

READING *MACBETH*

Dr. Jim Casey

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The Rosenbach Museum and Library

5 Week Virtual Course

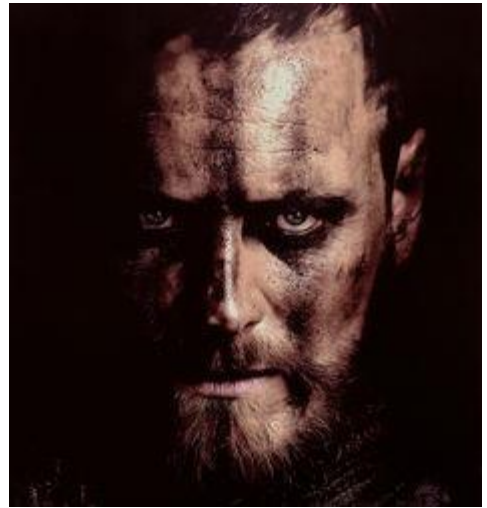
Wednesday Evenings on Zoom

7:30 - 9:00pm (Eastern Time)

October 9, 2024, October 23, 2024,
November 6, 2024, November 20, 2024,
December 4, 2024

Course Text

Macbeth, Folger Shakespeare Library, Updated Edition, edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (ISBN 978-0-7434-7710-9)



Course Description

Macbeth is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy (barely more than half as long as *Hamlet*), but it features an abundance of unique and memorable moments, including the prophecies of the witches, the murder of the king, the appearance of the ghost, the confession of a sleepwalker, and the migration of a forest. The Macbeths are one of the most fascinating couples in western literature; their interaction, and the play's complex depiction of the political, the psychological, and the supernatural, make *Macbeth* one of Shakespeare's most quoted, performed, and adapted plays. This course will explore the richness and depth of this remarkable text, with close consideration of the work's language, action, characterization, world-view, and more. Ideally, the course will be quite interactive, relying on class participation and free-flowing conversations that center on particular themes and passages. Every time we meet, we will practice a variety of reading techniques that will enable participants to begin experiencing *Macbeth* (and eventually all of Shakespeare's plays) more deeply and effectively on their own, recognizing the playtext not only as a narrative story but also as a poetic script that was meant to be performed out loud.

Course Format

We could spend hundreds of hours on *Macbeth* and still have more to discover. Thus, participants are encouraged to tell the instructor which topics and approaches they are most interested in pursuing. Each course meeting is structured around a topic and a set of close readings, but these focal points are meant to be frames through which we might view the play, not cages designed to confine us. Each Zoom session will begin with an opportunity for questions and clarifications, and then we will spend the majority of our time actively engaging with the playtext. You learn by doing (and by sometimes being wrong), so please participate!

We will have additional (optional) readings for those who are interested, but we will concentrate on the play itself, so *Macbeth* will be the only required reading for the course. If you can, please try to get the updated print edition of the Folger Shakespeare Library mass market paperback (ISBN listed above). The Folger edition is inexpensive, well-edited, and widely available. You can use other editions if you like, but you may find yourself lost or confused because the editor has chosen variant words, moved or deleted key passages, or imposed different act/scene

divisions. I would also suggest avoiding digital editions of the play (passages are hard to find in discussion, and studies demonstrate that reading electronically is incompatible with the comprehension of complex texts), but again that is your choice.

Course Schedule

October 9, 2024 ~ Signifying Nothing

At one point late in the drama, Macbeth compares life itself to a play, suggesting, “It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.” Yet this particular play signifies quite a lot. Deciphering that meaning can be a challenge for first-time readers, but a few simple approaches can help. Shakespeare wrote professionally for the stage and for an audience more attuned to “hearing” a play. In our first session, we will briefly discuss the material conditions of the early modern theatre and then cover some simple techniques for reading Shakespearean language, using Lady Macbeth’s famous “unsex me here” speech as a starting point.

October 23, 2024 ~ Unsex Me Here

More than any other Shakespearean play, *Macbeth* continually asks questions about what it means to be a man or to be a woman. In this session, we will follow up on our close reading of Lady Macbeth’s “unsex me” speech by focusing on a number of other passages specifically concerned with biological sex and culturally constructed gender.

November 6, 2024 ~ Macbeth Does Murder Sleep

Continuing our discussion from the previous class, we will begin with a re-examination of the gendering of violence and remorse, evaluating the way ethics, guilt, morality, and responsibility are framed in the play. Murder, regicide, and rebellion are certainly unlawful acts, but can there ever be justification for such criminal activities? In this class, we will discover how early modern beliefs regarding the divine right of kings, the obligations of governors, and the role of fate might impact our understanding of the play.

November 20, 2024 ~ Double, Double Toil and Trouble

According to tradition, Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* to capitalize on King James’ special fascination with witches and demonology. Whatever their provenance, the Weird Sisters and their prophecies are central to the narrative. In this session, we will consider contemporary attitudes toward witches and witchcraft, acknowledging the interconnected nature of the supernatural, the spiritual, and the scientific during Shakespeare’s time.

December 4, 2024 ~ What Else Remains To Do

Our final session will be driven by the questions and interests of the group, either returning to earlier subjects in more depth or exploring issues we have yet to cover.

About the Instructor

Dr. Jim Casey is a Fulbright Fellow, National Endowment for the Humanities grant recipient, Past President of the International Association for the Fantastic in the Arts, editor of Shakespeare and Fletcher’s *The Two Noble Kinsmen* (2019), and co-editor of the collections *Shakespeare/Not Shakespeare* (2017) and *Shakespeare and Comics* (2024). Before retiring from full-time teaching in 2020, he taught more than 100 graduate and undergraduate courses over more than twenty years. Although primarily a Shakespearean, he has published peer-reviewed essays on such diverse topics as fantasy, monstrosity, early modern poetry, medieval poetry, pedagogy, textual theory, performance theory, postmodern theory, adaptation theory, digital humanities, old age, comics, film, anime, masculinity, grief, the supernatural, Shakespeare, Chaucer, Ovid, *Firefly*, and *Battlestar Galactica*. His current projects include *Shakespeare and Science Fiction*, co-edited with Brandon Christopher, and *Fantasy Literature through History*. This is his third time teaching for the Rosenbach, following courses on Shakespeare and the Fantastic and *Hamlet*.