She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle,
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.
Macbeth Notes and Activities created by the RSC

Act: Five Scene: Five
Character: Macbeth

About the speech

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's bloodiest plays. At the heart of the story is a man who kills to be King and then pays the price. This speech comes after Macbeth has been through a terrifying series of events, many of them of his own making. In order to become King and hold on to his throne he killed King Duncan, his best friend Banquo, and the mother and children of a Scottish nobleman, Macduff. Because of all the bloodshed, his wife has gone mad. She encouraged her husband to kill the King at the beginning of the play, but now cannot come to terms with her guilt. Just before this speech Macbeth has been told that his wife has fallen off the castle walls and is dead.

In this speech, Macbeth reacts to his wife's death. "Out, out, brief candle." He thinks about what it means to be alive: "Life's but a walking shadow". His language is very downbeat, he is clearly struggling with understanding his wife's death and is exhausted by his constant struggle to keep the throne. He ends the speech by pessimistically saying that life is a story "Told by an idiot" and that it means "nothing".

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.

Performance Suggestions

There are many ways that you can perform the speech. Shakespeare often leaves clues in his language to help actors bring the words to life. In this speech he uses words whose sounds capture the idea of endless time. Try saying the speech while overstressing the following:

- the vowel sounds
- pauses after commas and full stops
- words that make short, sharp sounds, eg “Out, out”

Actors and directors approaching Macbeth will try and make a choice about the emotions he is feeling in this speech. In productions, this speech has been played in a variety of different ways: completely defeated, angry, traumatized by his wife’s death, etc. Say the speech as if he is:

- overwhelmed with sadness over his wife’s death
- defeated
- wanting to die
- angry at the blows life has dealt him

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