

The activities in this pack are inspired by the rehearsal room process and have been created around Michael Boyd's 2011 production of *Macbeth*. The activities can work in a classroom (or hall or studio space), either as stand-alone practical approaches to the text or as supporting activities for students seeing the production. They have been designed with KS3 and KS4 students in mind, but can be adapted for other age groups. More activities on *Macbeth* are available in *The RSC Shakespeare Toolkit for Teachers*, available online in the [RSC Shop](#)

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These symbols are used throughout the pack:



READ - contextual notes from the rehearsal room



ACTIVITY – Get on your feet for a classroom activity



WATCH - video

## ABOUT RSC EDUCATION

We want children and young people to enjoy the challenge of Shakespeare and achieve more as a result of connecting with his work. Central to our education work is our manifesto for Shakespeare in schools; Stand up for Shakespeare. We know that children and young people can experience Shakespeare in ways that excite, engage and inspire them. We believe that young people get the most out of Shakespeare when they:

- Do Shakespeare on their feet – exploring the plays actively as actors do
- See it Live – participate as members of a live audience
- Start it Earlier – work on the plays from a younger age

As an organisation, the RSC has four values. In all our work, whether in staging our productions or in our education work with teachers and young people, we aim to be:

- Collaborative – fostering an inclusive environment
- Ambitious – committing to excellence and taking risks to achieve this
- Inquiring – being thoughtful, inquiring and respectful about the world around us
- Engaging – creating a stimulating dialogue through our work

We also believe in the power of ensemble; a way of working together in both the rehearsal room and across the company enabling everyone's ideas and voices to be heard. Artistic Director, Michael Boyd encapsulates this vision for ensemble in his rehearsal room where actors are encouraged to try out different interpretations of scenes before deciding together on what will be presented to an audience in the final performance.

## Macbeth's ambition



In order to fully understand Macbeth's ambition, in early rehearsals, the cast spent some time researching the real Macbeth who was an 11th century Scottish king.

Macbeth was born around 1005. His father was a 'mormaer' which means 'earl'. In August 1040, he killed the ruling king, Duncan I, in battle near Elgin, Morayshire. Macbeth became king. His marriage to Kenneth III's granddaughter Gruoch strengthened his claim to the throne. In 1045, Macbeth defeated and killed Duncan I's father Crinan at Dunkel.

In the research, the cast found that the real Macbeth had a grandfather that was supposedly meant to be king but never got to the throne. This piece of historical evidence helped the actor playing Macbeth find another motivation for his character's ambition. The real Macbeth desired power because he felt it was his birthright.

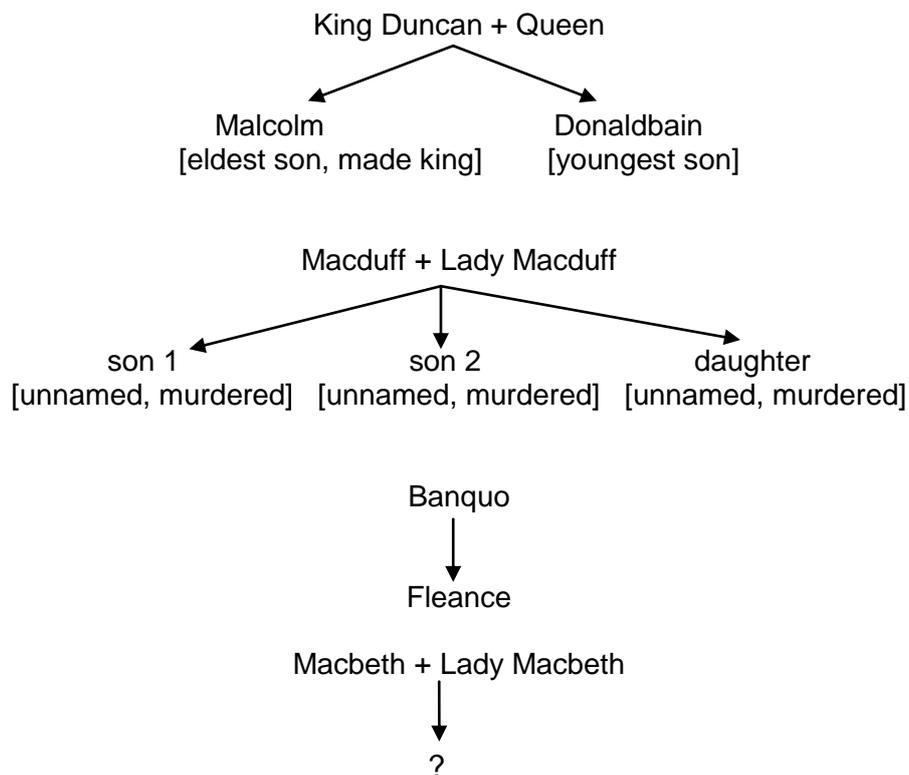
One focus in the rehearsal room was around the legacy of children and the complex relationships between fathers and sons. In the activities which follow, we use practical approaches for exploring the following key father and son relationships in the play:

