

LONG ISLAND
UNIVERSITY
STRAWBURY

Macbeth

William Shakespeare

Curriculum Unit

Mary Enda Costello
Stephen L. Jacobs
Mary Neelan
Gary Tutty



General Introduction

Many teachers, especially beginning teachers, approach a unit on Shakespeare with apprehension. And this concern is not without basis. Because of the age of the plays, many of the words are now archaic, obsolete, or have different meanings; because Shakespeare is a poet-dramatist, the speeches are often written in blank verse, replete with poetic figures of speech and classical literary references; because of Elizabethan dramatic conventions, a Shakespearean play often seems to lack the realism found in a modern play. Finally, the ideas and themes in a Shakespearean play are often more mature and complex than those of a modern play.

With these initial obstacles, it is not difficult to understand why teachers may question not only their own understanding of the play but also their students' ability to understand and willingness to become involved in the reading and study of a Shakespearean play. Students always approach any unit with a wide variety of levels of readiness and interest, but it often seems that an announcement of a coming Shakespeare unit provokes more than the usual number of groans and grimaces. Admittedly, some studies and dramatizations of Shakespeare do stimulate more yawns than new ideas.

Why, then, should English teachers risk such an unpromising study when contemporary educational materials offer so many courses and mini-courses in appealing subjects such as film, science fiction, and pop art? Should Shakespeare be deleted from the high school curriculum, or at most kept only for honors and advanced placement divisions? Is Shakespeare too complex to be taught by the average high school English teacher; too difficult to be understood by the average high school student; too abstruse to be worth the effort of either?

The educational materials in this packet spring from the conviction that the high school teacher can teach Shakespeare effectively, and enjoy doing it. By basing the class study firmly on the text and using educationally effective and interesting learning materials, the teacher can provide a sound introduction to Shakespeare and an accurate basic understanding of a Shakespearean play. The number of Shakespearean criticisms and interpretations need not disturb nor discourage the teacher; rather it should free the teacher to acknowledge a wide variety of student responses as acceptable.

The materials are based on several assumptions about students. The first is that they have a right to meet Shakespeare, the greatest author in English literature, as part of their high school education. In fact, if they do not, it is doubtful that many of them will ever read or see a Shakespearean play. Along with their right to read Shakespeare, students have a right to be taught how to read his works. Few, if any, come into a high school classroom equipped to read Shakespeare on their own. They can, however, learn how to read his works, and that process, although it is certainly demanding, should also be an interesting and enjoyable experience. Students' expressions of hostility toward a Shakespeare unit are most often indicative of fear that they will fail to understand the play or of certainty

that they will be bored. Basically, students want to become educated people, and they can enjoy mastering even difficult material if the methods of instruction are interesting and varied.

The assumptions about Shakespeare, Shakespearean drama, and Shakespearean study are many:

1. Shakespeare wrote for a broad audience, a nonelitist approach that is most appropriate today, too.
2. Reading his plays, like reading any great works of literature, is both a demanding and a rewarding experience.
3. The focus in a study of a Shakespearean play should be on the actual text of the play itself.
4. Shakespeare's plays are characterized by universality of themes, characters, and situations, and thus are relevant to modern youth.
5. Each Shakespearean play is a tremendously rich literary and dramatic work of art; as such, an introductory study cannot achieve and should not attempt an exhaustive treatment of the work.

These, then, are the objectives of this unit:

1. to involve students in the process of reading and understanding Shakespearean drama as a literary and dramatic work of art,
2. to help students comprehend the complexities of Shakespeare's language,
3. to introduce students to those Elizabethan concepts and dramatic conventions relevant to a greater understanding of the plays,
4. to use the students' own experiences as reference points in their study of Shakespeare,
5. to enable students to see Shakespearean drama as relevant to twentieth-century America.

Preliminary Notes to the Teacher

Rationale for Course

The lessons and handouts for this Shakespearean play represent assimilations of time-tested approaches by teachers experienced in teaching Shakespeare to high school students. Considerable research has been conducted in the various critical interpretations that have been written about the play over the centuries. The most typical and commonly-held responses have been incorporated into the Notes to the Teacher. A basic goal throughout the unit is to make Shakespeare's ideas and themes relevant to the students' own lives: thus during the discussion of *Macbeth*, students consider the effects of disordered ambition in the world around them and in their own lives.

