

# MACBETH | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Shakespeare's language can seem scary, but give it a try! *Go at your own pace, and have fun!*



SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S  
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

Macbeth is coming home from a big victory in battle, when he meets... **THREE WITCHES!** They get right to the point and tell him that two things are going to happen: he'll get a nice promotion, and he'll become *the king!* Macbeth has all sorts of questions, but **\*POOF!\*** they vanish. Next thing that happens, a messenger comes to tell Macbeth he's been promoted. The witches were right! Macbeth tells his wife what's up, and they decide he's got to kill Duncan, the king. But in a moment alone, he speaks directly to the audience...

**Hint: the core of this speech isn't the violent act Macbeth is contemplating. It's his struggle to make a difficult decision—to choose between right and wrong. More on the second page about that!**

## The Shakespeare

### MACBETH

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly. If th' assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
With his surcease, success: that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and the end-all, here,  
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases,  
We still have judgement here, that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return  
To plague th' inventor. This even-handed justice  
Commends th' ingreience of our poisoned chalice  
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:  
First, as I am his kinsman, and his subject,  
Strong both against the deed. Then, as his host,  
Who should against his murderer shut the door,  
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan  
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against  
The deep damnation of his taking off;  
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'er-leaps itself,  
And falls on th' other.

## The Translation

### MACBETH

If this business would really be finished when I did the deed, then it would be best to get it over with quickly. If the assassination of the king could work like a net, sweeping up everything and preventing any consequences, then the murder would be the be-all and end-all of the whole affair, and I would gladly put my soul and the afterlife at risk to do it. But for crimes like these there are still punishments in this world. By committing violent crimes we only teach other people to commit violence, and the violence of our students will come back to plague us teachers. Justice, being equal to everyone, forces us to drink from the poisoned cup that we serve to others. The king trusts me in two ways. First of all, I am his kinsman and his subject, so I should always try to protect him. Second, I am his host, so I should be closing the door in his murderer's face, not trying to murder him myself. Besides, Duncan has been such a humble leader, so free of corruption, that his virtuous legacy will speak for him when he dies, as if angels were playing trumpets against the injustice of his murder. Pity, like an innocent newborn baby, will ride the wind with winged angels on invisible horses through the air to spread news of the horrible deed to everyone everywhere. People will shed a flood of tears that will drown the wind like a horrible downpour of rain. I can't spur myself to action. The only thing motivating me is ambition, which makes people rush ahead of themselves toward disaster.

**Macbeth comes up with lots of arguments against committing his crime.**

- What are those arguments?
- Are some of them more persuasive to you?
- What are they about? Duty? Honor? Fear of punishment? Morals? Or what?

## the be-all and the end-all

Shakespeare probably invented this phrase, which has become common.

- Have you heard that phrase used?
- What does it mean now?
- Does it mean the same thing in *Macbeth*?

**What does it mean to be the "be-all"?  
What does it mean to be the "end-all"?**

This guy gets awfully poetic when he's arguing with himself. There are some great images:

- He'd just do it "if the assassination could trammel up the consequence."
- We teach "bloody instructions" that get us in the end.
- Committing the crime is a "poisoned chalice."
- The king's good qualities will "plead like angels."
- There's a crazy one about pity being a baby riding on "sightless horses" that can also fly, or whatever.
- A storm where "tears shall drown the wind."
- Macbeth's "intent" is a horse, but he doesn't have "spurs."

They just don't work the same way in the translation. Read them over carefully. Does one of these images really speak to you? Why? (If you don't want to explain it, then draw or write about it!)



