

A TASTE OF SHAKESPEARE



MACBETH

Produced by
Eugenia Educational Foundation

Teacher's Guide

The video with Teacher's Guide

**A TASTE OF SHAKESPEARE:
MACBETH**

a 52 minute video available for purchase or rental
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A Taste of Shakespeare:

Macbeth

Program Description

A Taste of Shakespeare is a series of thought-provoking videotapes of Shakespeare plays, in which actors play the great scenes in the language of 16th and 17th century England, but comment on the action in the English of today. Each video is under an hour in length and is designed to introduce the play to students in high school and college. The teacher's guide that comes with each video gives – among other things – a brief analysis of the play, topics for discussion or essays, and a short list of recommended reading.

Production Notes

At the beginning and end of this blood-soaked tragic play Macbeth fights bravely: loyal to his King and true to himself. (It takes nothing away from his valour that in the final battle King and self are one.) But in between the first battle and the last Macbeth betrays and destroys King, country, and whatever is good in his own nature.

A military hero when he first appears, Macbeth is seduced into villainy by a number of ambiguous events which happen to coincide with his own and his wife's ambitious strivings. Three "weird sisters" who accost him on his return from battle are not only ugly witches, but also represent the "Three Fates" who were thought in ancient times to spin, weave, and cut the thread of each man's life. They hail him as "Thane of Glamis" - a title he already bears; "Thane of Cawdor" - a title belonging to someone else; and "King hereafter" - giving voice to his own secret hope. Immediately afterwards, King Duncan, praising Macbeth for his victory in battle, anoints him Thane of Cawdor: a title made vacant because the traitorous man who last bore it had just been executed. When Macbeth returns home, his wife who had been informed of the day's astonishing events, persuades him through a combination of seduction, bullying, and guile into killing King Duncan, asleep as a guest in their house. This monstrous murder and cowardly breach of hospitality tears Macbeth apart, and ultimately destroys both him and his wife.

Because *Macbeth* is a tragedy, the hero is allowed only one mistake – one step taken without awareness of the consequences – before the trap is shut and his fate is sealed. If this had been a comedy like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the spirit world, benign and

helpful, would have prevented Macbeth from carrying out his wife's wicked commands. He might have made many mistakes (some even with criminal intent) but he would not have committed murder and so would have been saved. But in Tragedy, fate is inexorable, conspiring with man's worst desires to bring him down.

Macbeth's tragic error was to allow the predictions of the witches and the prodding of his wife to push him into a crime from which he initially recoiled in horror, and after which he was wracked by guilt and horrible imaginings. Certainly his ambitious mind whispered kingly longings and his life as a soldier made him capable of bloody deeds. But up to this point he had been an honorable man and would most likely have continued so had he not been tempted by the witches' prophecy and pushed to extremes by his wife.

The world of witches and evil spirits is also implicated in Lady Macbeth's criminal counsel to her husband. Hearing of the witches' prophecy she immediately calls on other forces of darkness, "spirits that tend on mortal [or deadly] thoughts" to "unsex" her – to take away her womanly gentleness – and fill her "from the crown to the toe, top-full / of direst cruelty!" Her tragic error was that she underestimated the violence she was doing to herself when she asked to be invaded by evil forces so that she

might commit an evil act. Blinded by ambition for her husband's future greatness, she coerces him into carrying out the crime that will destroy them both.

In our version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (videotaped at Toronto Film Studios and the Scarborough Bluffs with costumes from Stratford and Shaw), the actors stress the conflicted nature of Macbeth and his lady before, during, and after their initial crime. The stark set made up of steel platforms and plain curtains, provides no visual relief from the relentless progress of evil, and the suffering that afflicts villains and victims alike. Although Lady Macbeth takes part in only the first murder she breaks down first, while her husband goes on to bloodier and more appalling crimes, until he has waded so far in blood that he sees no option but to go on and on and on. As he hurls himself along the path of destruction his imagination tortures him more and more as he continues to violate his own nature and betray everything and everyone he once held dear. The entire play may be seen as a psychological study of "the mind diseased": the mind cut off from "ease," from pleasure, from the ability to sleep because the person has cut himself off from his own better self.

