

LANGUAGE IN MACBETH



UNIT 9

Introduction

It is important to study the language of *Macbeth*, not just because it is a feature of the play that candidates are tested on in examinations, but, more fundamentally, because it is the very material Shakespeare works with. His plays are nothing but language; actors, film and stage directors are needed to supply more.

Shakespeare employs some prose in *Macbeth*, and at least three different types of verse. These should be brought out, as should features such as the use of soliloquies and asides. *The Cambridge School Shakespeare* edition of the play makes some interesting observations and suggestions for activities – for example, on the way antithesis features in many of the speeches.

Many teachers will be familiar with the work done by Cicely Berry on speech in Shakespeare, which is particularly relevant here. It cannot be overstressed how important it is for passages from the play to be read aloud, in order for students to get a feel for Shakespeare's language.

The play's vocabulary leads into the topic of imagery, which forms a separate unit (Unit 8).

Spiritual and Moral

The spiritual and moral dimension may not be immediately obvious when considering the play's language, but it is important to recognise the power of words. Language can indicate social status, and can be used to hide truth as well as to convey it...

- The Witches' speeches employ incantation, as a force of occult control.
- Equivocation, one of the play's chief themes, is concerned chiefly with how language is used.
- Macduff ('I have no words' – Acts V scene 8, verse 6) is a character whose silence is often more significant than his language. Why?

Using the Unit

Much of this unit is for the student to read, and it is advisable to go through the points raised with the whole class. **Many teachers find it helpful to consider Shakespeare's language near to the beginning of the course. In fact, *Macbeth* is an excellent play with which to do this as it employs a wide range of language, verse and prose, early on in the play.** Most examples on the student sheets are taken from early scenes to allow this to be done.

Students should look at the questions, perhaps discussing them in pairs or small groups. They do not necessarily have to lead to written work. But it is important to go over the material with them, as shown below.

Aims

- To examine and evaluate the verse and prose of the play.
- To consider the moral and spiritual implications of the power of words.

This unit links with Unit 8, *The Imagery in Macbeth*.

SHAKESPEARE'S VERSE

9.1 The Rhyme

Is the rhyme simply a cue for the actors in the next scene? Or for those providing the 'thunder' backstage?

9.2 The Metre

As well as checking answers to the questions, it is worth indicating the scansion of lines. Overlaying acetates on an OHP work best, but the lines can also be written on a board.

Duncan:

x / x / x / / x x /
 What bloody man is that? He can report
 x / x / x / x / x /
 As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
 x / x /
 The newest state.

/ x x / x /
Malcolm: This is the sergeant
 x / x / x / x / x /
 Who like a good and hardy soldier fought
 / x x / x x / / /
 Gainst my captivity. Hail, brave friend;
 / x x / x / x / x /
 Say to the king, the knowledge of the broil
 x / x / x
 As thou didst leave it.

/ x x /
Captain: Doubtful it stood,
 x / / / x x x / x / x
 As two spent swimmers that do cling together
 x / x /
 And choke their art.

Students of more ability may appreciate the variations from standard iambic pentameter, and the tension between the rhythm of the blank verse and that of natural speech.

9.3 The Witches' Chanting

The standard line is octosyllabic, but many lines stop short. Should the witches pace around with an imaginary beat on each 'rest'?

Stress the impact of incantation ('the charm's wound up') and the significance in folklore and fairytale of 'the rule of three' (see lines 33 and 34).

It is worth looking too at Act IV scene 1 for another example of incantation, but care is needed not to offend anyone's religious principles by expecting students to invent or participate in similar occult-type rituals.

SHAKESPEARE'S PROSE

Draw attention to the dramatic impact of prose being used, and to the different sort of prose in each case (and in the two other prose sequences in the play – Act III scene 1, lines 75-90; Act IV scene 2, lines 34-61). The tone varies, according to whether the language is conveying straight information, allowing comic expression (however tragically ironic) or suggesting madness.

SOLILOQUIES AND ASIDES

Discussion of these points is probably enough, but excerpts from videos of the scenes on film make for more interest. If a video camera is available, a class could even devise their own versions of the soliloquies, dubbing speech where necessary.

LANGUAGE IN MACBETH



UNIT 9

Macbeth is obviously not written in everyday modern English, though most people who see it on stage are surprised at how ‘modern’ it feels. His language is different for at least three reasons:

a) **It was written nearly 400 years ago.** Some words have changed in meaning or are not used at all now. But it is surprising how much his language has in common with ours: he did not write in ‘Old English’ – in fact, he used an early form of modern English. Spelling and punctuation are usually modernised in the editions of the play we now use, but grammar and vocabulary have not altered much since Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*.

b) **Shakespeare invented many words** (such as ‘incarnadine’) which must have seemed strange to people of his own time. In fact, some of the words we are familiar with were first used by Shakespeare in this play – words like ‘bare-faced’, ‘cut-throat’, ‘lily-livered’, and many other compound words.

