

BBC BITESIZE - MACBETH Episode 6

Carl: Hello, and welcome to the Bitesize English literature podcast. Now, you've clearly done something right because you made it here. If you wanna hear all the episodes in this podcast, make sure you download the BBC Sounds app.

Jean: And don't forget that whilst you're in the BBC Sounds app, there's loads of other things you can use to help you with your revision - full versions of some of the texts you might be studying, revision playlists and other Bitesize podcast series to help with different GCSE subjects.

Carl: I'm one of your hosts, Carl Anka.

Jean: And I'm Jean Menzies. And in this episode, we're taking a closer look at the dramatisation of Macbeth. So Shakespeare's plays were obviously written to be performed, not read, so that has an impact on the way the text is interpreted and dramatised. Shall we get straight into this?

EXTRACT

Third Witch: All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!

Carl: The best way I've heard to describe the difference between a novel and a play is that a novel is like a finished building. But a script for a play is more like the foundations. So for a play, the words are built on and developed by the director and the actors and then you can add in costumes, lighting, scenery, and loads more technical and artistic choices.

Jean: I love that analogy, it really works. And reading a book and watching a play are such different things. You tend to sit and read a novel on your own. But watching a play in a theatre is a shared experience with an audience, and an audience of different people all have different reactions and thoughts to what they're seeing. Those things you've just mentioned - costume, light, staging - all have a huge influence on how the audience reacts to the play.

Carl: I've seen many film adaptations of Macbeth. I would recommend Joe Macbeth, which is set in a kitchen and stars James McAvoy. I'd also recommend the film adaptation with Michael Fassbender in. That one is set pretty much like how Shakespeare wanted it to be set. So everyone's in Scotland. The witches are very otherworldly. It is shot as if Macbeth is broken by the amount of times he's gone to war. It makes a suggestion of how to become king a little bit more straightforward. There's three key areas to look at. When you're thinking about the dramatisation of Macbeth. There's your casting, there's performance, and then there's the staging. So let's begin this discussion by talking about the casting.

Jean: So casting is one of the first and potentially most important jobs a director has to do. Shakespeare gives very little information about how his characters should look. So directors have a lot

of freedom when casting their actors in Macbeth. It really does depend on how they interpret the different characters. And so much freedom must be a real dream for a director, I think.

Carl: When I was a bit younger I went to film school, and one of my teachers said that if you're going to make a film, if you want to be a film director one day, you should always try and do an adaptation of Macbeth. There's going to be loads of things to think about in terms of getting the right combination of actors together, because we need to believe that Lady Macbeth and Macbeth work together as a couple. You also need to understand Banquo and Macbeth are best friends who both fight together in King Duncan's army, so they need to be similar ages. And you also need to think that King Duncan might be an older character because he has at least one adult son in Malcolm.

Jean: That's true, although all the characters in Macbeth are open to some interpretation, and that seems to affect the portrayal of the witches the most. They are the very first people to appear on stage, so they set the tone for the whole play. Traditionally, they've been presented as sinister old women, but there's been a whole host of interpretations from directors who've taken on Macbeth: they've been three men, nuns, vampires, aliens and even three personalities in one body.

Carl: Remember that adaptation in the restaurant I keep telling you about? In there, the witches were played by three binmen.

Jean: Love it.

EXTRACT

First Witch: Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the 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' the shipman's card.

I will drain him dry as hay:
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his pent-house lid;
He shall live a man forbid:
Weary se'nnights nine times nine
Shall he dwindle, peak and pine

Carl: Directors aren't limited to three in the witches either. In one performance, there were 13 witches with the actors who played other parts also taking on the role of a witch to show how evil affects everyone in the play.

Jean: I love that interpretation. That's a really good one actually, I'd love to see that. Emphasising the evil throughout the characters is a clever move. Now let's talk about performance. Because once the casting choices are made, the way those characters are performed has an impact on the audience's understanding and reactions to the play.

EXTRACT

Macbeth: 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.

Jean: So this is one of the most well-known and memorable moments and lines from Macbeth. "Is this a dagger which I see before me." There's a lot of people who know that line, but have no idea of the story of Macbeth or the context of the line itself.

Carl: And actually, that line can be performed in a number of ways, particularly because it's a hallucination. And it's a moment in Macbeth that really allows for interpretation of what Macbeth the character is thinking. Shall we have a go?

Jean: Oh, is this a dagger which I see before me?

Carl: Is this a dagger? Which I see before me?

Jean: Is this a dagger I see before me?

Carl: Is this a dagger I see before me?

