

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



William C. Carroll, *Adapting Macbeth: A Cultural History* (London and New York: The Arden Shakespeare, 2022). xv + 267 pp. ISBN 978-1-3501-8139-7

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William Carroll's *Adapting Macbeth: A Cultural History* ranges widely, though not as widely as its author would like. He engagingly admits that his choices about what to include 'depend in great part on accessibility, my own language capabilities and some serendipity' (p. 4). In a chapter on global adaptations, Carroll concedes that he 'cannot pretend to know the cultures or languages of all these countries well, or at all' (p.173). Similarly, he admits that he 'cannot do any kind of justice' to the 'staggering' number of Asian adaptations (p.191), then, in an endnote, regrets ignoring Chinese opera (p. 234, n15). Carroll has no reason to be so modest. He writes knowingly about Italian opera, German intellectual history, film (especially *Noir*) and several genres of fiction, as well as all of Shakespeare's sources for the play, in English and Latin.

By examining Shakespeare's sources in an unnumbered introductory chapter, Carroll begins his survey with works that pre-empt adaptation. His second, third and fifth chapters focus on individual characters, respectively Duncan and Malcolm (together), Fleance and Lady Macbeth. Chapters four, six and eight concentrate on genres: films, novels and musical adaptations (including opera). Chapter seven — "Global and Racial *Macbeth*" — isn't concerned with either character or genre. Not surprisingly, the contents of these chapters overlap: Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* turns up in the introduction, in the chapter on film, in the chapter on global adaptations and even in the chapter on musical adaptations, where we are informed that *Metal Macbeth*, a Japanese musical adaptation from 2006, references the film (p. 213). The not-quite infinite variety of adaptations demands organisation, but no system could hope to be truly methodical. The first chapter title — 'Political *Macbeth*' — names a criterion by which Carroll divides adaptations throughout

the book. The term ‘political’ often seems to mean everything and therefore nothing, but Carroll at least initially narrows it: ‘Here I will analyse how some adaptations revised the Folio to support or undermine political structures and regimes outside the play’ (p. 24). He begins with William Davenant and David Garrick, who provide what Carroll terms with a Biblical flourish ‘the Authorized Version’ of *Macbeth*, one which emphasises legitimate power and royal succession. Moreover, ‘The drive for political power [. . .] devolved into the story of a sensitive soul’s personal ambition or punishment’ in further iterations of the Authorized Version. Carroll cites Friedrich Nietzsche against this sort of ethical and psychological criticism (p. 28). In contrast to the Authorized Version, Carroll presents productions and adaptations influenced by the work of Jan Kott, whose ‘conception of Shakespeare has been so completely absorbed into contemporary theatrical practice that it is easy to forget how revolutionary it was’ (p. 36). In particular, he draws attention to adaptations by Heiner Müller who ‘strongly resisted Shakespeare’s text and the entire tradition of the Authorized Version’ (p. 47), and Eugene Ionesco who ‘also refuses to see *Macbeth*’s as a tragedy of character or “ambition”’ (p. 51). Carroll presents those who continue to read the play in such a way as uninformed:

If *Macbeth* can be used — as if it is *not* ‘political’ — to teach business leadership or just serve as neutral entertainment for the military, it can only be by disregarding over four hundred years of political adaptations and interpretations. (p. 61)

There’s no reason, however, that adapters and critics must follow their predecessors any more than that Shakespeare had to adhere to his sources, and Carroll shows in his introduction that Shakespeare did not.

The tendency to, as Carroll says of Ionesco, turn ‘the play’s values inside out’ (p. 68) extends to the representations of particular characters. ‘The Duncans in *noir* adaptations,’ for instance, ‘are invariably made men who have murdered their own way to the top, and in most cases fully deserve their violent deaths’ (p. 71). The Duncan in *Macbeth: A Novel* (by Andrew Hartley and David Hewson, 2012) is a pedophile who ‘*really* deserves to be murdered’ (Carroll’s emphasis; p. 139). Adapters show a similar tendency to convert Malcolm into a ‘murderous tyrant’ (p. 78). Fleance is often reintroduced at the conclusion to provide a ‘closed frame’ (p. 87) but also to provide another potential tyrant, reinforcing the depiction of a ‘cyclical continuation of violence and subversion’ (p. 93). As Carroll admits, such readings flatten characters. ‘Modern filmmakers have tended to show one side or the other of Duncan’ — as naive or even saintly, or alternatively as an effective war-lord

— ‘but rarely have managed to suggest both’ (p. 71). Carroll cites Georgianna Ziegler to the effect that Victorians presented Lady Macbeth either ‘as barbaric and passionate, or domesticated and caring’ (p. 125); moreover, ‘Such attempts to “understand” Lady Macbeth anticipate more recent adaptations in significant ways’ (p. 126). Nietzsche might not consider it much of a loss to rob characters of ambiguity, but many of us would.