Macbeth's turning away from good and embracing evil begins when he encounters the three "weird" women who prepare, predict, and seal his fate. We dress them as traditional witches with the added twist that, repulsive as they are, they treat Macbeth with chilling seductiveness to indicate the alluring power of evil. They are meant to be disgusting to the audience while Macbeth is horror struck and seduced in equal measure. Their main purpose in the play is to stir up trouble, and to muddy moral distinctions: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air." By the way they look, the words they speak, and the things they boast of doing, the three weird sisters stand as symbols for moral confusion. Their removal of fences between foul and fair creates a profoundly disturbing atmosphere in the play, causing audience and reader to hover between horror, disgust, and pity without the pleasure of making secure moral judgments. Certainly we abhor what Macbeth is doing, but the man suffers so profoundly that we cannot help but feel pity for him.

Topics for Discussion or Essays

1. Brave in battle but morally weak, Macbeth is an easy target for the witches' mischief and his wife's cold-hearted determination. Find the speeches (in the text) that indicate he really does not want to be king strongly enough to commit murder. Find the speeches that show how strongly he is tempted. Find the speeches that reveal how he feels when he has won the crown but lost everything else. Memorize one of these speeches and describe how it makes you feel.

2. The supernatural is as important to this play as it is to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The fairies in *Dream* and the witches in *Macbeth* interfere to a similar extent in the affairs of human beings. Examine a number of conversations among the fairies in *Dream*, and among the witches in *Macbeth*, to determine the ways they are different and the same. Look at the ways they interact among each other and with mortals. Look at their influence on getting things going and determining how they end. Look at the atmosphere they create in each play and how the reader or audience reacts to them. Present a number of fairy scenes and witch scenes in dramatic readings to hear how they sound in action. Look at the different rhythms in fairy speech and witch-speak.

3. Lady Macbeth is colder and stronger than her husband in the early scenes but seems to suddenly fall apart toward the end of the story. Read aloud the soliloquy in which she invokes evil spirits to help her gain mastery over a feminine softness we never actually see. Then read aloud the chilling words with which she urges her husband to commit murder. Finally read aloud her sleep-walking scene. What character portrait emerges from these glimpses of the inner workings of her soul? Why do you think she breaks down while Macbeth does not?

4. As in other Shakespeare tragedies, the people who take over at the end of the play are neither memorable nor impressive. Venture a theory as to why Shakespeare fades out the action in such a subdued way, with less interesting though ethically superior people.

5. The nobleman Macduff is presented as a good man, and yet he leaves his wife and little son behind when he flees to England. Do a dramatized reading of the poignant painful scene where his wife and son are murdered (IV.3.1-85). Then debate what you take to be his reasons for going to England and leaving his family to face danger alone.

6. Because the muddy moral atmosphere in the play is so profound, and because this is one of Shakespeare's few tragedies where the

hero is – or at least becomes – a villain, what do you think Shakespeare is here suggesting about the human soul? How does he use the spirit world to bring out what is hidden in a person's heart? Discuss the scene where Malcolm pretends to be as wicked as Macbeth so as to test Macduff's integrity

7. Memorize some of the famous soliloquies and noteworthy lines in the play and discuss their meaning:

"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly..." (I.7.1-28)

" ...We fail? But screw your courage to the
sticking-place, And we'll not fail." (I.7.59-61)

"False face must hide what the false heart doth
know." (1.7.81)

"Is this a dagger which I see before me, The
handle toward my hand?..." (II.1.33-49)

"Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this
blood?... " (II.2.59-62)

"Methought I heard a voice cry
"Sleep no more! ..." (II.2.34-42)

"Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, ..." (III.1-3)

