

Shakespeare Performance at Windsor Castle

Windsor Castle is a thousand years old, and the largest inhabited castle in the world. It has been home to kings and queens for centuries.

This activity explores the history of Shakespeare performances at Windsor Castle, using 3-D technology to capture what it was like to attend plays and films in this extraordinary building.

1. Watch the video ["Shakespeare Performance at Windsor Castle"](#) (9 mins).
2. Now, test your memory by answering the questions below:
 - What are the largest staterooms in the Castle called? **The Waterloo Chamber, St George's Hall. The smaller room discussed is the King's Drawing Room, also called the Rubens Room.**
 - Who lived at Windsor Castle in 1853? Who lived there in 1944? **Queen Victoria and Prince Albert / George VI and his family, including the teenage Elizabeth II**
 - Which plays have been performed at Windsor Castle? **Macbeth, Richard II, Henry V (film version). Many other plays have also been performed at Windsor Castle, including Shakespeare plays as well as melodrama and farce.**
3. Discuss with a partner:
 - Why do you think these plays were chosen? **For example, answers might discuss how the plays represent royalty, how they engage with English history/ royal history, the prestige of Shakespeare's reputation, or the celebrity status of the performers.**

Look at Louis Haghe's painting, *The Performance of Macbeth in the Rubens Room*.



4. Discuss as a class:

- How is the room decorated? Draw attention to the paintings, the decorated ceiling; note that the stage and seating are temporary rather than built-in (perhaps discuss how the stage and seating match the colour scheme of the room). The stone pillars behind the actress are deceptive--a painted cloth backdrop.
- How are the audience behaving? How are they dressed? Formal costumes, some military uniforms on far side. Queen Victoria stands out in a dark-coloured dress. Eagle-eyed observers might notice that the male children are wearing kilts and argyle socks. A very high-status, genteel audience. Some of them are consulting paper play bills.
- How is the actress dressed? A costume from a different period—the director was obsessed with historical accuracy. Probably a nightgown, given the context in the play.
- How would you describe the atmosphere? Answers might comment on the stiff and strict expectations for behaviour at court, the opulent décor, the excitement of the performance, etc.
- How do you think the room was lit in 1853? Notice the stand lights behind the audience and the row of footlights at the front of the stage. These would all have been oil lamps—no electricity or even gas light at Windsor Castle in 1853. If desired, discuss whether the artist has used some license to imagine a brighter scene.

- Scenes from this play are set on a heath, a battlefield, in a banquet hall, and in a castle hallway. How do you think scene changes were achieved in 1853? **Scene changes were hard work in the Victorian theatre. For this kind of theatre, painted canvas backcloths would be hung on rollers above the stage and unrolled one at a time.**

For students studying *Macbeth*.

Discuss in groups:

- Which characters in *Macbeth* are royal? **Duncan, Malcolm, Donalbain; later Macbeth and Lady Macbeth; arguably Banquo and Fleance, since the witches tell us they will have royal descendants.**
- How is royalty portrayed in the play? **Lots of possible answers: positive and negative models—Duncan’s trust in his subordinates and expectation of hospitality/entertainment; Macbeth’s tyranny, violence, paranoia; Lady Macbeth’s efforts to be a gracious hostess at the banquet v. her private guilt.**
- Do you think a royal audience would enjoy *Macbeth*? (You might consider: James VI and I, Queen Victoria, the modern royal family.) Why/why not? **Lots of possible answers—students might know that Macbeth was designed to flatter James I given its Scottish setting and his interest in witchcraft; Victoria enjoyed historical drama but we could also imagine that a queen might find Lady Macbeth an unsettling character.**
- Which scene is being performed in the painting? What are the clues that tell you this? **Act 5 scene 1, Lady Macbeth’s “sleepwalking” scene—clues include the actress’s clasped hands, the loose costume, the two figures huddled behind her.**

After this performance, Queen Victoria wrote in her diary:



“Shakespeare's splendid Tragedy of "Macbeth" was extremely well given. The scenery, including the Cave or Cawdor scene with the apparitions, was admirably managed, & the dresses beautiful, & most correct. Both Keans¹ acted very well, but she in particular. It is a most interesting, thrilling, & heartrending play.”

¹ The star performers were a married couple, Charles Kean and Ellen Kean, playing Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Imagine you are the actress Ellen Kean. Write a diary entry about preparing to play 'Lady Macbeth' for Queen Victoria. You might include:

- the challenges of performing for royalty
- the parts of the play you are most concerned about
- how you intend to approach playing a queen