Jean: The American Macbeth.

Carl: Loads of different interpretations.

Jean: Watching a production of Macbeth can really help an audience to understand the characters better. Actors and directors have to know everything about the character, so they can know what motivates them, and why the character behaves the way they do. So they can convey that to the audience.

Carl: I mentioned earlier that I've seen a lot of different adaptations of Macbeth, and I've seen it set in a restaurant. I've seen it set between ganglands in 1930s Chicago. I've also seen more classic tellings of the story. And so much hangs on performance. Different actors deliver key lines differently, and they suggest something about a character or a theme that you haven't thought of before. So I once watched one where a certain actor Michael Fassbender delivered the line of "Is this a dagger which I see before me?" as a man who only knows warfare.

Jean: In contrast, the first ever time I saw Macbeth performed live was on a bouncy castle. It was at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and an alternative theatre troupe had decided to take Shakespeare's Scottish play to the bouncy castle stage and use bouncy or blow-up weapons and naturally the tone entirely shifted. It became this weirdly violent comedy.

Carl: Yeah, I think it's always good to see a few different productions which helps you make up your own mind about what you think Shakespeare is saying. It also shows you the genius of Shakespeare – it allows for stories and big ideas to become relatable for multiple audiences. I've seen Macbeth in the form of a cartoon before.

Jean: Then at the same time as working on the characters and performance the director will also begin to think about lighting, sound and costume to be added to the scene to accentuate the decisions they've made. Which means it probably makes sense to discuss the staging now.

EXTRACT

Macbeth: Thou canst not say I did it: never shake
Thy gory locks at me.

Carl: This is the moment at the banquet where Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost, and it's such an important decision for the directors of Macbeth as to whether or not to show Banquo's ghost on stage. I've seen a version of this where Macbeth is facing the audience and he's got Lady Macbeth to his left and he's got everyone else to his right. And Banquo appears behind him, and the audience can see it, and Macbeth turns around and sees it, but no one else turns around. I've also seen versions where Banquo just isn't there at all. And then you go, "Oh, Macbeth is truly losing it because nothing is there whatsoever".

Jean: Yeah, and that's the thing. No one ever sees Banquo in the room, aside from Macbeth, so the option for the director is to also have the ghosts not visible to the audience, like you mentioned, to heighten Macbeth's downfall as he shouts at nothing. Or to have the ghost visible to the audience to heighten the shock of the scene. I love the idea of allowing the audience to see both perspectives. There's a lot of decisions that directors have to make aren't there, across the whole of the play, not just these key moments like this one. It kind of becomes their play as much as it is Shakespeare's: lighting, set design, sound effects, costumes, props, they all build to create a certain style of production. Some performances stay close to the Shakespearean way of staging, with a standing audience and using open spaces in daylight. Whereas other performances use a more modernised staging, in large darkened seated rooms.

Carl: There's some similarities between the theatres in Shakespearean times and the purpose to entertain. But also there were some big differences from the audiences who would eat, drink and dance and talk during performances, to the physical aspect of open-air theatre, which was the norm. I've watched Macbeth in the Globe Theatre, which is a theatre reconstructed just like Shakespeare's original theatre which is in London. And once I was told to be quiet. I also watched Macbeth in the Globe Theatre and been told to get really, really involved and to make some noise. It all depends on who's staging it, what's going on, and what the actors are most comfortable with. That is the joy of

Macbeth. For a play that reveals the supernatural and has a lot of ghosts and spirits, effects are really limited in the early 1600s. Whereas now, you've got loads more sophisticated things. You can have a massive CGI Banquo pop up to Macbeth in a dream sequence, or you could have Macbeth see absolutely nothing and still go a bit spare. Directors today have a lot more options.

Jean: It's the same with sound and lighting to the sophistication of the technology available now is worlds away from Shakespeare's times, which really opens up the options to directors now. I wonder how Shakespeare would have reacted to see some of those special effects that we can now work with.

Carl: I would truly love to be in a position to make those decisions one day. I think it's a play where you can have so much freedom to interpret the text, that you can have loads of fun with it. And I think that's a point worth making when looking at Macbeth - staging can really affect interpretation. Thank you, listener, for joining us for Episode Six of the Bitesize English literature podcast all about the dramatisation of Macbeth. As you may have heard, we're pretty keen on it.

Jean: Big fans. There's still a lot more to discuss though and in Episode Seven we're going to be exploring the context around Macbeth - when it was written and first performed and the importance of that. You can find that and all the other episodes on BBC Sounds.