"It is concluded: Banquo, thy soul's flight,
If it find heaven, must find it out tonight."
(III.1.141-42)

"It will have blood, they say; blood will have
blood." (III.4.123)

"Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow..."
(V.5.19-28)

"Two truths are told..." (I.3.127-42)

"...nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it. He died
As one that had been studied in his death,
To throw away the dearest thing he owed
As 'twere a careless trifle." (I.4.7-11)

Characters and Cast

MACBETH (Daniel Kash) - Thane of Glamis who becomes Thane of Cawdor. ("Thane" was a Scottish title of nobility) A brave soldier, but ambitious and easily influenced. He commits murder against his better judgment and suffers terribly for his crime.

LADY MACBETH (Soo Garay) - Trying to help her husband achieve his kingly ambition, she invokes evil spirits to stiffen her resolve to do evil. As Macbeth commits crime after crime and becomes ever more distant from her, she suffers terribly. Night after night she relives Macbeth's murders and her own initial complicity.

BANQUO/NARRATOR (David Fox) - As Banquo he is Macbeth's friend and comrade in arms, more principled than Macbeth but also ambitious in his own way. As the Narrator he provides linking commentary between scenes.

THE WEIRD SISTERS (Clare Coulter, Jane Moffat, and Holly Lewis) - Witch-like creatures who predict the future to Macbeth and thereby influence the tragic events that follow their intrusion into his life.

MACDUFF (Alan Van Sprang) - The Thane of

Fife whose family Macbeth slaughters, and who then joins the forces rising up against Macbeth. At the end, Macduff avenges the murder of his family and helps to put Scotland in safer hands.

LENNOX (Alex Poch-Goldin) a Scottish nobleman who turns against the murderous King Macbeth to support the forces that will put Malcolm, eldest son of King Duncan, on the throne.

KING DUNCAN (Robert Buck) - A good man, but not a good judge of character, who is murdered as he sleeps in Macbeth's house.

MALCOLM (Michael Mahoney) - King Duncan's eldest son who becomes King of Scotland when Macbeth, after many bloody deeds, is killed in battle.

MURDERER (Andrew Scorer) - a desperate man, game for anything, whom Macbeth convinces that Banquo has done him wrong.

DOCTOR (Desmond Ellis) - the doctor who treats Lady Macbeth for insomnia and hallucinations, and reports on her condition to Macbeth.

FLEANCE (Tyler Gallagher) - Banquo's eldest son who was supposed to be murdered along

with his father, but managed to escape.

DONALBAIN (Jack Grinhaus) - King Duncan's younger son.

SECOND MURDERER (Paul Irving) - He assists the first murderer in his attack on Banquo and Fleance.

KING DUNCAN'S ATTENDANTS

(Kenning Stewart and John Ford) - the King's aids and protectors who were slaughtered along with their master.

ATHANE (Grant Allert) - One of the noblemen at Macbeth's feast at which the ghost of Banquo appeared to Macbeth alone.

MACBETH'S ATTENDANT & GUEST AT

THE FEAST (Derek Dorey) - a man who must see and hear no evil even when it is right in front of him.

Key Production Personnel

Producer/Director; Adaptation & Narration -
Eric Weinthal

Executive Producers - Ada and Doug Craniford

Director of Photography - David J. Patrick

Production Designer - Cameron Porteous

Picture Editor - Ralph Brunjes

Music - Rusty McCarthy

Recommended Text and Reading

The Signet Classic edition of *Macbeth*, edited by
Sylvan Barnet (1963). Be sure to read the
deeply insightful essays at the back.

Northrop Frye.

Fools of Time: Studies in Shakespearean Tragedy.

University of Toronto Press, 1967; rpt. 1991.

A.C. Bradley.

Shakespearean Tragedy. Greenwich, Conn:

Fawcett Publications, 1965.

Harold Bloom. *Shakespeare: The Invention of the
Human.* New York: Riverhead Books, 1998.

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37 minutes

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