



Teaching Shakespeare's Greatest Plays & Sonnets

with Dr. Joshua Avery

Lecture 3: Macbeth

Outline:

Macbeth

- Act I, Scene II
 - Macbeth's violent defense of his king and his country is associated with virtue.
 - Macbeth is praised (called brave).
 - What is the argument for why violence could ever be virtuous? Killing and violence is not the same thing as virtue, even if it seems necessary.
 - Macbeth was disdainful of fortune. He shows contempt for fortune.
 - Macbeth is a good Machiavellian.
 - The crucifixion of Christ is being invoked. Macbeth killing in defense of Scotland is likened to the crucifixion of Christ.
 - All soldiers are risking their lives for their country.
 - Some kinds of violence are associated properly with virtue. It is not just about killing others, but also a willingness to be killed.
- Act I, Scene III
 - In Scene II there is a vision of violence that is virtuous and even sacrificial.
 - In Scene III there is another image of violence that is smacking of honor in the egoistic sense.
 - Something is presented and then a counterpoint is presented.
 - When you are talking about violence does the analogy of Christ break down eventually? Let the students see that these are the problems being presented to us.
 - Toward the end of Scene III: We get a stirring insight into Macbeth's soul. He wants the crown. He wants it without being evil.
 - Discussion question: Does he want the crown? Force the student's to find the distinction.
 - What if you can't have it both ways, then what?
 - How do I explain the division going on inside me? I am in a state of mystery, confusion, interior contradiction. This is an early modern thought.
- Act I, Scene V
 - One of Lady Macbeth's most famous monologues: This passage tends to be badly read.



- What feminism means to us today is alien to Shakespeare's context.
- What does Lady Macbeth actually mean? She is asking for her female nature to be altered. She is expressing contempt not for a gender norm, but she is questioning nature itself. Is there a nature here which could not be overcome?
- Lady Macbeth loves power, and her interpretation of femininity is that is powerless. That's Lady Macbeth's reading.
- Good feminism is good because it helps to make culture more just.
- Act I, Scene VII
 - Macbeth makes an argument for why it is evil to do what he is being tempted to do.
 - Kinsmen, subject, host. At the bottom of the inferno these are the worst of the damned in hell.
 - This is a deep application of the intellect in order to accomplish something evil.
 - These layers of trust are what allow society to work.
 - Invite students to analyze the debate between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. These transhumanist ideals are beginning in the early modern period.
 - Lady Macbeth ambitions go way beyond social conventions.
 - She is not opposing custom, she is saying that she is sovereign.
- Act II, Scene II
 - Lady Macbeth says there is a kind of instinct of fear, but it is something you outgrow.
- Act II, Scene III
 - The argument of mental reservation said to answer the question in a way that can be read as what your interrogator wants to hear, but in your mind there is another and legitimate possibility in your words.
 - Equivocation runs through the play. The witch's prophecies all equivocate, even when telling the truth, they are lying.
 - Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have a clever plan to put the blame on the servants.
 - Will replaces reason as a reference point. The intensity of the passion overrides the obligation to behave according to what one knows is right. This is a very Romantic idea.
- Act II, Scene IV
 - Have the students consider the meaning of the omens.
 - The students may come to realize the idea of Natural Law as mediator between the human and the divine.
 - This is not exactly that God is removed, but that nature is disrupted.
- Act III, Scene II
 - One of the interesting aspects of this scene is Macbeth's intense fear and anxiety.



- Macbeth wants things to be covered over. He doesn't want the evil to be too visible. Macbeth is bothered by it. He is training himself to be able to successfully cover it over.
- Act III, Scene IV
 - Macbeth is retelling some relatively more barbaric history of Scotland (pagan world where revenge killing was normal).
 - What is happening? This is not just violence, there is something metaphysical happening that is more terrifying than the barbarism of the past.
 - There is a step we do not take. The physical terror has nothing on the metaphysical terror. What is the distinction he is drawing?
 - Why is metaphysical terror a thousand times more terrifying than physical terror? The other-worldly fear feels different.
 - The conscience is the terror. What kind of ethic is that? This is revenge ethic. This is a pagan/pre-Christian revenge ethic.
 - If students have read the Nicomachean ethics (Aristotle), there is a point at which you have free will. There is a point at which you can lose or lessen that free will (weakened to a point of inefficacy).
- Act IV, Scene I
 - Macbeth makes a statement that he is going to eliminate rational activity. I affirm the loss of my free will.
 - Why is it that humans can act freely? This is because of reason (Aristotle). One could compare this to an animal or a machine.
- Act IV, Scene II
 - Have the students take note of the son. Whatever is considered to be right and wrong, it is just a matter of will anyway.
 - The son is sufficiently surrounded by corruption that he understands this possibly reading. The son is encouraged into a cynical position on things.
- Act IV, Scene III
 - The students need to know the point of Malcolm's test of Macduff. What is it that Malcolm wants to know? Is Macduff loyal to a person, or is Macduff loyal to Scotland.
 - Macduff passes the test.
 - What is Macduff's motive? One is loyal to the strong man because one wants to be in the orbit of power.
 - Is Malcolm's test a lie? Is it a good lie? When parents deceive their children for a moral purpose, what is the meaning of that? How does this associate with Machiavelli?
 - Malcolm is practical and to the point. Macduff is saying that it is not weakening me, I will dispute it like a man. Let me grieve for a moment.
 - This draws us back to the fallacy of Lady Macbeth's pride and complete insensibility as a kind of power.
- Act V, Scene I



- When Duncan is murdered and the blood is pouring out, she couldn't avoid that it was a human being.
- The doctor says this disease is beyond my practice.
- "God forgive us all." This is a statement of humility.
- Shakespeare presents the horrors of the radical extermination of moral transcendentals. What does that lead to? He also points out the manipulation of morality.
- Does Macbeth show any nobility in the final scenes? What is courage? What is necessary for us to call something courage? Does Macbeth have an alternative? Does there have to be a good end of us to call it courage?
- There is an overriding sensation that everything is scripted. Did Macbeth chose?
 - Know the irony of opening scene. Fortune is a horror, she is not loyal, and you have to take her in hand. His destiny is in charge of him.
 - It begins with choices, and it ends with no more choices.
 - It is all about choice, but how choices may or may not lead to other choices.
- Nature itself comes in and defeats Macbeth. Nature stands up against tyranny.
- The play ends optimistically despite being a tragedy.