

**Synopsis/Sample of
Seven Ladies Macbeth**

by

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Seven Ladies Macbeth

DESCRIPTION

What came before and after Lady Macbeth became Lady Macbeth?

CHARACTERS

- GRUOCH (later, Lady Macbeth)
- ELFRIDA (mother of Lady Macbeth)/DUNCAN/GENTLEWOMAN
- SOLDIER/GILLACOMGAIN (first husband)/MACBETH's SQUIRE/DOCTOR/MACDUFF
- MACBETH
- NURSE/BISHOP/SINT (can be played by a male or female)
- CHORUS OF CROWS/GRUOCH'S ATTENDANTS/THE 3 WITCHES

CHORUS will wear half-masks made to look like crows.

There is nothing but interpretation.

Seven Ladies Macbeth

Scene 1: First Lady

Blackness. In the blackness, the sound of ELFRIDA, the queen, in carnal delight and distress -- a rising wail halfway between pleasure and lamentation, with a final crescendo halfway between pleasure and a snarl.

As this happens, a light up on young GRUOCH. When ELFRIDA is finished, a light up on ELFRIDA slipping on a simple rough cotton caftan. They sit apart, at some distance. They hold each other's gaze, then GRUOCH looks away.

ELFRIDA
(annoyed)

Gruoch?
We named you Gruoch -- I don't know why.
I don't think you can change it.
The name sounds like it crawled out of the
throats of crows.
Would you like me to remember for you
how your world began?
Well?
Not that you have many memories --

GRUOCH
I heard -- it -- them -- the screams --
your screams -- they -- shook me -- as I --

GRUOCH makes a sliding motion with her hand: slipping out of the womb. ELFRIDA mockingly imitates her.

ELFRIDA
My obligatory motherly screams, my
obstetrical aria --

GRUOCH
Did I -- hurt --

ELFRIDA
As I was saying, you don't have many
choices about remembering, but do you have
some. Well, two.

GRUOCH
I don't want to choose.

ELFRIDA
Three, then.

GRUOCH

I want to go back.

ELFRIDA

Not one of the three, I'm afraid.

GRUOCH

I want to go back. To there.

ELFRIDA

(slapping her own belly)

To the queen's labyrinth?
To the garden of breedin'?

GRUOCH

Please.

ELFRIDA

That desire makes you much too much like
your father --

GRUOCH

What --

ELFRIDA

Who.

GRUOCH

(shifting)

Who is he?

ELFRIDA

Too much like any man,
which means not enough --

GRUOCH

I don't know "man" or "any" or --

ELFRIDA

Always wanting to adjourn themselves
To some moist salty female darkness --
Remember that.

GRUOCH

I don't know what you're saying.

ELFRIDA

I did not spit you into the light
for you to want such things.

GRUOCH

Can't I -- please go [back] --

ELFRIDA

You have had your last taste of paradise,
daughter --
even now, even though it's still early in
your life,
Eden has melted down into a sticky
hungering
common among the common and uncommon alike
--
That sticks --
(grabbing her throat)
-- here --
Doesn't it?
Panging at you forever.
So much easier to hope for better times
when you hadn't been born.
Your birth shows me
what an unraveling fact
my life is --
too bad.

GRUOCH looks crestfallen, disheartened.

ELFRIDA

I will embrace you,
if that is something
you think you want.

GRUOCH gets up, ELFRIDA gets up. They embrace each other from a distance, without touching. ELFRIDA, for a moment, softens.

ELFRIDA

I think I am heartily sorry.

GRUOCH

What are my other choices?

But light out on ELFRIDA. At her feet, GRUOCH finds a sword and buckler. She straps it on without hesitation, stares at it. A sound of wind comes up along with the calls of crows.

GRUOCH

How did I know how to do that?

GRUOCH stares into the darkness, half a smile on her face. Out of the darkness NURSE appears.

GRUOCH

Nurse.

NURSE

I will answer to that.

GRUOCH

Why did doing that come so easily to me?
And feel so -- so --

NURSE

Is "good" the word you want?