It has been estimated that Shakespeare uses well over 30,000 different words in his plays. Most well-educated people nowadays use less than half that. The Authorised Version of the Bible, which appeared in 1611 (the ‘King James’) uses only 8000 different words – evidence that it was translated for the benefit of the ordinary man and woman.

c) **Shakespeare’s plays are written mainly in verse.** This is not just because poetic language sounds more grand – though it does – but because

verse is easier for actors to learn.

Prose was used either in letters (which the actor was allowed to read on stage – see I.5.1-12) or by characters of lesser status (such as the Porter, II.3.1-34) who were often comic characters who added bits of their own in any case.

Try to read as much Shakespeare as you can aloud. It will help you to get a feel for his language and make it easier to understand. The clue to good reading is to pause at the punctuation marks and to ignore the line endings.

SHAKESPEARE'S VERSE

The next three boxes look at different aspects of Shakespeare's verse. If you are tackling all three of them, you might find it best to follow the order in which the boxes are numbered.

9.1 The Rhyme

Look at the end of Act I scene 2 (from line 63).

Duncan No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive
Our bosom interest. Go pronounce his present death,
And with his former title greet Macbeth.

Ross I'll see it done.

Duncan What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won.

Why do you think Shakespeare uses rhyme?

9.2 The Metre

Look at Act I scene 2, lines 1-15.

Duncan What bloody man is that? He can report,
As seemeth by his plight, of the revolt
The newest state.

Malcolm This is the sergeant
Who like a good and hardy soldier fought
'Gainst my captivity. Hail, brave friend.
Say to the king, the knowledge of the broil
As thou didst leave it.

Captain Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonald –
Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him – from the Western Isles
Of kerns and galloglasses is supplied,
And fortune on his damnèd quarry smiling
Showed like a rebel's whore.

Count the number of syllables in each line. Be careful! Some words were pronounced differently then – sergeant, for example, had three syllables. Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are all the lines the same length?
- What happens when a new speaker joins in?
- Where do you need to pause when you read the lines?
- How regular would you say the metre is?

9.3 The Witches' Chanting

Now consider Act I scene 3, lines 1-35.

- First Witch** Where hast thou been, sister?
Second Witch Killing swine.
Third Witch Sister, where thou?
First Witch A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
 And munched, and munched, and munched.
 'Give me,' quoth I.
 'Aroint thee, witch,' the rump-fed ronyon cries.
 Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' th' Tiger:
 But in a sieve I'll thither sail,
 And like a rat without a tail
 I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.
- Second Witch** I'll give thee a wind.
First Witch Thou'rt kind.
Third Witch And I another.
First Witch I myself have all the other,
 And the very ports they blow,
 All the quarters that they know
 I' th' shipman's card.
 I'll drain him dry as hay.
 Sleep shall neither night nor day
 Hang upon his penthouse lid.
 He shall live a man forbid.
 Weary sennights nine times nine
 Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.
 Though his bark cannot be lost,
 Yet it shall be tempest-tossed.
 Look what I have.
- Second Witch** Show me, show me.
First Witch Here I have a pilot's thumb,
 Wrecked as homeward he did come.
 (*Drum within*)
Third Witch A drum, a drum;
 Macbeth doth come.
All The weird sisters hand in hand,
 Posters of the sea and land,
 Thus do go about, about,
 Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
 And thrice again to make up nine.
 Peace, the charm's wound up.

As in Act I.1, the Witches use a different kind of verse from that spoken by the other characters.

What is the standard number of syllables in each line? Note down any variations in this pattern, and explain what effect they have.

What is the overall effect of the Witches' chanting?

SHAKESPEARE'S PROSE**9.4 Different Uses of Prose**

The next three boxes contain scenes which make extensive use of prose. Compare the prose used in each of them, and then look at the following three points:

- Say why you think prose is used in each of these scenes, and how it differs in tone in each.
- Look for how prose is used to convey straight information, humour, or a distorted mind.
- Why do you think Shakespeare preferred prose to verse in each of these instances?

Act I scene 5, lines 1-12

Lady Macbeth (reads) ‘They met me in the day of success, and I have learned by the perfectest report they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who all-hailed me Thane of Cawdor, by which title before these weird sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time with “Hail, King that shalt be.” This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness, that thou mightst not lose the dues of rejoicing by being ignorant of what greatness is promised thee. Lay it to thy heart, and farewell.’

Act V Scene 1, lines 1-60

Doctor I have two nights watched with you, but can perceive no truth in your report. When was it she last walked?

Gentlewoman Since his majesty went into the field I have seen her rise from her bed, throw her night-gown upon her, unlock her closet, take forth paper, fold it, write upon 't, read it, afterwards seal it, and again return to bed, yet all this while in a most fast sleep.