- **Malcolm** who is made heir to the throne by his father King **Duncan**
- **Macduff** and his struggle between his role as a father and a soldier
- **Banquo** and his relationship with **Fleance**
- **Macbeth** and **Lady Macbeth's** childlessness

Below are find family trees to illustrate the father and son relationships.

The play does not tell us if Duncan and Banquo have wives or the names or number of Macduff's children.

In Michael Boyd's production of *Macbeth*, three children are cast as Macduff's children who are illustrated on these family trees here:



I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me  
(Act 1, Scene 7)

## Making a start: Notes from rehearsals



In rehearsals, each time we came to a scene where the focus was around a father and son relationship, there was a good deal of discussion about how the child takes on the responsibilities of their father even if they don't choose it. An example is when Malcolm becomes heir to the throne much sooner than he could have imagined.



### ACTIVITY: Starting with sonnets

A good starting point for this theme is exploring Shakespeare's second sonnet which is concerned with the importance of procreation. It's written to a young man urging him to marry and have children in order to immortalise his beauty and spirit by passing it to the next generation. Shakespeare lost a son to the black plague and through these sonnets and some of his plays he explores the theme of the effects of losing a son on a father.

- Ask the group to stand in a circle and read the sonnet shown on the next page with each student in turn reading up to a punctuation mark so that everyone has an opportunity to say part of the sonnet.
- Talk though any difficult words or phrases.
- Ask the students to get into pairs and give each pair a line.
- Ask the students to decide on two strong images in their line of text and to find a way of embodying those words as a frozen image.
- Once the pairs have created their line, the group reforms the circle.
- Each pair in turn shows their images and line of text until the whole sonnet is built up through shared images.

### Reflection

- What do you notice about the images that people have chosen to create?
- Are there any connections or differences between the choices in the images?
- What do you think Shakespeare is trying to say about children and parenthood in this sonnet?

## Shakespeare's Sonnet 2

When forty winters shall besiege thy brow,  
And dig deep trenches in thy beauty's field,  
Thy youth's proud livery, so gazed on now,  
Will be a tatter'd weed, of small worth held:  
Then being ask'd where all thy beauty lies,  
Where all the treasure of thy lusty days,  
To say, within thine own deep-sunken eyes,  
Were an all-eating shame and thriftless praise.  
How much more praise deserved thy beauty's use,  
If thou couldst answer 'This fair child of mine  
Shall sum my count and make my old excuse,'  
Proving his beauty by succession thine!  
This were to be new made when thou art old,  
And see thy blood warm when thou feel'st it cold.

## ACTIVITY: Instant images



- Ask the class to stand in a space in the room.
- Explain you that you will call out a number and that this represents the amount of people in a group. Next you call out a title for a frozen image:

Groups of 2 - A childless couple

Groups of 5 - An absent father

Groups of 2 - An old king handing his crown to his eldest son

- Give the students five seconds to create their image.

When each of these images has been created, ask the group to look at the other groups in the space and comment on what they see in the images.

What do the relationships look like? Any differences/similarities?

