



HOUSTON
SHAKESPEARE
FESTIVAL

ONE ROLE, TWO ACTORS: Lady Macbeth
Lesson plans for ACT 1, SCENE 5

Be Careful What You Wish For: Fate and the Muscularity of Lady Macbeth

Curriculum Authors: Laura B. Turchi, Abbey Bachmann, and Cori Stevenson
Approximate timeline: 70 minutes – see sequence

TEKS (9th Grade)

E1.4 Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/Drama.

Students understand, make inferences and draw conclusions about the structure and elements of drama and provide evidence from text to support their understanding.

E1.25 Listening and Speaking/Speaking.

Students speak clearly and to the point, using the conventions of language. Students will continue to apply earlier standards with greater complexity. Students are expected to give presentations using informal, formal, and technical language effectively to meet the needs of audience, purpose, and occasion, employing eye contact, speaking rate (e.g., pauses for effect), volume, enunciation, purposeful gestures, and conventions of language to communicate ideas effectively

Overview (notes for the teacher)

One goal for this lesson (in addition to exploring Shakespeare’s text together) is for students to think about how an actor thinks about creating and performing a character. There are many intentional decisions that actors make about how to speak and gesture when they act a part. In this video, one focus is on the physical gestures that can suggest “muscularity” and how this emphasizes the power that Lady Macbeth has (or wants to have). You might want to show the performances of the arias once without sound, so that students can see how clearly the text and the movements are connected.

What is this scene about?

The speech is from Act 1 Scene 5 Macbeth. Prior to this, Lady Macbeth has received a letter from Macbeth that tells of his encounter with the weird sisters and their prophecy that he will be King (the audience has seen these events, and so we know that Macbeth is telling the truth, strange that it is, to his wife). The question is, what about the current King Duncan? As Lady Macbeth finishes reading the letter, a messenger brings word to her that Duncan – the current King – will be visiting the Macbeth castle this evening. Lady Macbeth immediately knows that this is a great opportunity, but she wonders if her husband could really kill a king. She looks for help from “spirits” to make it possible.

If you’re teaching the whole play

Sometimes productions of Macbeth create an opening scene or sequence that establishes the “situation” of the Macbeths, often in terms of childlessness. Emily Wold describes the opening of the production of the Arkansas Shakespeare Festival (video 3:22) where the audience first sees women in domestic settings – and then we see Macbeth’s army killing their husbands. These same women become the “witches” (the weird sisters) of the play. Students can discuss what this setting for the production would mean. For instance, are the prophecies of the weird sisters meant to convince Lord and Lady Macbeth to be ambitious? Do the weird sisters know what is going to happen from the very beginning? Or are they just making trouble?

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Both actors describe Lady Macbeth in this scene as feeling that the universe (the spiritual world, perhaps fate or another power) is on her side, is showing her signs (like the impending visit of King Duncan) that the prophecy that Macbeth will become king could come true. But Lady Macbeth does not wait: she makes things happen. The class could discuss whether impatience might be a tragic flaw.

The actors also discuss Lady Macbeth and portraying her as vulnerable. In this play, what are Lady Macbeth’s powers? What are her vulnerabilities? The class might discuss “who’s to blame” for the tragedy told by the play.

There are 13 different birds referenced in Macbeth. What might the raven croaking hoarsely on the battlements mean or symbolize in this scene?

If you’re teaching just this excerpt

Both actors describe this scene as a transformation of Lady Macbeth. They describe playing her with muscularity as a way that shows that Lady Macbeth dares to “play with the big boys.” Students can look at the text and wonder about what gives her the strength that she needs? Why does she want to be “unsexed” and be a mother whose breastmilk is bitter and evil instead of wholesome?

The performances (especially with Tracie Lane beginning at 12:17) suggest that Lady Macbeth the spirits that she has called down – are transforming her body. Students might discuss how these performances show what the desire to carry out evil seems to do to the human body.

Key Vocabulary

47 battlements – castle walls	55 gall – bile, or a bitter substance
48 tend on – pay attention to, care for	55 ministers – agents
52 compunctious visitings – worries or second-guesses	56 sightless – invisible
53 fell – evil or deadly	58 pall – cover (like a cloth over a coffin)

Additional information and ideas for teachers

Because this lesson is based on dramatic performance, this is a great opportunity to start a conversation – or even a collaboration – with a drama teacher.

Students will likely be tempted to say which actor they “like” or who they think is “better” at being Lady Macbeth. This is an important opportunity to help students support their opinions by looking carefully at the performance and the text. In the “mutual admiration society” section, the two actors model a process sometimes called a critique: they each describe very specific details in how the other actor is creating Lady Macbeth in the performance. Students can think about and use some of these same terms:

Gesture

Pace

Scansion

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Materials needed for this lesson: Scripts
Access to video

LESSON SEQUENCE

Part 1: whole class instruction 15 minutes

Students begin the session brainstorming about transformations. First, they consider the ones in nature: the caterpillar who becomes a butterfly, for instance. We don't usually think of caterpillars deciding or scheming to become butterflies. It's just what they do. In comic books and movies, many superhero characters have or gain powers that also change their physical shapes (From Superman to the Hulk). Often there are "origin stories" in movies that explain the first time, or the circumstances that led to the character gaining these powers. Sometimes it was the choice of the character (like Captain America), other times it's an event (Spiderman gets bit by a radioactive spider). In Hollywood versions, a character who gains superpowers often becomes a hero – or a terrible villain (like the Joker). Many novels and plays depict characters who choose to pursue what they want in life, and they gain the skills or powers that they need. Is it worth it? Are they "supposed" to achieve their dreams? Depending on the theme(s) of interest in the class, this can be a discussion of ambition, or destiny or fate, as a part of literature and specifically The Tragedy of Macbeth.