Using the Course Materials

This packet consists of a teacher's manual of lesson plans, a set of handouts to match the lessons, and four appendices, including a glossary of terms and enrichment activities.

Within the unit the lessons are sequential. Even though each is geared for one class period of forty to forty-five minutes, the time will vary depending on the nature of the class. Work left unfinished during class time may be assigned as homework. Activities that are designed as assignments are designated as such. These assignments can also be used as class activities if time permits.

Because of the focus on the text, background on Shakespeare's life and theater is included in the lessons only when pertinent. There are many films and filmstrips on Shakespeare and his age that the teacher can use to supplement the unit. A student-teacher selected bibliography and a selected audiovisual bibliography have been included at the end of this packet (Appendix 4).

Teaching Approaches

One of the first decisions that the teacher must make is the method of presenting the play to the class. One recommended approach is that of the teacher reading the play orally to the class. Another approach is the playing of a professional tape or recording of the play. A final approach is having students read the play orally to the class. Depending upon the needs and abilities of the class, the teacher should feel free to use one or a combination of these three approaches.

Shakespeare's plays should be seen as well as read. Having gained an understanding of the play through their oral reading, appropriate writing, and perhaps occasional acting, the students would enjoy seeing a performance. Viewing a staged or filmed version enriches their experience with the play. Participating in a joint teacher-student production also enhances the students' view of the play as theater.

Evaluation

Using this unit provides the teacher with a variety of evaluation alternatives. One or a combination of the following may be used.

Since day-to-day response is crucial, class discussion and participation are valuable guidelines in determining the students' effort, interest, and achievement. Collecting and checking handouts is one effective method of evaluating student progress.

A list of suggested projects is included to be used either as a requirement or as enrichment. Some give students the chance to use talents that otherwise might not be used. Others develop students' composition skills. Setting aside time for presentation of these projects is an enjoyable way to end the study of the play.

For those teachers who desire an objective evaluation tool at the end of the unit, testing is provided. In keeping with the philosophy expressed in the introduction, testing is designed to be an affirmation of the students' understanding of the play.

MACBETH



Lesson 1

Beginning the Play

Objective

- To introduce students to the world of *Macbeth*

Notes to the Teacher

One of the primary emotional forces in *Macbeth* is human ambition, a dominant character trait in both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The play shows the effects of disordered ambition on the main characters and on those around them. In order to understand this tragedy, students must be able to identify ambition as a positive characteristic when it is ordered or in harmony with man and society. They should see that when it becomes disordered, ambition is a negative and destructive force.

Shakespeare introduces the play with a very short scene, but one which is skillfully constructed to guarantee audience interest because of its social, literary, and theatrical values.

In this lesson, students are introduced to the "world" of *Macbeth* in several ways. First, they are asked to consider ambition as a universal characteristic in human life. This enables them to see Macbeth's choice as a believable one for a person with great potential. They are then asked to examine Act I, Scene 1, for its topical, thematic, and theatrical interest.

Procedure

1. Distribute **Handout 1** and have small groups read the case study and discuss the questions.
2. Have students share their answers. Point out that ambition is a primary motivating trait, and that various factors (exceptional individual ability, possibility of great success, sense of being destined for great things, opportunity, lack of real self-confidence and self-acceptance, and human support) contribute to disordering the ambition. Future dangers include a possibil-

ity of choosing to resort to trickery to maintain success, feelings of guilt, loss of self-worth, and fear of discovery and/or retaliation. Ask students to evaluate ambition as a character trait, and to give examples of ordered and disordered ambition in contemporary life.

3. Tell students that the play they are about to begin, *Macbeth*, is generally considered one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies (along with *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*), and that it centers on a character who is ambitious.
4. Play a recording of Act I, Scene 1. Point out its brevity, and tell students that Shakespeare often opened his plays with short scenes that are carefully designed for theatrical and literary effect.
5. Distribute **Handout 2** and have students read the material and complete the exercise on side 1.
6. Review the handout, suggesting responses to fill in gaps left by student responses.