- Now ask the class to recreate their images in the same groups and hand out a line of text (given below) to each. The groups will need time to discuss which character will be speaking the line, what alterations need to be made to their images and how they are going to incorporate the text into the image.
- Once the language has been added in, ask the students to look at the images again. What sorts of relationships are shown here?
- As an extension to this exercise, you could ask students to speak their characters' inner thoughts aloud when you tap them on their shoulder so that the group can find out if there is a disparity between what they are saying and what they are feeling.

### Reflection

How does the text change your original image?

What do you think the character speaking is trying to communicate?

What do these images show about the relationships between parents and children in the play? Are there any commonalities with the contemporary images created earlier?

The lines of text are:

Cut out ✂ ---

Childless couple:

I have given suck and know how tender  
'tis to love the babe that milks me

Absent father:

To leave his wife, to leave his babes, his mansion,  
and his titles in a place from whence himself does fly

Old king handing his crown to his eldest son:

We will establish our estate upon our eldest, Malcolm,  
whom we name hereafter the Prince of Cumberland

## Malcolm – The Young King



In Michael Boyd's production of *Macbeth*, Malcolm represents the moral centre of the play. He has been announced as heir to the throne. He is Duncan's successor and therefore has responsibility for the future of England and Scotland. Once Malcolm discovers his father's murder at Macbeth's castle and fearing for his safety, he returns to England. The first time we see how Malcolm will take on his new responsibilities as king is in Act 4 Scene 3, when Macduff visits the English court asking for Malcolm's help in protecting Scotland.

This scene comes immediately after we witness the murder of Macduff's wife and children at the hands of Macbeth's men. The dead children are led through a door at the back of the stage. The audience have witnessed the killing of Macduff's family, left unprotected by their father and husband. Yet, in the following scene we watch Macduff pleading with Malcolm for protection, for Scotland. This irony of the situation has been shown in the production by the use of the same door for the exit of the dead children and the entrance of Malcolm. This door is used as a symbol of a portal from good to bad or heaven and hell throughout the play. At the beginning, the door is used as the entrance to Duncan's bedroom where his horrific murder takes place.

Tom Piper, Designer on *Macbeth* says:

“ The door can be perceived as hell's gate, in this religious context, this portal could open up a wound in the world and let the devils in ”

In this scene, Malcolm is testing Macduff's loyalty by pretending that he would be a more violent dictator than Macbeth::

**Malcolm**      black Macbeth  
Will seem as pure as now, and the poor state  
Esteem him as a lamb, being compared  
With my confineless harms

In early rehearsals for this scene between Malcolm and Macduff, there were discussions about how static the scene should be, which character should move on what line and who holds the power in particular parts of the scene.

One early idea was that the actor playing Malcolm might be dressed all in white to signify an angel or a sacrificial lamb. Michael Boyd described this scene in rehearsal as a 'sparring match'.

Try the activity on the following page to try out a 'sparring match'.

### **ACTIVITY: Shadow boxing**



- Ask the students to form pairs.  
Hand out the edited version of Act 4 Scene 3 of *Macbeth* (see next page) - one person will play Malcolm and the other Macduff.
- Ask pairs to stand about one metre away from one another, explain that throughout the exercise they must never touch each other.
- Tell them that when they are speaking their lines they must perform it as though they are shadow-boxing with one another explain that whoever has the upper hand in the argument will deliver the physical blows (without touching!). Whoever is on the receiving end has to respond to the blows.

### **Reflection**

This scene provides an opportunity for both characters to both give and receive blows. Decide if there are moments in the scene when Malcolm and Macduff stop exchanging verbal blows and start to gain a mutual understanding and respect for one another.

Where are the points in the scene where Malcolm has the upper hand?

Where are the points in the scene where Macduff has the upper hand?

What kind of King do you think Malcolm will be?

What is the relationship like between Malcolm and Macduff by the end of the scene?

