

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Macbeth*, presented at the Longacre Theatre, New York, March 29 to July 10, 2022**

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Directed by Sam Gold. Scenic design by Christine Jones. Costume design by Suttirat Larlarb. Lighting design by Jane Cox. Sound design by Mikhaal Sulaiman. Original music by Gaelynn Lea. With Daniel Craig (Macbeth), Ruth Negga (Lady Macbeth), Che Ayende (Witch, Lord), Philip James Brannon (Second Witch, Ross, Murderer), Grantham Coleman (Macduff), Maria Dizzia (First Witch, Lady Macduff, Doctor), Eboni Flowers (Witch, Lord), Amber Gray (Banquo, Gentlewoman), Emeka Guindo (Fleance, Young Siward), Paul Lazar (King Duncan, Porter, Siward), Bobbi Mackenzie (Third Witch, Macduff's Child), Michael Patrick Thornton (Lennox, Murderer), Danny Wolohan (Seyton, Bloody Captain, Murderer, Lord).

To begin with, this was a surprisingly funny rendition of *Macbeth*. Michael Patrick Thornton, who played Lennox and the third murderer, introduced the production with a short stand-up routine on the famous curse, and how much Shakespeare accomplished during his 1608 lockdown, whereas 'I just wheeled around my apartment feeling sorry for myself'. To general hilarity, Macbeth cracked open a can of beer in his emotional turmoil after the murder of Duncan, and the Porter accepted a similar can handed up from the audience at the beginning of his monologue. At some points, this humour strengthened the production. Daniel Craig's comic timing, in particular, was flawless. I usually have to insist to my students on the irony of saying that Duncan will depart 'Tomorrow, as he purposes' (1.5.29) or the remark that "'Twas a rough night' (2.3.62), but Craig successfully delivered both statements as one-liners.¹

¹ Act, scene and line references are to William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, ed. by Nicholas Brooke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

On the other hand, the production seemed to have difficulty becoming serious. 'Not bear the blade myself' was met with laughter as another of Macbeth's one-liners, rather than horror at a contemplated violation of the most basic of social ties (1.7.16). The two murderers giggled at finding themselves speaking in unison. The claim that Duncan had been 'clear in his great office', was retained, but he was manifestly a molester, pawing at Banquo who was played as a woman by Amber Gray (1.7.18). In fact, Paul Lazar played the king as a clown, with a fake belly filled with blood and (hopefully) armoured against Craig stabbing too hard when performing the murder onstage. Soon after dying as Duncan, Lazar stood up to play the Porter, then climbed back onto the bed to become Duncan again, discovered by Macduff and Lennox. For all the blood of his onstage murder, it has the superficiality of a clown's death.

A mixture of blood and humour characterized the performance as a whole. Different actors repeatedly cleaned blood off the same spot on stage left. One might take this gesture to show how violence is obfuscated in the offstage world as well as in this fictive Scotland, but it seemed rather to show the entire production agreeing with Lady Macbeth's claim that 'a little water clears us of the deed' (2.2.66). Every murder was staged, as was the death of Lady Macbeth (portrayed as a childbirth gone horribly wrong), but the blood could always be cleared away, and repeatedly was. The final fight scene took place in slow motion, which gradually came to resemble something like traumatized numbness. Finally, Macbeth suffered a wound that bled like a punctured artery in his upper thigh; Macduff was about to dispatch him when Malcolm suddenly ended the play, and the whole cast shared a soup which had been in preparation from before the play even began. On entering the theatre, the audience encountered actors on stage right chopping vegetables. The soup grew increasingly grotesque and served as a repeated motif, or perhaps merely a running joke. Macbeth drank some on meeting the witches, and shrugged at the flavour to titterings of amusement from the audience, then was force-fed it before seeing the apparitions. Shared at the end, the soup becomes a symbol of community, as though the feast broken by the arrival of Banquo's ghost were restored. One of the younger cast members sang a song that I can't accurately quote as it certainly isn't in the Folio text, but part of which concerned moving beyond tragedy. A Brechtian might rave about alienation, but I found the effect merely alienating, or even nihilistic: the production used a great deal of stage blood, but we were never allowed to forget that it was only stage blood, so none of the many onstage deaths had much real importance.

