

Curriculum subject: English Literature

Key Stage: 5

Author / Text: William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*

Theme: Lady Macbeth

Rationale

This varied series of activities is designed to encourage learners to exercise independence of thought when exploring the presentation of Lady Macbeth throughout the play. Students are encouraged to explore the character in light of early modern ideas of marriage, mental illness, motherhood and marriage. The tasks draw learners' attention to the varied ways in which Lady Macbeth's language and actions can be interpreted, aiming to broaden the simplistic reading of the character as villainous.

Content

Literary and historical sources from the site:

- [First English book on hysteria \(1603\)](#)
- [Seneca His Ten Tragedies \(1581\)](#)
- [King James VI and I's *Demonology* \(1597\)](#)
- [Portrait of Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth by George Henry Harlow \(1814\)](#)

Recommend reading (short articles):

- ['Unsex me here', Lady Macbeth's 'Hell Broth': Sandra M Gilbert](#)
- [Manhood and the 'milk of human kindness' in *Macbeth*: Kiernan Ryan](#)

External links:

- [Summary of Seneca's *Medea*](#)

Key questions

- What ambiguities are presented by Lady Macbeth's characterization?
- How does Lady Macbeth confirm or challenge early modern ideas about marriage, motherhood, mental illness and magic?
- How useful is it to consider Lady Macbeth as responsible for the text's tragic conclusions?

Activities

- 1) [The first English book on hysteria: Jorden's *The Suffocation of the Mother* \(1603\):](#)

Conversational carousels

As a starter, present your class with notes from Jordan's work on hysteria and ask them to read and annotate these for points they find striking. Write down each of the following statements on three large sheets of paper and place these on three tables around the classroom:

"Though Jordan suggests that the absence of a husband makes virgins or widowed women especially vulnerable to mental ill health, marriage seems to be the principal source of Lady Macbeth's instability."

"Through his characterization of Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare seems most interested in exploring disease metaphorically rather than literally."

"Jordan suggests that the inherent passivity of women is one of the reasons for their medical problems. But considering Lady Macbeth as inherently passive is deeply problematic."

Ask students to write their immediate responses to each statement on a Post-it note and to stick this to the appropriate sheet.

On their Post-it notes, students might consider why, and to what extent, they agree/disagree with the view offered. Might they like to refine the view or highlight ambiguities presented by the statement?

Once students have stuck Post-it notes around all three statements, ask students to return to the sheets and then to choose a Post-it note with a view that they find interesting written on it, preferably written by another member of the class!

Students should then try to develop the idea on the Post-it note by writing a full paragraph that supports this view and corroborates it by using at least five quotations or references to the text and the notes on Jordan's work. Alternatively, in their paragraph, students can use evidence from the play and from Jordan's work to challenge the Post-it note comment.

2) [Seneca His Ten Tragedies, 1581](#): Think, pair, share

Sit students in groups of four. Present students with the source, *Seneca His Ten Tragedies* and [a summary of Seneca's Medea](#), asking them to make connections between Medea and Lady Macbeth. Encourage students to concentrate on the references to child killing.

Making detailed reference to the text and their contextual research, students should now individually write short responses to the following questions:

- What similarities and differences are there between the ways Shakespeare and Seneca use the motif of infanticide within their texts?
- Is the social status of Medea and Lady Macbeth significant when considering their infanticide/imagined infanticide?
- Why might a Jacobean audience find Lady Macbeth's imagined murdering of her children especially disturbing?

- Though Lady Macbeth's imagined murdering of her children might make some audiences question her 'maternal instinct', how *do* we see her mothering in the play?

Students should then compare their ideas with the person sitting closest to them, making careful notes about points of difference between their own thoughts and their partner's.

They can then open up their discussion with the other pair on the table, again making careful notes of the other pair's opinions.

After 15 minutes of discussion in fours, the teacher should ask individuals to return to their notes and identify the most interesting and exciting idea in their notes that they would like to share with the rest of the class.