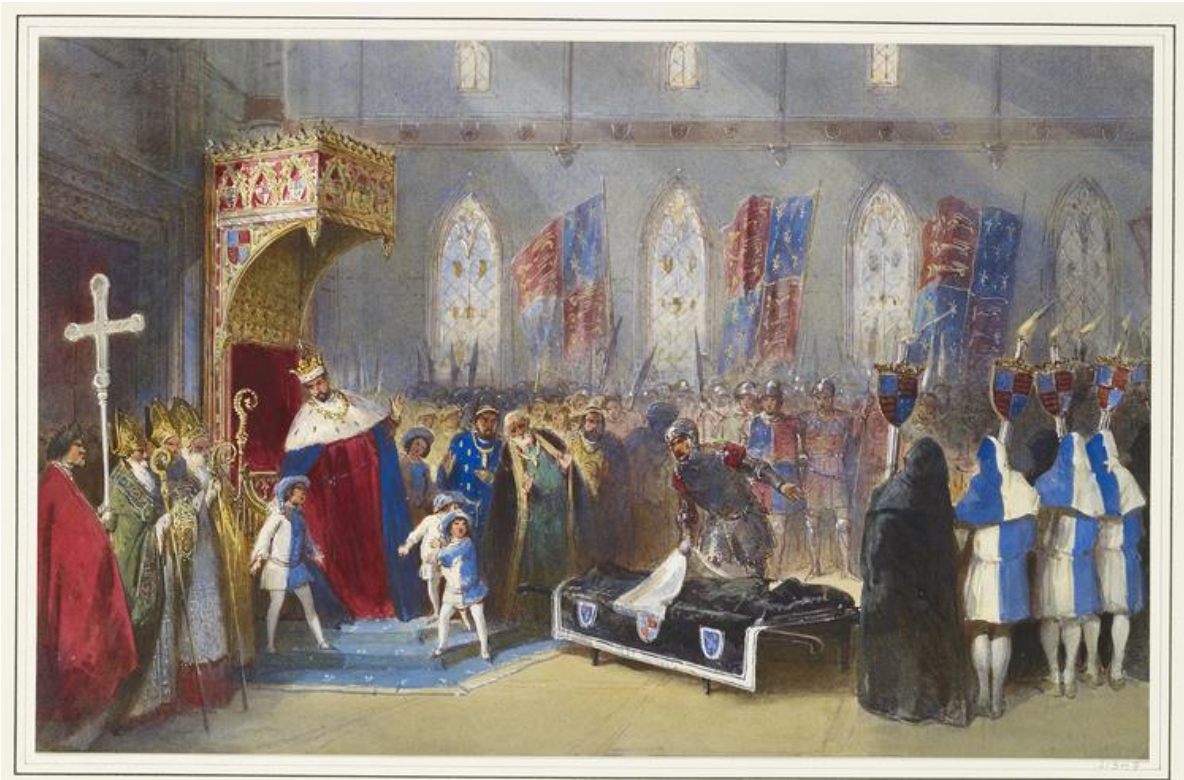
Extension activities

Today, we usually talk about Macbeth as a tragedy. But for Shakespeare's audience, it might also have been thought of as a *history* play—it is based on stories in Raphael Holinshed's historical 'chronicles', and the king, James I, believed that he was descended from Banquo.

Shakespeare wrote a lot of plays about kings and queens from history. For example, Richard II reigned from 1377-1399, and his reign ended when he was forced from the throne by his cousin, Henry Bolingbroke, and sent to prison, where he was murdered. Shakespeare's play *Richard II* dramatizes these events, and explores Richard's feelings about power and its loss.

Henry V reigned from 1413-1422. Shakespeare wrote three plays about him: in *Henry IV part 1* and *Henry IV part 2*, Henry is a prince who enjoys drinking and gambling. His experiences of war and politics gradually convince him to leave behind his drinking companions. In *Henry V*, he becomes a war hero in a dramatic battle against France.

Richard II



This painting by Egron Sellif Lundgren portrays the final scene of Richard II, when Richard's body is presented to the new King Henry IV

After seeing *Richard II*, Queen Victoria wrote in her diary:

"We went over to St. George's Hall for a Play which was most successful. Shakespeare's Richard II was given, which we had never seen before & which has not been acted for a long while. It is a beautiful, interesting tragedy, which was well acted, — beautifully by Kean, who was never seen to greater advantage, though labouring under a bad cold & gout! The costumes were splendid & very correct, & the scenery extremely pretty & wonderfully well managed for so small a stage. It was curious that such Play in which all my ancestors figured should just have been performed in St. George's Hall."

1. Underline the phrases which tell us something about the performance.
2. Discuss in groups:
 - What did Queen Victoria think were the most interesting and important things about the play? **Answers might mention the effect of costumes and scenery; 'very correct' is a reference to historical accuracy, which was considered very important by Victorians.**
 - What were the main challenges for the performers? **Answers might mention the small stage, Kean's cold and gout.**
 - How do you think Queen Victoria felt about this portrayal of 'her ancestors' in Windsor Castle?

Henry V

Shakespeare's play *Henry V* focuses on the king's invasion of France, and his victory, against the odds, at the battle of Agincourt. In one of the most famous speeches, the king addresses his army:



"This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.

[...]

This story shall the good man teach his son;
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But we in it shall be rememberèd—
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;

For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother."

Discuss in groups:

- Can you remember how the Waterloo Chamber was decorated? Think about this speech with that decoration in mind.
- What would it be like to hear this speech during World War Two? Think about how responses to the speech might have differed from person to person.