All but three members of the company played multiple roles, and doubling detracted from the individuation of characters. The same soldier (played by Danny Wolohan) was executed (throat slit, hanging upside down), had a thumb cut off for the 'pilot's thumb' (though nothing else indicated that he was a sailor, or even a marine), appeared with an

open amputation above the knee after the intermission, and then left under his own power at the end of the scene. Thornton not only opened the play, but also served as a dark chorus, taking on the words of the thanes in the second scene of act five, to describe how Macbeth is surrounded and doomed. As Lennox he remained onstage with Macbeth, Duncan's body and the attendants, handing Macbeth the knife used to bloodily dispatch them. He never changed costume, and as the only member of the company in a wheelchair, was instantly recognizable. Thornton showed himself capable of switching from offhand humour to laconic seriousness, so one cannot fault Sam Gold's desire to keep him on stage as much as possible, but the effect was that Thornton appeared to play a single, merged character, with unexplained and probably incoherent motives.

This is not to say that the production was lacking in strengths, especially in the three actors who did not play multiple roles. As Macduff, Grantham Coleman effortlessly merged iambic pentameter with the cadences of African American English: I would be delighted to watch him play pretty much anything in the canon. Craig's muscular Macbeth physically dominated his slight wife, picking her up when they met, and also carrying her offstage in his arms after she fainted. (Unlike in A. C. Bradley's famous or notorious note, there is no question in this production that she really faints.) This physical disparity, however, turned from protective to threatening after Duncan's murder. As Macbeth raged that 'full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife', she shrank back, pressing herself against a pillar in fear (3.2.39). Her handwashing was played as a repeated, obsessive movement, punctuated by the sign of the cross. Doubling practices attenuated even the force of this scene, however: Gray as the Gentlewoman held Negga's Lady Macbeth, as though attempting to comfort her. Because both actors were black women, I suppose this provided a moment of solidarity, albeit one with no support in the text, where the Gentlewoman only refers to Lady Macbeth with horrified objectivity in the third person. Because Gray also played Banquo, moreover, it seemed that Lady Macbeth was comforted by one of the last people whose concern she deserved. In any case, Lady Macbeth in this performance generally appeared as a victim, rather than the demanding virago as whom many actors have made their reputations. In keeping with this, the Macbeths shared only a brief confrontation when they decided to undertake the murder, with Macbeth surrendering without so much struggle as would get him out of his chair.

Ayanna Thompson, who served as dramaturge, commented in an article in *Vogue* that she asked Craig about 'how your whiteness plays', and the term 'white' gained a force I've seen in no other production.² Lady Macbeth's claim that 'I shame to bear a heart so white'

² Chloe Schama, 'Daniel Craig and Ruth Negga star in Broadway's New *Macbeth*, a Cathartic Release for Our Times', *Vogue*, 23 March, 2022. <<https://www.vogue.com/article/daniel-craig-ruth-negga-macbeth>>

made the colour of Macbeth's skin into an accusation of cowardice (2.2.63-64). Later, he projected his own anxieties onto the 'cream-faced loon' who delivered the news of Birnam Forest apparently moving (5.3.11). Craig's Macbeth was shown enjoying a high level of privilege in his society – he often appeared lounging in a chair, and wore silk pyjamas, then later a fur coat – and needed to be stirred into action by the aspirations of his black wife. When telling his wife that 'I have bought / Golden opinions from all kinds of people / Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, / Not cast aside so soon' (1.7.32-35), Craig's Macbeth substituted the word 'received' for 'bought,' as if the honours which his society bestowed had not been purchased with the horrors of combat. On the other hand, Gray's portrayal of Banquo showed that this depiction of Scotland did not systemically exclude black women from positions of authority. The contrast of privilege and marginality seemed, in other words, to fail both ways, though it was suggestive.

The production engaged not only with race, but with a number of contemporary social justice issues. Asia Kate Dillon might have been history's first openly transgender Malcolm, for instance. The pronoun 'they' acknowledged this, but also made it seem as though Malcolm had been merged with Donalbain, who did not otherwise appear. Not every act of political engagement seemed to add much, however: it was unclear why Macbeth would choose to reinforce the two murderers with a paraplegic third murderer, nor, as the third murderer's killing of Banquo was necessarily facilitated by a firearm, why all other characters restricted themselves to bladed weapons. Most importantly, the production's interpretation of the play seemed to require a general undermining of its genre. It is sometimes asked whether political engagement can co-exist with comedy. This production, however, seemed to ask whether it can co-exist with tragedy, and to conclude that it can not.