# ***Macbeth* Act 4 Scene 3 – Edited scene**

*Enter Macduff into Malcolm's Castle:*

**Malcolm** Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there  
Weep our sad bosoms empty

**Macduff** Let us rather  
Hold fast the mortal sword, and like good men  
Bestride our down-fall'n birthdom; each new morn  
New widows howl, new orphans cry

**Malcolm** What I believe I'll wail,  
What know believe, and what I can redress,  
This tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues,  
Was once thought honest: you have lov'd him well

**Macduff** I am not treacherous

**Malcolm** But I crave your pardon:  
That which you are my thoughts cannot transpose;  
Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell;

**Macduff** I have lost my hopes

**Malcolm** Perchance even there where I did find my doubts.

**Macduff** Fare thee well, lord:  
I would not be the villain that thou think'st  
For the whole space that's in the tyrant's grasp

**Malcolm** Were I king,  
I should cut off the nobles for their lands,  
Desire his jewels and this other's house:  
And my more-having would be as a sauce  
To make me hunger more.  
If such a one be fit to govern, speak.

**Macduff** Fit to govern?  
No, not to live. O nation miserable!  
Fare thee well,  
These evils thou repeat'st upon thyself  
Hath banish'd me from Scotland.

**Malcolm** Macduff, this noble passion,  
Child of integrity, hath from my soul  
Wip'd the black scruples, reconcil'd my thoughts  
To thy good truch and honour.

**Macduff** Such welcome and unwelcome things at once,  
'Tis hard to reconcile.

## Banquo's ambition for his son



In Act 1 Scene 3, Macbeth and Banquo hear the prophecy from the witches that Macbeth will be King and so will Banquo's children. The actors playing these characters instinctively know that this will cause conflict between them if the prophecy is to be believed.

When the actors playing Macbeth (Jonathan Slinger) and Banquo (Steve Toussaint) were rehearsing the scene, they discussed what must be going on in the characters heads – the opposite to what they are saying!

### ACTIVITY: Sharing a secret



When approaching this scene, ask your students to think about what might happen to two friends once a secret that affects them both has been revealed.

Ask the students to get into pairs and create three images:

- 1) Two best friends
- 2) Two best friends sharing a secret
- 3) Two best friends who don't trust each other

### Reflection

How does their relationship change when a secret is introduced?

To follow on, ask the students to think about what Macbeth and Banquo might be feeling about the witch's premonition.

### ACTIVITY: What's the subtext?

In the next activity small groups will perform a section of Act 1 Scene 3 while adding in the subtext of the scene. The subtext describes the underlying thoughts and feelings of the characters while they are saying the lines in the play.

- Ask the students to get into groups of four and choose two of them to be Macbeth and Banquo and the other two to speak the subtext.
- Tell the groups to read through the edited text from Act 1 Scene 3 (see next page). All four members of the groups must decide what should be said in the subtext.
- Then tell the whole group that the two students performing the subtext must decide where they place themselves in the scene in relation to Macbeth and Banquo and how they perform their lines.  
Also, each group needs to decide if the actors playing Macbeth and Banquo respond to the subtext and how it affects their performance.
- Ask each group to perform both the script and the subtext lines in the scenes back to the rest of the group.

### Reflection

What strong differences can you identify in sub-text the scenes we have been presented?

How did the thoughts change the way the lines were spoken?

What was the difference between the appearance and reality of the scene?

# ***Macbeth* Act 1 Scene 3 – Edited scene**

Banquo      The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,  
                 And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?

Subtext      \_\_\_\_\_

Macbeth     Into the air, and what seem'd corporal,  
                 Melted, as breath into the wind. Would they had stayed.

Subtext      \_\_\_\_\_

Banquo      Were such things here as we do speak about?  
                 Or have we eaten on insane root,  
                 That takes the reason prisoner?

Subtext      \_\_\_\_\_

Macbeth     Your children shall be kings.

Subtext      \_\_\_\_\_

Banquo      You shall be king.

Subtext      \_\_\_\_\_

Macbeth     And Thane of Cawdor too: went it not so?

Subtext      \_\_\_\_\_

Banquo      To th'selfsame tune and words

Subtext      \_\_\_\_\_

## Fleance Flash Forward



In Act 2 Scene 1, Banquo's son, Fleance is acting as his father's squire. In the scene Banquo gives his sword to his son to hold. This could be interpreted as Banquo merely giving Fleance another task, however, Michael Boyd asked the actor playing Banquo to give the sword to Fleance and to take that opportunity to look at his son as though he is imagining him becoming king.

