

Macbeth: Scene in focus

This activity uses images collected by the royal family to explore *Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 1.

Extract: *Macbeth*, Act 5, sc. 1

Enter Lady Macbeth with a taper

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 is 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. Oh, oh, oh!

PART 1: Visualising the scene

Read the extract above. Discuss/ write down:

How many performers are involved? [3: two grouped together, Lady M separated from them]

Where does the scene take place? Inside or outside? Is it a safe place? What time of day/ night?

[Lots of possible answers; the important thing to elicit is that it's a place that Lady M shouldn't be: i.e. the scene relies on the fact that she is sleepwalking and has strayed outside her private space where she can be overheard and may be in danger—a few scenes later she dies, possibly by suicide or an accident while sleepwalking]

If you were staging this scene, how would you indicate this setting to the audience? [Answers may refer to scenery or to acting/blocking choices]

If you were staging this scene, which props would you use?

[The central one is a 'taper' or 'light' mentioned in the first lines and stage direction. Discuss: what is 'a taper'? are there other kinds of light that would be more appropriate depending on the setting, i.e. a lantern/ electric torch? What limits does this prop place on the actor playing Lady Macbeth? What can she do with it? What does the light tell the audience?—that it's nighttime/ that Lady Macbeth has become afraid of the dark]

What kind of costumes would you use? [any answer that signals that Lady M is out of place—i.e. she's wearing her nightgown/ she's not dressed right for the location. Does the fact that she's in nightclothes make it more difficult to show the class difference between Lady M and the gentleman? How does the doctor's costume signal his role as a professional, and therefore signal that Lady M's household are worried about her?]

PART 2: Lady Macbeth in art

Look at these images of actors playing Lady Macbeth.

1. Miss Edmiston



2. Sarah Bartley



3. Ellen Kean



4. Mrs Yates



What do the images tell us about how the play was performed?

Discuss in groups:

- How does the costume show that she is a woman of high status?
- Does the costume change the shape of the actor's body? What effect does this have?
- What can we see of the actors' gestures and facial expressions?
- Decide which of these pictures looks the most powerful, the most vulnerable, and the most frightening.

Do any of these pictures fit with the Lady Macbeth we imagined for the extract above?

How are they similar/ different?

What kind of change does Lady Macbeth go through in the play?

Look at these representations of the 'sleepwalking' scene.

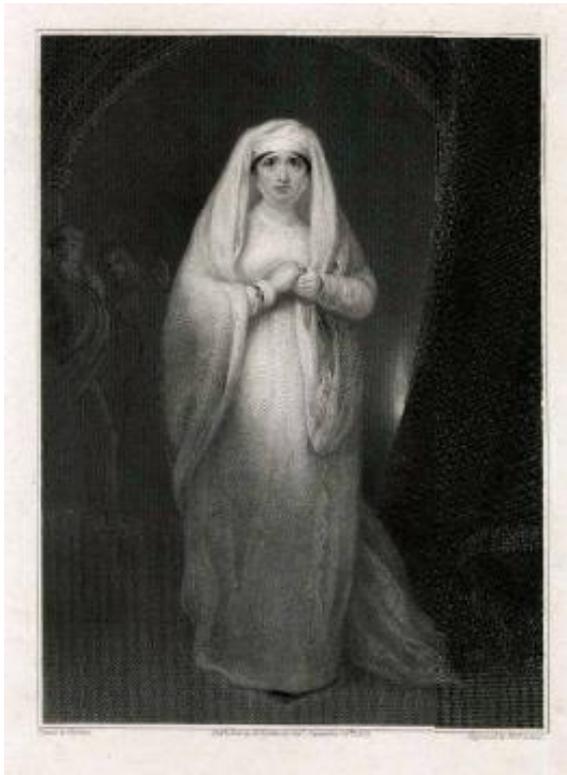
1. Cromwell House tableaux



2. Ellen Kean in the Rubens Room



3. Sarah Siddons #1



4. Sarah Siddons #2



Discuss in groups:

Do these images meet the criteria discussed in **Part 1**?

How can we tell that Lady Macbeth is sleepwalking/ out of place?

Can we tell that she is a woman of high status?

How do the images show that this is a night-time scene?

How do the images create atmosphere?

[BONUS] Compare: Ellen Kean.

These images belong to the same production. What information do these images give us? Is the context of the performance surprising?



Extension: search online for images of Lady Macbeth from modern performances. How have representations of this character changed since the 18th and 19th centuries?