Social Appeal: *Continuing interest evident in popularity of The Exorcist, The Omen.*

Literary Elements: *Plan to meet Macbeth; lines 2, 4, 11-12; mysterious, dangerous, evil*

Dramatic Values: *Thunder and lightning, dim lights, shrill rough voices, animal sounds; mystery, curiosity; witch's cauldron, cat, hedgehog, owl; makes audience curious and elicits sense of spooky fascination*

7. Look at the *Dramatis Personae* before Act I and identify important characters in the play: Duncan and his two sons, Macbeth and his wife, and Banquo with his descen-

dents to James—as they appear on side 2 of the handout.

Optional Assignment

Ask students to look in newspapers and news magazines for examples of the effects of ambi-

tion, either ordered or disordered, on man and society. These may be presented in either oral or written form, or kept for class discussion.

Case Study

For the past eight years, Kathy A. had been ice skating for eight hours a day preparing for pre-Olympic tryouts, which took place in her city, Los Angeles. After three days of competition, the field narrowed to six contestants for only five places on the U.S. team. Of the other five, two, Susan C. and Marlene P., were staying with Kathy's family.

The evening before the last day of competition Kathy and Susan decided to go browse around the shopping mall. In a tiny booth in the center of the mall they found an old gypsy woman who offered to tell their fortunes. They entered the booth together.

The old woman held her wrinkled hands over a large glass ball. She asked the girls to sit down, and gazed into the ball for a short time. Finally, she looked up; her red, bleary eyes were somehow both fascinating and frightening.

"You," she said looking at Kathy, "are meant to be a winner. Never take second place to anyone if you can help it."

"And you," she said to Susan, "will win even more in the long run."

Later on, walking home together, the girls talked over what the old woman had said. Susan felt reassured, and told Kathy that they had nothing to worry about. Both of them would surely be going to the Olympics. Kathy agreed.

Late that night Kathy awoke from a dream about the old fortune-teller. She slipped quietly from her bedroom, noiselessly entered Marlene's room, and turned off the six separate alarm clocks Marlene had set to awaken herself the next morning. (Even six alarms didn't always succeed; sometimes Kathy had to go in to shake her awake after all six had rung.)

The next morning Kathy and Susan were ready to leave on time at 7:45; competition was scheduled for promptly at 8:00. "Come on, Marlene," Susan called loudly. Marlene's door opened to reveal a pajama-clad figure with half-closed eyes and uncombed hair. "What time is it?" she asked. "7:45, and we can't wait, or we'll be late," Kathy answered. "Hurry up. We'll meet you there."

Only five competitors arrived for the 8:00 competition that morning. They were named the members of the Olympic team.

Questions

1. What character traits motivated Kathy in her action?
2. What external factors also contributed to her decision?
3. How might this action affect Kathy's future?

Shakespeare's Introduction to Macbeth

In Act I, Scene 1, of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare catches the audience's attention by appealing to their interest in the supernatural. In addition, he uses literary and dramatic techniques to set the plot in motion and establish atmosphere.

Social Appeal

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* to be first presented to King James I at the palace theater, so he included several elements of special interest to the king. One of these was the three witches. As a young man in Scotland, the king wrote a book on demonology, specifically on the Scottish witches, who were tremendously more potent and dangerous than were the witches in England. Some critics describe James as a witch-hunter fascinated with sorcery. Actually, by the time James became King of England, he had become very skeptical about witchcraft and was engaged in protecting those wrongly accused and in exposing frauds. While he was indeed interested in sorcery, he was not committed to it nor to the extermination of witches.

Shakespeare's audience included people with various attitudes toward witchcraft. Undoubtedly, many of the groundlings (common people) firmly believed in it, while some of the more educated members of the audience were probably skeptical about it.

How do today's audiences regard witchcraft?

Literary Elements

How is the plot set into motion?

Find three examples of verbal contradictions.

What is the atmosphere of the scene?

Dramatic Values

Describe the lighting and sound effects that are appropriate to this scene.

How does the scene gain the audience's interest?