The CHORUS OF CROWS appears. They speak GRUOCH's name as if it came from their throats.

CHORUS

Gruoch!

GRUOCH

Good?

CHORUS

An indifferent spasm
of royal fluids --
and Gruoch comes --

NURSE

(adjusting the buckler)

It would be good for you to begin
forgetting --
her, for starters --
all of the bastards.

GRUOCH

Forgetting my mother would be good?

NURSE

She and the others have already made you
too old for your own good.

GRUOCH

I am completely lost.

CHORUS

When the child's tongue-tie
is cut at birth --
when that skin-thread holding
the mouth-bell's clapper is snipped --
snip! --
the one who had been muted,
the one forced by biology
to play a stuttering idiot,
now spits out rhyme, releases sense --
this is how Gruoch will suffer --

the umbilical cut now forces her
to learn the sort of knowledge
that can only turn into
a perpetual lack of wisdom --

NURSE waves her arms to shoo the birds away. They leave. NURSE
smoothes down GRUOCH's hair, clothes, then looks GRUOCH in the
eye.

NURSE
You could be destined for greatness.
(looking more intently)
Or something equally as painful --
or boring.
If you're lucky, you'll die without
drooling
or having to scream --
those are not small accomplishments.

GRUOCH returns NURSE's gaze. Then, with a mix of deliberation
and innocence, GRUOCH unsheathes the sword and puts it between
her legs, as if she were riding a hobby-horse. She begins to
skip like a child.

GRUOCH
La - la - la - la - la - la -

GRUOCH stops, throws NURSE a defiant look, then continues
skipping and chanting.

After a few seconds, GRUOCH stops, a look of puzzlement on her
face. She looks down at the sword, back at the NURSE.

NURSE
Well?

GRUOCH rides the sword a few more times, as if testing something,
then stops again.

NURSE
Good?

GRUOCH doesn't answer right away, but then nods her head yes and
smiles.

NURSE
Who knew friction
could be so educational.

GRUOCH
I don't know what you mean.

NURSE

How does that feel?

GRUOCH

The same as when I hooked
the belt around my waist.

NURSE

Do it some more.

But GRUOCH doesn't move. Instead, she closes her eyes, as if
recalling the sensation.

GRUOCH

(her eyes still closed)

My mother said I have two choices
about remembering my life,
even as short as it's been so far --
is that true?

NURSE

I don't believe in remembering anything.

GRUOCH

You are supposed to be
preparing me
for my life.

NURSE

I can't teach you the amnesia
you'll need
to find
a useable happiness.

GRUOCH

But I don't want to forget
what I am remembering
right at this moment.
It feels too good.

NURSE

The sword between your legs feels too good.

GRUOCH

Oh yes.

NURSE

Really?

GRUOCH

It feels like womb.

NURSE grabs the sword and pulls it free, shocking GRUOCH.

NURSE
And how does that feel?

GRUOCH
You could have --

NURSE
Before you accuse me, check.

GRUOCH feels between her legs.

GRUOCH
No -- I don't think you cut --

NURSE places the sword-tip against GRUOCH's dress. GRUOCH hesitates, then stands her legs apart enough for NURSE to slide the sword back into place between her knees.

NURSE
You may be both lucky and unlucky enough
to survive your childhood.
Either way, I will still get paid.
Which of us would you rather be?

GRUOCH and NURSE stare at each other for a moment, then GRUOCH grabs the hilt of the sword and begins to hobby-horse again.

GRUOCH
Keep up with me.

NURSE
I am paid to follow you.

GRUOCH
You are paid to please me.

NURSE
I am paid to hurt you
at the appropriate times,
otherwise known as education.
That may not please you,
but it pleases me.

NURSE smiles, follows. Lights down.

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Scene 2: Second Lady

Sound of wind. Lights dawn. SOLDIER stands at attention, on guard. He rests his sword point on the ground, hands perched on its hilt. GRUOCH skips in, NURSE following.