### ACTIVITY: Contrasting futures



- Ask the students to form small groups of four or five. Explain that they are going to create an image showing the picture of the future that Banquo sees when he looks at his son in this scene.
- Ask the groups to create a second image which shows what Macbeth sees for the future in this scene when he looks at Fleance.
- Ask the groups to present their images back to the whole class.

### Reflection

What is the difference between the two images?

What does this already show about Macbeths' ambition very early in the play?

### ACTIVITY: Flash forward



- Next, ask the groups to create a short scene showing a flash forward to a future in which Fleance is being crowned as king. The characters that appear in this scene should include Fleance, Banquo and Macbeth. Other students could play either servants or lords and ladies who have been invited to the coronation.
- Ask students to include a short speech from Fleance that will illustrate to the nation what qualities he has to be a good king.
- Tell the groups that they must decide what role Macbeth plays in Fleance's court and how he will respond to Fleance's coronation.
- Ask the groups to present their images back to the whole class.

### Reflection

How do you think Fleance becomes King in this alternative storyline?

What do you think Macbeth's role might be in the court under King Fleance?

What is the relationship like between Banquo and Macbeth now that Fleance is King?

It can be useful to explore these alternative realities both within the rehearsal room and in the classroom so that actors and students can gain a deeper understanding of how the witches' premonition has fundamentally affected the trust between Banquo and Macbeth.

## Macduff and his family



Macduff is Thane of Scotland and plays a pivotal role in the play: he suspects Macbeth of killing King Duncan and eventually kills Macbeth in the final act. He is the main antagonist in the play.

During rehearsals, Aiden Kelly, the actor who plays Macduff described the character as: 'someone who has to compromise particularly when he is torn between being a father to his children and fighting for his country'.

Aiden's interpretation of Macduff is that he is:

'great man who has to sacrifice things for the greater good'

### ACTIVITY: Macduff's nightmare



In this activity, we will illustrate how Macduff is torn between the two things he loves the most, his family and his country by looking at ways of staging Macduff's nightmares.

- Watch the trailer for Michael Boyd's production of Macbeth:

<http://www.rsc.org.uk/whats-on/macbeth/> (click the yellow trailer button)



Ask the class to imagine that this short film is a nightmare that Macduff has been having about his murdered children. Discuss:

What dramatic techniques are used in this trailer to make it feel like a nightmare?

How could we use some of those techniques to create our own Macduff nightmare?

To create Macduff's nightmare:

- Split the class into two groups. Tell the group they will use the trailer as a stimulus to create a short nightmare sequence which represents Macduff's state of mind.
- One person in each group will play Macduff who will not speak - they will close their eyes and listen to the words.  
Give each group the nine lines of text (see next page) to be incorporated into the scene. The groups can decide who will speak each line.
- Ask the rest of the group to pick out individual words from the nine lines of text that have a strong meaning for them and repeat them in a whisper like an echo after the line is spoken.
- Give the groups time to create their nightmare and then ask them to perform for each other.

See the next page for the lines of text – they are grouped into two distinctive sides to show how Macduff is torn between his loyalty to his country and his family.

All the lines of text are either spoken by or about Macduff.

### Reflection

Once the two groups have performed their nightmare sequence to one another, discuss the following questions:

- Which lines of text stood out for you and why?
- Which lines of text stood out to Macduff?
- What do these lines of text say about Macduff and how he might be feeling at the end of the play?
- When does the nightmare become reality?

# Macduff

## For war

Hold fast the mortal sword, and like good men  
Bestride our down-fall'n birthdom  
Act 4, Scene 3

Front to front  
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself,  
Within my sword's length set him.  
Act 4, Scene 3

I think our country sinks beneath the yolk  
Act 4, Scene 3

Let our just censures  
Attend the true event, and put we on  
Industrious soldiership  
Act 5, Scene 4

## For family

What had he done, to make him fly the land?  
Act 4, Scene 2

He loves us not  
Act 4, Scene 2

Why in that rawness left you wife and child,  
Those precious motives, those strong knots of love,  
Without leave-taking?  
Act 4, Scene 3

The than of Fife had a wife: where is she now  
Act 5, Scene 1

My wife and children's ghosts will haunt me still  
Act 5, Scene 7

## Macbeth and Lady Macbeth



Throughout the play, Macbeth is concerned with controlling the future and since children are symbolic of the future, they represent his biggest threat.