## SHAKESPEARE IN PRISON

DETROIT PUBLIC THEATRE'S  
SIGNATURE COMMUNITY PROGRAM

# MACBETH | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

You can respond to these in any way you choose:

Write

Draw

ACT IT OUT

Talk about it

THINK ABOUT IT

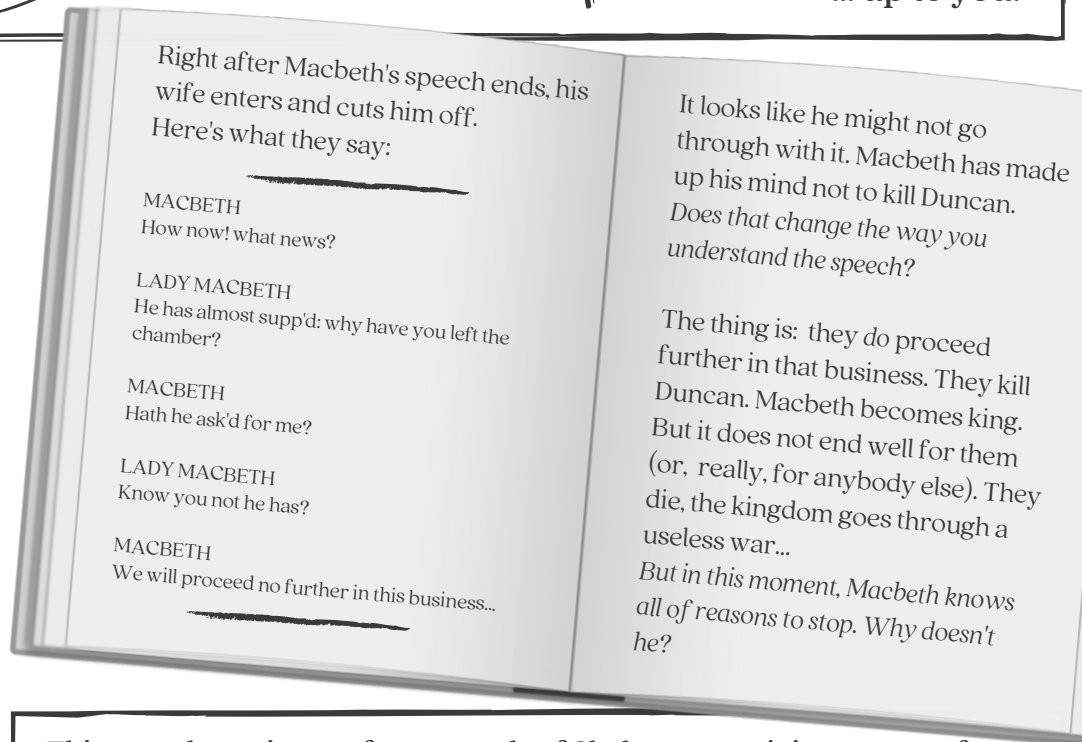
... up to you!

Macbeth is experiencing something very human: he is struggling to make a decision about whether to do something that he *knows* isn't right.

Actors are always looking for that "as if": something in their own experience that helps them see things from the character's point of view, even if they haven't had the exact same experience—and even if they don't agree with their choices.

Find an "as if" and put yourself in Macbeth's shoes. Now that you're there, what do you think about these questions?

- He's going through his thought process out loud with the audience. What's his objective—what does he want from them?
- Do you think his mind is already made up? If so, why does he continue to struggle with the decision?
- Can you identify exactly what is getting in his way? Dig into the language. You'll probably end up with a bit of a list.
- Take a hard look at those last few lines. What "spur" could "prick the sides of [his] intent" if he doesn't really want to do "the horrid deed?"



**This monologue is a perfect example of Shakespeare giving us tons of information about the character, just with the language. Let's explore that a bit.**

Try reading the monologue aloud very quickly. It's tough, right? The language is probably tripping you up quite a bit.

Now slow it down and pay attention to how the language demands to be spoken. Where do you *need* to take a breath before you can comfortably move on to the next word?

One example is in Macbeth's description of Duncan. There is no natural way to go from "meek" to "hath" without taking a breath—and that forces a pause. Why? Where else does Shakespeare help the actor out this way? And what does it mean about Macbeth's state of mind?

Punctuation in the text is often very useful for the actor, but now that you've explored the mechanics of speaking the language... do you *need* all of it? Or do the words themselves do the work? (There isn't one right answer!)



*Can you visualize what's going on in Macbeth's mind?  
What does it look like? What does it sound like?*