**The Language of Macbeth**

Shakespeare used different kinds of verse de­pending on the mood, action, or character. Here’s a sampling of the verse types in *Macbeth*:

**Blank Verse: Iambic Pentameter**

Most of *Macbeth*—and many of Shakespeare’s plays—are written in blank verse. Blank verse can be any number of lines and those lines are biased toward *un­rhymed iambic pentameter*.

* Each line contains five “feet,” or units made up of two syllables.
* The first syllable is unstressed; the second is stressed. This kind of foot is called an “iamb.”

Read aloud, iambic pentameter has this rhythm:

goodBYE goodBYE goodBYE goodBYE goodBYE

In Shakespeare’s plays, blank verse sounds a lot like normal speech, only slightly more formal, rhythmic, and musical.

These lines of *Macbeth* are written in perfect iam­bic pentameter:

*Away, and mock the time with fairest show…*

*So fair and foul a day I have not seen…*

To understand the effect of iambic pentameter, try reading a few lines aloud. Pause whenever it seems like you should depending on the punctua­tion or the meaning of the words. What you’ll find is that the meaning of the words and the steady rhythm play off each other, so that the meter pulls you forward while the meaning slows you down. As you read, look for moments in the verse where this tension seems to stand out, and consider how this use of poetic meter helps to support what is happening in the play. The meter also helps the actors memorize their lines!

**Rhymed Couplet**

The rhymed couplet is used to indicate the end of a scene to an audience in a theater without curtains. The lines below are in iambic pentameter, AND they rhyme.

For example:

*Away, and mock the time with fairest show:*

*False face must hide what the false heart doth know.*

(Act I, Scene 7)

**Trochaic Tetrameter**

The witches in *Macbeth* speak in trochaic tetram­eter.

* The syllables, or feet, in this poetic form are *trochees* (stressed-unstressed).
* Tetrameter refers to the fact that there are four feet per line.

A line of trochaic tetrameter has this rhythm:

BAby BAby BAby BAby

This meter gives the witches’ chants their hypnotic rhythm:

*Liver of blaspheming Jew,*

*Gall of goat, and slips of yew*

*Silver'd in the moon's eclipse,*

*Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips,*

*Finger of birth-strangled babe.*

(Act IV, Scene i)

Did you notice something missing? The last unstressed syllable isn’t there, so you’re forced to pause at the end of the line. Because of that miss­ing syllable, it’s hard to read these lines and make them sound like a normal conversation.

**Varying the Verse**

Shakespeare varies the verse to express meaning. For example, the language of the witches is in a choppier form of verse (Act IV, Scene 1), and the tension of the language used by Lady Macbeth during her famous sleepwalking scene (Act V, Scene 1) provides an interesting contrast to the more natural flow of rhythm in blank verse used in the greater part of the play.

*Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One:*

*two: why, then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky.*

*Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeared? What need*

*we fear who knows it, when none can call our*

*pow'r to accompt?*

(Act V, Scene 1)

Compare the language variety in the play to background music used to portray emotion in films and television. Listen to several pieces of music and identify the feelings they portray. When you orally read or hear sections of *Macbeth*, listen to how the change of verse expresses feeling.