One question that every production of Macbeth needs to address is why Lord and Lady Macbeth don't have children. Have they lost a child? Did Lady Macbeth have a child before that died before marrying Macbeth?

During early rehearsals on Act 1 Scene 7, the actors playing Lady Macbeth (Aislin McGuckin) and Macbeth (Jonathan Slinger) played this scene imagining that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth had lost a child in the past.

To indicate this loss, Lady Macbeth rubbed her stomach on the lines:

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me

### ACTIVITY: The Macbeths' back story



In the play, the actors playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth believe that they once had a child. This activity is designed to get your students to create their own back story around the loss of the Macbeth's child.

- Explain to the class that they will be deciding on what they think happened to the Macbeths' child.  
Ask them to split into groups of six, then into pairs within each six.  
Each six will create three linked images to form the beginning, middle and end of the story.
- Each pair should pick one movement and one sound that can be repeated over and over again in their scene for example: rocking a baby and repeating 'there, there'.
- Give the groups time to prepare and practise, and then ask them to present their images to the whole class.

### Reflection

What might the impact of childlessness on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?

## What is it to be a man?



### ACTIVITY: Emotion Imaging

In the play *Macbeth*, there is much talk of what it is to be a man.

- Ask the students to discuss stereotypical male characteristics.  
If you have a mixed gender class, you could split the boys and the girls and get them to write the characteristics on a large sheet of paper.
- After the discussion, ask the groups to choose one of the characteristics and present it as a frozen image.
- Next, give out copies or project the text scraps on the following page and ask students to work in pairs.  
Choose eight students, giving each pair one short scene from below.  
The remainder of the class should watch each scene and try and identify which emotions is strongest for Macbeth in each of these scenes, for example: fear, anger, jealousy.
- Watch each scene and ask for a volunteer from the audience to create a physical image of Macbeth's main emotion and put themselves into the scene.  
Tell the person creating the physical image to decide how close or near they are to Macbeth to signify how strong that emotion is within that character.  
Start off with adding in just one emotion but if the group notice more than one emotion then they can put in more volunteers to illustrate more emotions.

RSC Education

We hope you and your students enjoy working on these activities. If you'd like to find out more information on teacher's resources and INSET please visit <https://www.rsc.org.uk/education/>

More activities on *Macbeth* are available in *The RSC Shakespeare Toolkit for Teachers*, available online in the [RSC Shop](#).

# Mini scenes

## Act 1 Scene 7

When Macbeth tells his wife that he has changed his mind and doesn't want to kill King Duncan, she accuses him of being a coward. He asks her to be quiet.

**Lady Macbeth** Are you a man?

**Macbeth** Prithee, peace;  
I dare do all that may become a man  
Who dares do more is none

## Act 3 Scene 4

When the Ghost of Banquo appears at Macbeth's banquet, Macbeth reacts strongly, showing his fear. However, he is the only one who sees the ghost, so the banquet guests are astounded, and Lady Macbeth is angry that her husband is making a fool of himself. She takes him aside and asks,

**Lady Macbeth** Are you a man?

**Macbeth** Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that  
Which might appal the devil.

## Act 4 Scene 3

When Macduff hears the news that his wife and children have been murdered, he cries out. Malcolm tells him to keep his emotions in check, but Macduff counters him.

**Macduff** All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell kite! All?

**Malcolm** Dispute it like a man

**Macduff** I shall do so; But I must also feel it as a man

## Act 5 Scene 8

In the last scene of the play, Macduff tells Macbeth that he was not 'of woman born'. In Macbeth's way of thinking, the 'better part of man' is courage.

**Macduff** Macduff was from his mother's womb  
Untimely ripp'd

**Macbeth** Accursed be that tongue that tells me so,  
For it hath cow'd my better part of man.