

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?
 - Who lived at Windsor Castle in 1853? Who lived there in 1944?
 - Which plays have been performed at Windsor Castle?
3. Discuss with a partner:
 - Why do you think these plays were chosen?

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



4. Discuss as a class:

- How is the room decorated?
- How are the audience behaving? How are they dressed?
- How is the actress dressed?
- How would you describe the atmosphere?
- How do you think the room was lit in 1853?
- 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?

For students studying *Macbeth*.

Discuss in groups:

- Which characters in *Macbeth* are royal?
- How is royalty portrayed in the play?
- 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?
- Which scene is being performed in the painting? What are the clues that tell you this?

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."

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

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

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 IInd 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?
 - What were the main challenges for the performers?
 - 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.