Concept Design with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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Exercise: Concept Design

(This exercise is related to design slam, but its agenda is different: to get to the essence of the students' imagined production-- and in getting to the essence of the production, to understand the world of the play more deeply. While both exercises can accommodate different levels and learning styles, it is fair to say that Design Slam is better for younger students and Concept work more easily suited to older ones.)

Here's an example of working with *Macbeth* and concept exploration:

- Have the group read-through Act II, sc ii together, the murder of Duncan.
- (*Macbeth* is in general a great play for design and concept, since it's got a lot of mood, weather, witches, etc!)
- Divide the group into smaller groups and ask each group to find THE FACTS of the scene, which should include:
  - Imbedded stage directions (separate the ones specific to acting from the environmental ones)
  - Imbedded props
  - Indications of time of day, place, season, any sensory information
  - You can include other basic facts if you think that's useful, including characters names, etc.
- Come back together and make a comprehensive list.
- Ask the group to identify words in the scene that feel the most operative, juicy, or essential to the story of the scene. (Hint: could be words or phrases which are repeated, typically nouns or verbs). Make a master list of those, and, if there are a lot, have the group vote it down to the strongest 6.
- Ask the group to make a final list that uses their imaginations, filling in the phrases:
  - If this scene were a smell, it would be _____
  - If this scene were a sound, it would be _____
  - If this scene were an image, it would be _____
- Ask the group to land on one or two key ideas from this final list and use that as the launch for the scene (or play's) concept. "This scene is going to be like a rotting peach in the sun"- non-literal, but based on text! And ripe (pun intended) for imaginative work for directors, actors, and designers.
- ADD ON: if you have the time and inclination, have the students divide into jobs (designers, actors, directors, etc.) and stage the scene with this concept in mind. The primary question for each of them would be "How does this choice support our conceptual vision?"

Here is a page from the scene, as an example, with key words, images, and givens highlighted or marked, including repeated phrases:

What hath quenched them hath given me fire. Hark!
Peace!
It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman,   3
Which gives the stern'st good-night. He is about it.   4
The doors are open; and the surfeited grooms   5
Do mock their charge with snores. I have drugged their
    possets,   6
That death and nature do contend about them
Whether they live or die.
MACBETH [*Within*]   Who's there? What, ho!
LADY MACBETH
Alack, I am afraid they have awaked,
And 'tis not done. Th' attempt and not the deed
Confounds us. Hark! I laid their daggers ready;   11
He could not miss 'em. Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done 't.

    Enter Macbeth, [*bearing bloody daggers*].

My husband!
MACBETH
I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?
LADY MACBETH
I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.   16
Did not you speak?
MACBETH   When?
LADY MACBETH   Now.
MACBETH   As I descended?
LADY MACBETH   Ay.
MACBETH   Hark! Who lies i' the second chamber?
LADY MACBETH   Donalbain.
MACBETH   This is a sorry sight. [*He looks at his hands.*]
LADY MACBETH
A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight.
MACBETH
There's one did laugh in 's sleep, and one cried
    "Murder!"

3 bellman one who rings a bell to announce a death or to mark the hours of the night   **4 stern'st good-night** i.e., notice to condemned criminals that they are to be executed in the morning   **5 grooms** servants   **6 mock their charge** make a mockery of their guard duty.   **possets** hot bedtime drinks, (as at 2.1.32)   **11 Confounds** ruins   **16 owl, crickets** (The sounds of both could be ominous and prophetic of death.)

sleep

That they did wake each other. I stood and heard them.
But they did say their prayers, and addressed them   28
Again to sleep.
LADY MACBETH   There are two lodged together.   29
MACBETH
One cried "God bless us!" and "Amen!" the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.   31
List'ning their fear, I could not say "Amen"
When they did say "God bless us!"
LADY MACBETH   Consider it not so deeply.
MACBETH
But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"?
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"
Stuck in my throat.
LADY MACBETH   These deeds must not be thought   37
After these ways; so, it will make us mad.   38
MACBETH
Methought I heard a voice cry "Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep," the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the raveled sleave of care,   41
The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,   42
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,   43
Chief nourisher in life's feast—
LADY MACBETH   What do you mean?
MACBETH
Still it cried "Sleep no more!" to all the house;
"Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more."
LADY MACBETH
Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy thane,
You do unbend your noble strength to think   49
So brainsickly of things. Go get some water
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.   51

blood

28 addressed them settled themselves   **29 two** i.e., Malcolm and Donalbain   **31 As** as if.   **hangman's hands** bloody hands (because the hangman would draw and quarter the condemned, and also executed with an ax)   **37 thought** thought about   **38 so** if we do so   **41 raveled sleave** tangled skein   **42 bath** i.e., to relieve the soreness   **43 second course** (Ordinary feasts had two courses, of which the second was the *chief nourisher*; here, sleep is seen as following eating in a restorative process.)   **49 unbend** slacken (as one would a bow; contrast "bend up" at 1.7.80)   **51 witness** evidence