Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw.
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o'th'other senses,
Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,
And on the blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. There's no such thing:
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's off'rings, and withered murder,
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.
I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.
Macbeth Notes and Activities created by the RSC

Act: Two Scene: One
Character: Macbeth

About the speech
Macbeth is one of Shakespeare’s bloodiest plays. Macbeth, a Scottish general and nobleman, plots with his wife to kill King Duncan of Scotland. Macbeth meets three witches on his way home from battle who foretell that he will become King of Scotland. Macbeth agonises over whether to murder the King in order to make the prophecy come true while his ambitious wife encourages him to commit the murder.

In this speech Macbeth makes the decision to murder King Duncan who is, that night, sleeping in his castle. At the start of the speech Macbeth imagines that he sees a dagger floating in the air: “Is this a dagger which I see before me”. He wonders if it is real or if his guilty conscience has imagined it: “Or art thou but/A dagger of the mind”. He ends the speech with a plea for Duncan not to hear the church bells, “Hear it not, Duncan”, as he imagines that it is a death knell summoning Duncan’s soul “to heaven or to hell”.

How actors work
During rehearsals, directors and actors often investigate the background of the play and character they are bringing to life. Shakespeare often highlights events happening in Elizabethan England through the language, characters and plots of his plays. Understanding the context in which these plays were written will help you make interesting choices about how to perform a particular speech. Actors also connect the character they are playing with their own experiences and the world around them.

People in Shakespeare’s time thought a great deal about where the soul goes after death. Find out about Elizabethan attitudes to life after death and to heaven and hell. What will happen to Macbeth’s soul if he commits the murder?

In rehearsals, actors and directors explore their character’s motives, which help them decide how to play the part. Why do you think Macbeth is willing to commit murder to become king? What does that tell you about his character?

Performance Suggestions
Actors enjoy playing Macbeth as there are many ways to interpret his character. He has been played on stage as a murderous villain, as a man bullied or under the spell of his wife.

Try saying this speech as if he is:

- a brave warrior who has fought for his country
- a power-hungry murderer
- a sensitive man who thinks deeply
- a man afraid of his wife

Take a look at the language of the speech and try mixing these different choices to see which ones work best for specific moments.