Doctor A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching. In this slumbry agitation besides her walking and other actual performances, what at any time have you heard her say?

Gentlewoman That, sir, which I will not report after her.

Doctor You may to me, and 'tis most meet you should.

Gentlewoman Neither to you nor anyone, having no witness to confirm my speech.

Enter Lady [Macbeth], with a taper

Lo you, here she comes. This is her very guise, and, upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her, stand close.

Doctor How came she by that light?

Gentlewoman Why, it stood by her. She has light by her continually, 'tis her command.

Doctor You see her eyes are open.

Gentlewoman Ay, but their sense are shut.

Doctor What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands.

Gentlewoman It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

Lady Macbeth Yet here's a spot.

Doctor Hark, she speaks. I will set down what comes from her to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

Lady Macbeth Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One, two. Why then 'tis time to do 't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard? What need we fear? Who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?

Doctor Do you mark that?

Lady Macbeth The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that. You mar all with this starting.

Doctor Go to, go to. You have known what you should not.

Gentlewoman She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of that. Heaven knows what she has known.

Lady Macbeth Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. O, O, O.

Doctor What a sigh is there? The heart is sorely charged.

Gentlewoman I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

Doctor Well, well, well –

Gentlewoman Pray God it be, sir.

Doctor This disease is beyond my practice. Yet I have known those which have walked in their sleep who have died holily in their beds.

Lady Macbeth Wash your hands, put on your night-gown, look not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on 's grave.

Doctor Even so?

Lady Macbeth To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand; what's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed. *Exit*

Doctor Will she go now to bed?

Gentlewoman Directly.

Act II scene 3, lines 1-34

Porter Here's a knocking indeed: if a man were porter of hell-gate he should have old turning the key. *(Knock)* Knock, knock, knock. Who's there, i' th' name of Beelzebub? Here's a farmer that hanged himself on th' expectation of plenty. Come in time – have napkins enough about you, here you'll sweat for 't. *(Knock)* Knock, knock. Who's there, in th' other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator. *(Knock)* Knock, knock, knock. Who's there? Faith, here's an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose. Come in, tailor. Here you may roast your goose. *(Knock)* Knock, knock. Never at quiet: what are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further: I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to th' everlasting bonfire. *(Knock)* Anon, anon. I pray you, remember the porter. *(Opens door)*

Enter Macduff and Lennox

Macduff Was it so late, friend, ere you went to bed
That you do lie so late?

Porter Faith, sir, we were carousing till the second cock, and drink, sir, is a great provoker of three things.

Macduff What three things does drink especially provoke?

Porter Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep, and urine. Lechery, sir, it provokes and unprovokes: it provokes the desire but it takes away the performance. Therefore much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him and it mars him; it sets him on and it takes him off; it persuades him and dis-heartens him, makes him stand to and not stand to. In conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him.

Macduff I believe drink gave thee the lie last night.

Porter That it did, sir, i' the very throat on me, but I requited him for his lie, and, I think, being too strong for him, though he took up my legs sometime, yet I made a shift to cast him.



SOLILOQUIES AND ASIDES

Soliloquies and asides are when a character talks to herself or himself. We are meant to assume that this is what they are thinking. The audience can hear it, but (by convention) the others on stage cannot.

The next three boxes explore an aside and two soliloquies from *Macbeth*.

9.5 Analysing an Aside

Which words does Macbeth say to himself, which to Ross and Angus, and which to Banquo?

Look at Act I scene 3, lines 115-19.

Macbeth (*aside*) Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor.
The greatest is behind. – Thanks for your pains. –
Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me
Promised no less to them?

9.6 Lady Macbeth's Soliloquy

Look at Act I scene 5, lines 35-56.

Lady Macbeth The raven himself is hoarse,
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold!'

Enter Macbeth

Great Glamis, worthy Cawdor,
Greater than both by the all-hail hereafter,
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.

Note that:

- **An aside** is a short comment to oneself, or occasionally to a close friend.
- **A soliloquy** is a longer speech, representing thought – such as Lady Macbeth's words here, up to the arrival of Macbeth.

In a film version, it is possible to dub over the spoken thoughts, so that the actor/actress need not be seen to be moving their lips.

But occasionally, film directors have the character saying some of the words aloud. Which of Lady Macbeth's words in this scene could be said aloud?

9.7 Directing a Soliloquy

How might these words be spoken in a film?

Imagine you are a film director. Decide which words you will have spoken aloud by the actor and which ones dubbed over as 'thoughts'. Then discuss your conclusions with another student and see where your ideas differ.

Look at Macbeth's speech in Act II scene 1, lines 31-64.

Macbeth *(To servant)* Go bid thy mistress, when my drink is ready,
She strike upon the bell. Get thee to bed.

Exit (Servant)

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses,
Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. There's no such thing:
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's off'rings, and withered murder,
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives;
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

A bell rings

I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell. *Exit*