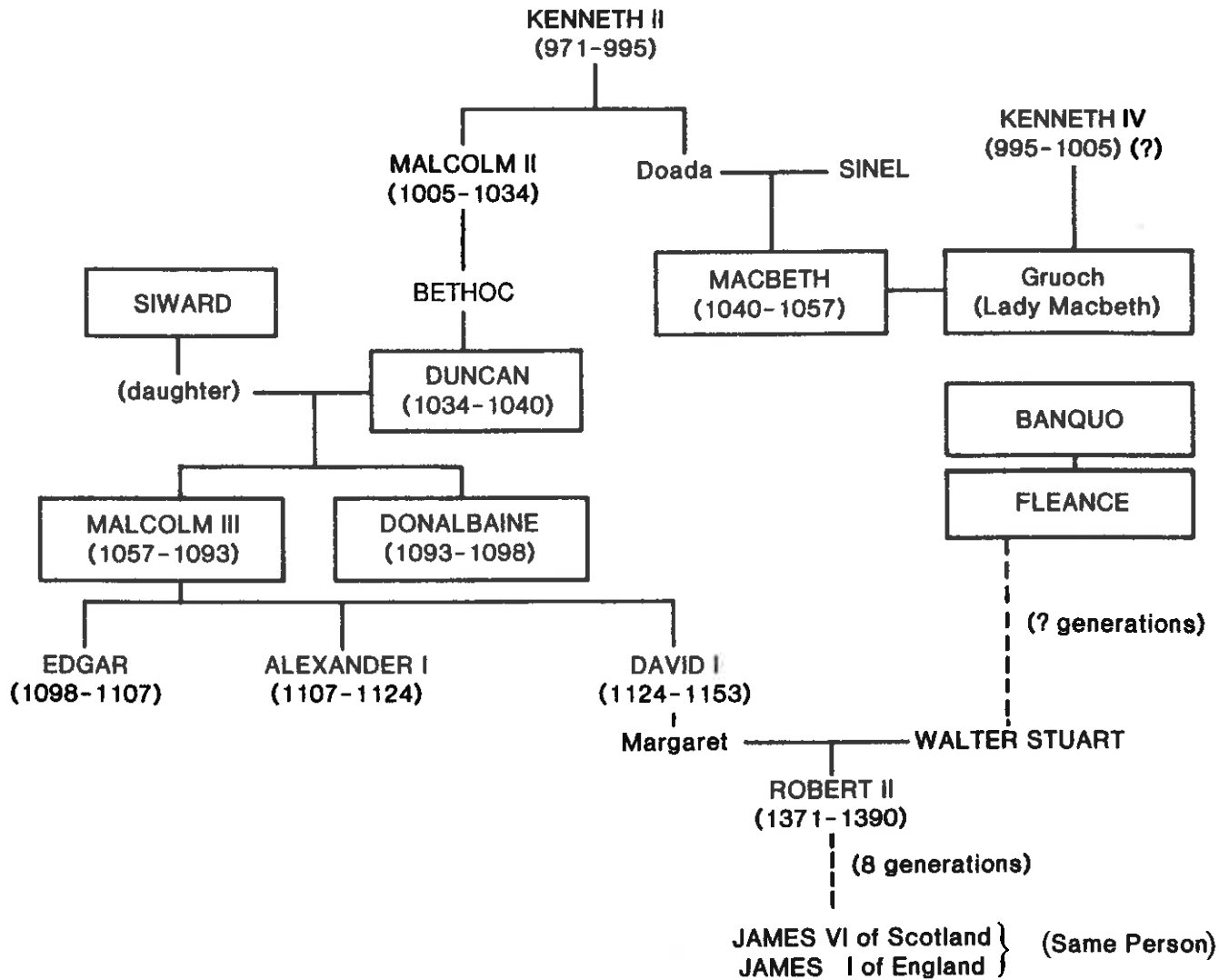
What stage properties would dominate the scene? (Note especially that the first witch has a cat—Graymalkin—and the second has either a toad or a hedgehog—Paddock. These are likenesses assumed by the devil. Later in the play we find that the third witch is accompanied by a large owl—Harpier.)

What effect does this scene have on the audience?

Ideas from *The Royal Play of Macbeth* by Henry N. Paul, Macmillan Publishing Co., New York; and *Pale Hecates Team* by K. M. Briggs, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana.

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Was There a Real Macbeth?



Mentioned in play
 Women's names in lower case letters

From "The Tragedy of Macbeth" in *Asimov's Guide to Shakespeare* by Isaac Asimov; Avenel Books, New York.

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