- 3) The Garrick Club, [*Portrait of Sarah Siddons as Lady Macbeth*](#) by George Henry Harlow (1814): Creative task

Provide students with an A3 sheet of paper. On the left side of this sheet there should be an A4 colour photocopy of Harlow's portrait. Students should annotate the image, justifying the choices made by the costume designer by making notes and writing down quotations from text around the painting that explain why it is appropriate that Lady Macbeth is dressed in this way.

On the blank, right-hand side of the A3 sheet, invite students to draw their own version of Lady Macbeth's costume, being as inventive as they can and annotating their design choices in the same way that they did on the Harlow painting.

Exhibit the students' illustrations on the classroom wall. Through discussion, the teacher might like to draw attention to some of the more interesting connections between material from the text and images that the students have made.

- 4) [*King James VI & I's Demonology \(1597\)*](#): Debate

At home, in preparation for the lesson, students will need to access the digitised version of *Demonology*. They could focus on reading and summarising the Second Book, Chapter 5 (pp. 42–49).

In the lesson, split the class into two halves. Sit one half of the class on one side of the room and the other half of the class opposite them.

Using their personal responses, their reading of the text and their preparatory notes on *Demonology* to support their arguments, ask one half of the class to support and one to counter the following statement:

"Clearly, Lady Macbeth is the fourth 'weyward sister'."

Give the students large sheets of sugar paper on which to note down their points and quotations. They should spend 30 minutes compiling this range of ideas in preparation for a whole class debate.

After 25 minutes, the teacher might like to end these discussions and designate one student as a scribe who will note down each group's ideas on the whiteboard in bullet points. This can then be emailed to students.

The teacher should chair the debate, or could ask a student to take up this role.

For homework, students could use and expand on the whiteboard notes from the debate to create an essay plan for a balanced essay in response to the statement about Lady Macbeth. Students should use the conclusion of this essay to assert their own personal point of view.

Extension activities

- The Malcontent: Ask students to research definitions of the term 'malcontent' and to record these definitions. They should make detailed reference to the text to help answer the following discussion question: How useful is it to consider Lady Macbeth as a malcontent?
- Close linguistic study: Split the class into three groups: one group needs to focus on imperatives, one on questions and one on declaratives. Selecting pertinent quotations, each group needs to explore how Lady Macbeth's use of their assigned sentence type changes or develops from her first appearance on the stage to her last and to suggest what these developments might tell us about her character arc throughout the text.
- Directorial challenge: Show your class the opening scenes of Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015), up until the end of the first funeral. Put students into pairs for a role-playing exercise. In each pair, one learner needs to be the director of the film. The other should take on the part of the screenplay writer. The director is uncertain about opening the film with the burial of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's child given that it is a fairly significant departure from the original text. The screenplay writer is much more enthusiastic. The screenplay writer is convinced that this will be a powerful way to begin the production and enriches Lady Macbeth's characterization. Three options for the exercise:
 - Drawing on detailed examples from the text, each learner needs to carefully prepare a range of arguments justifying their assigned point of view, before sharing thoughts with their partner. This can eventually be opened up into a whole class discussion.
 - To turn this into a written exercise, rather than engaging in spoken debate, the pairs could present their differing perspectives as an extended email exchange between the director and screenplay writer.
 - Similarly, the director and screenplay writer could debate the significance and symbolism of casting Marion Cotillard – an actress with a distinctly French accent in a film peopled with English and Scottish actors – in the role of Lady Macbeth. The director could be keen on Cotillard whereas the screenplay writer could have reservations about this choice.
- Creative Writing: As a recap or starter activity, ask the class to read/perform Act 5, Scene 1. Ask learners to imagine that they are Lady Macbeth. They are to write the diary entry that she composes just before she goes to bed. In the entry, students might concentrate on:
 - Lady Macbeth's reflections on her marriage/Macbeth's ascent to power
 - Lady Macbeth's isolation

- Lady Macbeth's femininity/gender identity
- Lady Macbeth's fears about divine punishment
- Using linguistic devices to demonstrate Lady Macbeth's troubled state of mind.