Teacher introduces the excerpt (students have individual copies or teacher projects the one-page text) – see context notes. This is a scene where Lady Macbeth is making an important choice about what she wants, and what she will do.

Teacher reads the text aloud while students follow along. Check if there are any words that students don't know, or any words they find strange or difficult to pronounce.

Part 2: individual writing 5 minutes

After the teacher has read the speech and students have asked questions they have about what words mean, etc. students should complete individual writing in their notebooks or on notecards.

What is this speech about? What are the most important words? What do we know about Lady Macbeth?

what she is thinking. What other ideas about this character seem powerful?

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Part 3: Students share ideas with shoulder partners.

Extension question: What are the words that show that Lady Macbeth is determined to get what she wants?

Part 4: whole class instruction

Watch video opening (5 minutes – see video timeline for details). Ask students what they hear/notice about the similarities and differences between the two stagings of the scene that the actors describe.

Watch the two actors discuss their ideas about what Lady Macbeth is up to (5:10-12:00 7 minutes) Ask students what they notice about these two actors and how they are thinking about this speech and their ideas about who Lady Macbeth is and what she is thinking. What other ideas about this character seem powerful?

Watch the performances (3 minutes); consider watching again without sound, to pay attention to the gestures and movements of the actors.

Students discuss the performances in pairs and add to their notes about Lady Macbeth's characterization.

Watch "mutual admiration society" (3 minutes).

Extension: what do the students notice about how the actors discuss each others' work?

Part 5: Back to the idea of transformation and Lady Macbeth

Continued whole class discussion, or a freewrite

What is different about Lady Macbeth after this speech?

Do students feel convinced that Lady Macbeth will get what she wants? Why or why not?

What have we learned about the craft of acting? Reflecting on other performances students have seen (movies, television, plays), what are some other techniques for depicting a transformation of a character (for good or for evil)

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VIDEO TIMELINE

ACTORS: Tracie Lane: Houston Shakespeare Festival 2015
Emily Wold: Arkansas Shakespeare Festival 2019

Comparing venues

- 00:36** Tracie Lane: Miller Outdoor Theater is a gigantic stage and remarkable playing space.
Emily Wold: Performance in Reynolds Performance Hall [U of Arkansas] The whole audience is on the stage (a very intimate space) – with the set. The audience is much closer (you have to watch out for those purses when you’re fighting).
- 2:00** Arkansas set design – Organic look to the stage, with rocks and moss, and centered around a very large staircase. She performed this particular speech at the top of the staircase, the highest point in the set, which makes the connection to the spiritual world (in the speech) compelling.
- 2:40** HSF – Because of the size of the stage and audience, used micro phones and big voices. Also big gestures, and playing to the back of the hill. As an actor, you have to give yourself permission to take up as much space as humanly possible. Even if that’s not part of normal experience (implicitly, especially for women). The production wants the people by the stage and the people back on the hill to have the same experience of the play.
- 3:22** **TITLE The setting; The concept**
- 3:25** Arkansas: Concept of “a relational narrative”
Inserted an opening scene with no text showing women (ultimately they become the witches) who are in domestic scenes with their husbands - and who then see Macbeth’s armies in battle killing their husbands.
- 3:54** HSF - Play roughly set in its historical context. An environment to feel like medieval Scotland.
- 4:06** Arkansas - Veered away from the “otherworldliness” of the witches— focused on relationships and why we do what we do. More psychological narrative than otherworldly – and unpacked how relationships drove the characters’ action (good or bad).

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4:28 HSF - We were in period clothing and there were tall platforms and stony staircases and a big heavy banquet table.

4:44 There were props that for Miller were all about size – crowns and goblets and daggers all had to “have some heft” so they wouldn’t disappear in that space. The feeling of the set also helped the sense of the supernatural – which is what motivates Lady M.

5:07 **TITLE The Aria: what launches it, what inspires Lady Macbeth to say this?**

5:10 HSF Tracie Lane - This aria has one of the “clearest launches” in the canon which is extraordinarily helpful for the actor.

5:16 “so I appear in the play for the first time” and I receive a letter from my husband. “ambition is bubbling” – but one problem: Macbeth’s not up to it (murder).

5:30 “So I call on the metaphysical – which appears to be on my side – and I speak to him directly.” But then describes calling Macbeth home so that she can “work on him” and get rid of the obstacles between him and the crown.