NURSE
(indicating sword)
It has been said
you should not be wearing that.

GRUOCH
I like to wear it.

NURSE
It is said
that it makes you
very unlike a lady.

GRUOCH stops skipping.

GRUOCH
I thought
I was being
a child.

NURSE
That's over.

GRUOCH
So short.

NURSE
You've had longer than most.

GRUOCH
When?

NURSE
The moment the word "lady"
sickened the air.

GRUOCH
Oh.
Oh.
Could you suck it
back in --

NURSE
I am not paid enough.

GRUOCH

Oh.
Is "lady"
one of the hurts?

NURSE

How do you feel?

GRUOCH

Limpid --
is that a word?
It just sprang
into my mouth.

NURSE

There may be hope
for you yet,
unfortunately.

GRUOCH

Have I been educated?

NURSE

Do you know what death is?

GRUOCH

No.

NURSE

Then no.

GRUOCH

Then I need to know death.
And lady.
And limpid.
You said "makes you" -- me --
"very unlike a lady" -- me --
And what, it is said,
is a lady?

NURSE

Whatever men say she is --
it is said.

GRUOCH

Then am I a lady?

NURSE

On the building-up towards one, yes --

GRUOCH

Then that means
I am
what men
say I am.

NURSE

You're too young
to have men say anything
about you.
Have a taste for you, yes --
always their tastes to navigate,
like walking through
a cow-shitted field --
(tip-toes through a cow-shitted field)
And one and two and three and four --

GRUOCH imitates her, laughs.

GRUOCH

(overlapping)

-- and two and three and four --

NURSE

Stop it!

GRUOCH stops. NURSE repeats her steps.

NURSE

And one and two and three and four --
but of that we will need to --

GRUOCH

(pointing to SOLDIER)

Is he a man?

NURSE

You must learn to focus.

GRUOCH

Is he a man?

NURSE

As a mongrel is a dog.

GRUOCH

Is that a "yes"?
Remember,
I am young and don't yet know
the subtle corrosive power
of metaphor.
That just sprang into my mouth.

NURSE

That is a very subtle thing
for such a young
obvious
girl to say.

GRUOCH

I am trying to surprise myself
every half-hour.

NURSE

You'll be surprised
how "surprise" wears off.

GRUOCH

Is he a man who would
say things
about
what I am?

NURSE

Yes.

GRUOCH

Good!
My half-hour
was coming up.

GRUOCH walks over to SOLDIER, sword drawn.

GRUOCH

That was so much simpler,
wasn't it?

NURSE

As if "simpler"
could simply
reschedule --

GRUOCH
(to SOLDIER)

Oy!

NURSE

-- the nausea
of experience --

GRUOCH

Oy!

NURSE

Listen to me!

GRUOCH faces NURSE.

NURSE

A clear heart guarantees you nothing --
a clear heart will make nothing clear.
A clear heart tricks you
into believing
that being sincere
is a virtue.

GRUOCH stares at NURSE.

GRUOCH

La - la - la - la - la - la --
eleemosynary --
that, too,
just leaped --

GRUOCH turns back to SOLDIER.

GRUOCH

Oy!

SOLDIER does not respond, remains at attention.

GRUOCH

What do you say I am?
Balance off
what the wicked tit
over there
says about you.

No response. Wind blows.

GRUOCH
(prompting)

A lady is.

No response. Wind blows.

GRUOCH
(prompting)

As a man I say that a lady is --

No response. Wind blows.

GRUOCH

I am told men say such things.
That men which are also considered dogs --

she says --
say such things.
I don't understand how
these connections connect,
but there they are.

No response. GRUOCH turns to NURSE.

GRUOCH
Either you lied to me
and he's not a man or a dog --
or he is being --
what's the word
I have the right
to say?

NURSE
You have the right to say all of them.

GRUOCH
(reciting)
Father says words churn
the heart into piss --

NURSE
A pissant thing
for a king to say --

GRUOCH
Sssh! -- I'm trying to [remember] --
(reciting)
-- only action
makes the heart hard enough
to be hard enough
for action.

