The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,
Stop up th’access and passage to remorse
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
Th’effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, 'Hold, hold.'
About the speech

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's bloodiest plays. Central to the play is Lady Macbeth, the ambitious wife of Macbeth. Just before this speech Lady Macbeth receives a letter from her husband who has been victorious in a war for King Duncan of Scotland. Macbeth writes that he has met three witches who have informed him that he will become King of Scotland. Lady Macbeth immediately starts thinking of ways to make her husband king, perhaps even by killing King Duncan.

In this speech Lady Macbeth summons evil spirits to help her murder King Duncan by taking away any feelings of sorrow. She asks them to "unsex" her so she won't feel badly (she assumes that being a woman makes her prone to feeling guilty). She also asks to be protected from Heaven, not because she will be punished for her actions, but because Heaven might make her guilty and stop her from committing the murder. Lady Macbeth feels that she has to fight her very nature in order to achieve what she wants.

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.

Women in the Elizabethan era played a different role in society to men. Find out about the different expectations of women in the Elizabethan time. Do Lady Macbeth's actions differ from how women were expected to act at that time? How does this help you approach the speech?

Performance Suggestions

In rehearsals, actors must decide what Lady Macbeth is feeling during this speech. Some have said the speech as if she is afraid of the spirits she is calling to, some as if she can barely contain her excitement at the prospect of her husband becoming king. Look at the speech again and try speaking it as if she is:

- afraid of the spirits
- excited by the murder
- feeling guilty about what she is trying to do

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