[Note 1st person]

5:46 Emily Wold – [The scene is] this kind of spiral, this tornado, calling the spiritual world, calling on the fates. Textually speaking, the gentleman’s news that he brings (she’s already got the letter) is what really pushes things further – The King is coming tonight!

Textually speaking, that what launches everything for Lady M in this aria.

[Note 3rd person]

6:15 Tracie Lane “So I realize I’m getting what I’ve asked for”
“This portal between me and the supernatural is open, so I have no choice, but in this moment, I go further, and [I want to] somehow be transformed, so I might be man enough for us both.”

6:38 I was working in our production with some imaginative cues, some physiological and visual cues, and auditory experiences that were helping me move from one moment to the next”

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- 6:54** Emily Wold What fed me in those moments was the idea of a legacy (no child for the Macbeths) They want to “give each other a legacy” which in this historical time, is a child.
- “Textually that’s what we know about this couple”
- That desperation is what drove a lot of the production “with the relational heart” that we were working with in particular.
- “[Macbeths] wanting to give [each other] something beyond this [relationship], something that lasts forever.”
- 8:12** The news of Duncan, and how quickly his arrival happens, is what kicks everything into high gear. Lady M sees a shortcut to what she wants. This is the sign to her that “fate is on her side.” She is operating on “the grand scale of spirits, and fate, and [the sense that] this is what is meant to be.”
- 8:49** **TITLE The big news; the big discovery**
- 8:49** Emily Wold: Lady M is now “playing with the big boys” she has called down fate, she’s called down metaphysical aid, she’s called down time and destiny. She reads the letter and she reads the signs – the universe (and all) coming into alignment with what she perceives as the right path.
- 9:35** Tracie Lane: The discoveries that send Lady M on her trajectory: First, “That I am totally in alignment with the supernatural world.” This prophecy is inevitable, and that is empowering. She has been so transformed – at her request – “That I am capable of killing Duncan by myself”
- 10:05** Emily Wold: There’s a “leveling up” in terms of her wants and desires.
- 10:27** “Give the whole history of humans striving for what they want, and then the feeling that – we have sought out that feeling that maybe the universe, that divinity, that god, that spiritual whatever, is also striving with us on that same path, and that power at that intersection . A thrilling feeling.”
- But also: She’s trying to steer a force of that grandeur to what she wants.
- That informs her choices through the rest of the play.

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11:17 Including her choice to “unsex herself” to give up the dreams that she had before. Her womanhood, the primary source of value that she brought to this culture.

They both [the Macbeths] try to take those things in hand (steer fate, steer destiny) this, to get a “legacy” – and to watch it fail is to see the tragedy of the play.

To watch them try to outpace fate is a fascinating journey.

12:07 **TITLE The aria**

GESTURES – maybe listen to it once without the sound.

12:17 Tracie Lane: What she calls down she feels as transforming her body.

She is reacting to something, looking up, reaching for something, and in grabbing it, is shocked, and maybe infused.

13:31 Emily Wold: Also a prayer to the spirits. She too, seeing things, “praying” to the spirits she’s addressing.

Looks more scared? Than transformed? Bargaining and then in the end, arms outstretched: COME

14:43 **TITLE Mutual Admiration Society**

Tracie Lane & Emily Wold

Emily Wold: “This is what’s so magical about what we do”

Tracie Lane: There are particular paths to productions, but the play is so much more than what’s on the page, and it doesn’t happen that often that we get to see two actors dig into the same piece of text.

Emily Wold: The play is so muscular, so tight, so nonstop from beginning to end – and reflected in your work –

She is the engine of this play, And I loved seeing your pacing: it moves like a freight train, and moved you to the place of action, the place of discovery, the moment of decision.

I can just imagine how watching the rest of the play just kind of tumble out. It would happen so naturally, with that speech as the impetus for the entire action.

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Mutual Admiration Society continued

- 16:08** Tracie Lane: This [Emily Wold's] Lady M desperately needs these spirits – she cannot do this without them.
That's really helpful – I might steal a little of that the next time.
It's early in the play, and it gives us somewhere to go. I appreciated seeing her vulnerability, her fragility. I think about the kind of woman this is, and we know where she ends up, and the Lady M who "cracks" in the end, who really can't manage this after all, is present from the very beginning.
"I'll steal some of that the next time I work on this"
- 16:55** Emily Wold: Even though you and I come from the same training program, playing the same role, with the same words, our adaptations of Lady Macbeth and her place in this story at this moment are so different, and I find that totally thrilling.
- 17:20** Tracie Lane: I really appreciated the small technical choices that you made that were different from mine, in terms of the scansion and emphasis. And even word choice: I think you said excess, or access, [line 50] as opposed to AC-cess, and that changes the meaning of the line.
Come you ... spirits. I loved that, and I thought,
- 17:53** "we bring our own instruments, and intellects, and we make choices, and those choices are individual, and valid."
- 18:00** Emily Wold: I loved watching your gestural life, the sweeping gestures: it was so easy for me to imagine them happening in this huge space [Miller] to which you had to play, and I loved watching how that informed the muscularity of your speech, of this aria.

Mutual thanks and appreciation:

- 18:22** Emily Wold I have made notes about what to steal.
- 18:39** final professional shots of both actors.

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