NURSE
Do you always follow your father?

GRUOCH
Do I always --

GRUOCH ponders this possible heresy.

GRUOCH
I want the word first.

NURSE
Said against
what your father says
about words.

GRUOCH
(uncertain)

Not against --

NURSE
You begin to suck on
that word-tit
and --

GRUOCH
Tell them to me!
(brandishes sword)
Or I will --

NURSE
(mimicking/mockng her action)
"Or I will!"
Or you will this:
you will kill the one person
who cares enough about you
to treat you with contempt
so that you will come to love
what you hate needing
but cannot do without
and thus be stronger
when you have to kill me
and no longer need
what you hate and pretend to love
and thus can be rid of
the squalor of pretending.

Silence. Wind blows.

GRUOCH
I did not follow that.

NURSE
Do you want me to repeat it?
That you will kill --

GRUOCH
No! I am choosing,
on this half hour,
to stay unsubtle --
let's keep it that way.
(pointing to SOLDIER)
I want to know the words.
"Or he is being -- "

NURSE
Obstinate. Or cautious.
Traitorous. Or discreet.

The word depends -- on --
how you plan to bend your heart toward
killing him or
sparing him
because --

(speaking directly to SOLDIER)
-- he is yours to kill or spare.
Aren't you?

GRUOCH listens with mouth agape, unsure of the logic, clear on the power underneath. She walks up to SOLDIER and inspects him as if she were inspecting a curiosity.

GRUOCH
Won't bending my heart to --
you know --
(whispers)
-- killing him --
(back to full)
-- won't that hurt me?

NURSE raises an eyebrow, which annoys GRUOCH.

GRUOCH
You have to help me learn
to learn these things --
I am dependent upon -- you --
your fart-filled skirts!

NURSE
This is what
the unlocking tongue
of your father means, Gruoch --
such questions -- philosophy --
prayer --
simply make the muscles go dim.
A pinch of gall or
the dawdle of affection
can undermine
the fevered blood
of roused power.

GRUOCH
But I should kill him because
he does not answer me?
Or because
he has offended good taste --
where did that come from? --
and needs to learn
a lesson? Or because --
I don't understand half
the words I'm using --

NURSE

Kill him because
a king's daughter can.
Kill him because
you want to.
Kill him because
there is nothing better to do.
We all die --
it's not as if the worm-feast
hovering inside our skulls
is your fault.
Or do not kill him.
As you choose.
My dear.

GRUOCH lifts her sword and swings at SOLDIER's leg. With barely a move, SOLDIER moves and blocks her swing.

GRUOCH

Why did he do that if I can supposedly --

NURSE

You are not the only one with choices.

GRUOCH tries again. Solider easily blocks each of her thrusts. ELFRIDA enters, watches.

Before long GRUOCH is panting heavily and drops to the ground.

GRUOCH

You are not making
my choosing easy!

NURSE notices ELFRIDA. GRUOCH notices ELFRIDA. SOLDIER kneels, head bowed. NURSE does not.

NURSE

It's how she's chosen
to work out the questions
that are questioning at her --
thinking that her father
required her to --

ELFRIDA

Shut up.

NURSE

Of course.

ELFRIDA

Gruoch!

GRUOCH stands, depleted, head bowed, unmoving.

ELFRIDA
(to NURSE)

You are deployed to protect her.

NURSE

From?

ELFRIDA

Gruoch!

GRUOCH still does not move.

ELFRIDA

From herself, at least.
This frontal --

NURSE

"Herself" is the one thing
she has to be afraid of least
around here.

ELFRIDA

Gruoch! Come here.

GRUOCH does not move.

NURSE

I have my limitations.

ELFRIDA

A wolf has only so many teeth,
yet it still manages
to feed itself well.

NURSE

Which is why you deploy me
rather than kill me.

ELFRIDA moves to GRUOCH, who has begun to shiver.

ELFRIDA

Don't begin with any excuses.
Or explanations.

