-existent; few people had a room of their own. Christianity was in turmoil. The English language still in formation; spelling, for example, was unstable (Shakespeare himself spelled his name several ways). London (pop. 100,000) was the major city of Europe, and it was unbelievably dirty, smelly, and difficult to get around: the easiest travel was by river. Up to 2,000 boats a day ferried people from the City of London to Southwark, where the theatres were located. There were only two bridges; London Bridge was overcrowded with traffic and lined with houses, shops, and booths—and heads of executed criminals rotting on spikes.

Staying Flexible

As we have noted, Shakespeare puts a premium on **language**. Don't assume the usual subject-verb-object word order; when the language seems especially complex, it may need major untangling. Suspend your expectations: he's doing it for a purpose—such as building dramatic tension, being deliberately ambiguous, or demonstrating shiftiness of character. See, for example, *Macbeth's*

"Tomorrow" soliloquy in Act 5, Scene 5, which uses inversions, long modifiers, personification and other figures of speech to draw attention to how pointless and boring life has become for Macbeth. We will be taking a closer look at this speech in the relevant lesson.

Subtext*

For our purposes the term *subtext* refers to the emotions and body language that accompany the delivery of a speech; to some extent, it is open to reader's interpretation, but the dialogue limits that interpretation. The subtext may be inferred from exercise of effort, imagination, and flexibility. (For example, in Act 1, Scene 3, after the entrance of Macbeth and Banquo, we may infer that Macbeth's opening line is addressed to Banquo, and Banquo's to Macbeth. But by his second sentence, Banquo has noticed, and is commenting upon, the witches ("their attire" indicates he is not yet speaking to them). His next words are addressed to the witches: two questions and a comment. So are Macbeth's next words, which are followed by the witches' greetings. The next speech is Banquo's, and it first calls for Macbeth to have shown some emotion: "Good sir, why do you *start* and *seem to fear* . . ." Banquo then immediately addresses the witches again, and again his comment on Macbeth ("he seems rapt") calls for Macbeth to be registering yet another emotion.) What subtexts are implied for the characters of the witches by the speeches of Macbeth and Banquo?

* Common definition: "In literary theory, a theme or viewpoint that underlies a text or activity, [which] is often at odds with the apparent meaning of what is going on, and reflects a significant though not immediately obvious truth." —*Oxford Companion to the English Language*.

Lesson Two: Read Act 1, Scenes 1-3.

See the section "Reading Shakespeare." For every lesson, review all sections of the lesson before beginning to read.

Background: The story is **based** on history but numerous particulars, including names, have been changed to meet the requirements of the play and to put the Stuart dynasty in a good light, for example, the historical Banquo was implicated in the plot to kill the king, but in the play Banquo is completely innocent and virtuous. He does not even pay much attention to the witches, thus obeying divine prohibition against such interest. In the play, Banquo is the distant ancestor of King James I, during whose reign *Macbeth* was originally produced. Historically, this relationship is uncertain.

Vocabulary, etc.:

- **Fortune** --personification: a woman at a spinning wheel; both the woman and the position of the wheel were believed to determine the fate of individuals.
- **Thane** --ancient Scottish noble title.
- **"I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do"** --I'll do harm, evil; cause trouble.
- **"All the quarters that they know**
- **I' the shipman's card"** (scene 3, lines 16 & 17) --from all directions of the chart (map). The rest of this speech refers to Macbeth.
- **I'** --in (and pronounced as "in," omitting the "n" sound. Not emphasized.
- **How far is't called to Forres?** --How far is it said to be to Forres [their destination, the location of the king's palace]?

Discussion Questions: —Respond to all (written or orally):

Check box after completion

1. Why is fair foul and foul fair? What does this contradiction imply about the play?
2. What picture comes to mind from the **simile** in scene two referring to "two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art"?
3. How dismayed are Macbeth and Banquo about the new supplies obtained by the rebels? (line 35).
4. What is the point of having Rosse re-iterate the story of Macbeth's victory (lines 48 and following)?
5. How does does Macbeth's opening line (in scene 3) answer Discussion Question 1? Why do things that "sound so fair" (as Banquo says) alarm Macbeth?
6. What is the grammatical subject of the sentence "My noble partner / You greet with present grace"? --scene 3, lines 54 and 55.
7. What does Macbeth mean when he asks the messengers, "why do you dress me / In borrowed robes"? Keep this phrase in mind and see ways throughout the play that Macbeth wears his "borrowed robes" or is described in terms of clothing. For example, Banquo completely misinterprets Macbeth's preoccupation at the end of scene 3, believing that the new honors bestowed on Macbeth are like "strange garments" that he is not yet accustomed to.
8. What does Banquo mean by his comment "The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray 's [us] / In deepest consequence" (lines 124-5)? He is referring to **equivocation**, an important theme in the play. Look up this word in at least two separate sources.
9. What does Macbeth mean by "the imperial theme" (line 129) and the "suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair"?

Optional Investigation/Research: locate and read the part of Scottish history concerning Macbeth. Note that the Stuarts are Malcolm's descendents (and the present Queen of England is the 28th generation descended from Malcolm's third son, David.)

Assignments:

1. Writing: Translate into today's English the passage following the two swimmers simile, scene 2, lines 9 to 23.
2. Start considering your passage(s) for memorization. The "Two truths are told" speech is a possibility. If you select it, you will need to understand it fully. The "translation" technique is very helpful in providing this comprehension.

Email paper to school (info@olvs.org) or SEND PAPER TO SCHOOL.