GRUOCH

Nurse told me --
Nurse told me!
She told me that father --

ELFRIDA
The king, my husband, your father --

NURSE
My liege --

ELFRIDA
(indicating SOLDIER)
-- his master --
that is the world --
arranged so --
the world as it
must appear real to be real.

NURSE
The problem with that
piece of instruction is that
she may -- nay, she does --
have her problems with that --
lesson.

ELFRIDA and NURSE share a look that, if translated, would say, "A bosom full of the milk of human kindness must not interfere."

ELFRIDA takes out a small knife and walks up to SOLDIER. She gestures to him, and he exposes his neck. Without hesitation ELFRIDA plunges the small knife into SOLDIER's jugular. SOLDIER dies. NURSE moves in closer to inspect, then hands ELFRIDA a handkerchief.

ELFRIDA
(shows the knife)
Smaller, Gruoch --
(cleans knife)
-- that is how we women must deploy --
in small turns of the screw --
we gain nothing by
mimicking bucklers and slash
but must find
our own solid --

NURSE
Sordid --

ELFRIDA
-- silences.
(to NURSE)
Shut up! Otherwise --

NURSE
Otherwise look to your daughter.

GRUOCH is in tremors, staring at SOLDIER. ELFRIDA takes GRUOCH's sword, hands it to NURSE, then slips the dirk into GRUOCH's hand. Almost immediately, GRUOCH calms.

She looks at the dirk, touches her chest to feel that her breathing has calmed, then, without hesitation, goes to plunge the knife into NURSE's thigh. NURSE blocks the thrust. GRUOCH tries again and again, in a mixture of rage and calculation.

NURSE, tiring of the game, finally grabs GRUOCH's wrist, smiles.

ELFRIDA

Let her go.
Stay still.

NURSE lets her go, and GRUOCH goes to stab again -- but stops short.

GRUOCH

I choose.

ELFRIDA

Take her in and
wash her up.
Make sure she has something
that warms her.
(to GRUOCH)
I will come to you later.

GRUOCH

(pointing to SOLDIER)
What will father say?

NURSE and ELFRIDA exchange a look.

ELFRIDA

We don't need him
to know
what we have helped you
to know.

GRUOCH

(to NURSE)
You said man or dog.
Which one is he now?

NURSE

(to ELFRIDA)
We were discussing
the nature of metaphor.
We have very interesting discussions
when you are not around.

ELFRIDA

The dead may be luckier, daughter.

GRUOCH turns an unbeliever's face to ELFRIDA.

ELFRIDA

Metaphor cannot break
their bones any more.

GRUOCH

What?

ELFRIDA

They are intact without being
punished for being intact.

GRUOCH turns her unbeliever's face to NURSE.

GRUOCH

Luckier?

NURSE shrugs.

GRUOCH

That little clicky catch in your throat --
will I be able to learn
to do that as well?
"Exposition of shit."
I am not exactly sure
what that means --
it just came to my tongue.
What does it mean?
What does it mean?
Will that be happening
more and more, mother --
things coming into my mouth?

GRUOCH gives her mother a shit-eating grin, all-innocence once again.

ELFRIDA

She needs something to warm her.

NURSE

I assume that means
"not you."

ELFRIDA

Go. Now.

NURSE leads GRUOCH away. ELFRIDA kneels down by the corpse, extracts the swords from his grip. The sound of wind increases as she slices the air. She exits.

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Scene 3: Third Lady

Wind continues. A wash of light from bright to dim to bright. SOLDIER alone.

GRUOCH comes on bearing a candle, comes to the dead SOLDIER.

GRUOCH

I am warm now.

What are you now?

GRUOCH waits for a response, gets none. She sits next to SOLDIER as a child sits, takes out her dirk.

GRUOCH puts a delicate finger into SOLDIER's blood, smears it on the dirk's blade, inspects it in the light. She hears crows.

At the sound of the crows, SOLDIER sits up.

GRUOCH takes this in stride.