Moreover, one might argue that these Kottian readings are ultimately cynical about all politics, describing the world as a series of murders and revenge in which nothing really changes: ‘Fleance “mayst” revenge”, but in some adaptations it is a certainty’ (p. 94). Kott, we must remember, was an existentialist describing the absurdity of human existence, not an activist seeking ‘to support or undermine political structures and regimes outside the play’. Carroll has to place the many adaptations of *Macbeth* into some sort of structure, but his central distinction between Kottian ‘political’ readings, and a conservative Authorized Version tends to become Manichean, as though our only choice is either a naive acceptance of the divine right of kings on the one hand, or cynicism towards any and every political system on the other. It is a credit to the breadth of Carroll’s reading — his modesty notwithstanding — that he presents several cases where this distinction does not apply. Pavel Kohout wrote in resistance to the communist regime of Czechoslovakia, but his Malcolm remains, like that of the Authorized Version, ‘a righteous figure ushering in a new order’ (p. 179). Carroll notes similarly that Welcome Msomi’s *uMabatha* earned the endorsement of Nelson Mandela by becoming ‘in effect, a Zulu equivalent of the Authorized Version’ (p. 184; p. 186). Describing the many German adaptations, Carroll notes that

throughout the Nazi regime, the GDR regime, and post-1989 politics, *Macbeth* proved an irresistible paradigm, depending on how the play was read, for both the legitimacy of state power and resistance to it. (p. 46)

He makes a similar observation a couple of pages earlier about post-war Romania (p. 44). What Carroll says of *Macbeth* in general can also be said of the two versions: either a Kottian reading of the play or the Authorized Version can be deployed to either subvert or legitimate state power, whichever sort of state power happens to furnish the immediate political context. In fact, a single adaptation can be played either way, as Carroll shows with his description of the recent production history of Giuseppe Verdi’s Italian opera, including a 2018 Berlin production which was ‘about as Kottian a vision of future division as could be offered,’ whereas ‘Most productions now present the 1865 text and music more

or less as written — a musical equivalent of the Authorized Version’ (p. 207).

Carroll also offers a better explanation than political engagement for the tendency towards adaptations which challenge the Folio text. Early in the book, he notes that the Folio contains a number of gaps, which elicit efforts to fill: ‘[T]he desire for completeness and for answers (just how many children *did* Lady Macbeth have?) to unanswerable questions persists through editing practices — and adaptation’ (p. 6). Indeed, ‘many, perhaps most adaptations attempt to “make sense” by rewriting the apparent irregularities’ (p. 8). Moreover, the title character himself ‘often defies categorization even within similar concepts of the play’s structural flaws’ (p. 8). This process of filling gaps begins with Davenant and Garrick’s Authorized Version, but it also includes apparently subversive adaptations. As a result, many adaptations repeat the same tropes, some of which pre-date Shakespeare’s play. George Buchanan, Carroll reminds us, criticised Duncan’s rule in his 1582 *History of Scotland* (p. 64), and Lady Macbeth’s son gets recycled from Raphael Holinshed’s 1587 *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* into a number of novels (p. 91). Even when they don’t return to the source-texts, many adapters borrow from earlier adaptations. Probably the best example is Tom Stoppard who, with *Cahoot’s Macbeth*, ‘eclipsed Kohout’s actual play, even as [he] elevated it to world-wide status’ (p. 177). Carroll notes of Tom Magill’s ‘compelling 2007 film *Mickey B*’ that ‘some of his adaptive choices will be familiar’ (pp. 122; 123). Lady Macbeth’s pregnancy and miscarriage ‘has now become standard theatrical and filmic practice’ (p. 148). Most novelistic adaptations, Carroll observes, follow an anonymous 1708 work entitled *The Secret History of Mack-Beth, King of Scotland* in inserting ‘backstories, filled gaps, explanations, and, as we see here, the exposure of “secret histories”’ (p. 163). Opera productions follow stage adaptations ‘with familiar cuts, emphases [. . .] and “political” revisions or enhancements’ (p. 214). Carroll ascribes this sort of repetition to ‘the rhizomatic nature of the adaptive gesture’ (p. 216), though one might conclude more simply that there are a limited number of ways to close the gaps left open by the Folio text. Penny Woolcock’s *Macbeth on the Estate*, Carroll notes, ‘employed several of the themes we have seen in other adaptations’ (p. 117), though he also quotes Woolcock declaring that ‘If Shakespeare is kept traditional, then it’s just for the tourists and the dead’ (p. 116). Woolcock appears less original than she thinks herself, following a tradition of adaptation as old and in some ways older than the Authorized Version or even Shakespeare’s Folio. Moreover, while filling gaps, many of these repeated tropes also flatten the play’s ambiguities.

This is unfortunate, because adaptation also re-examines some of the play’s themes,

changing our reading of *Macbeth* and potentially opening it to new possibilities. I don't think I ever would have asked myself why Macbeth does not simply name Fleance as his heir, had Kurosawa not had his protagonist do precisely that in *Throne of Blood* (which, incidentally, Carroll agrees is 'the greatest adaptation of *any* of Shakespeare's plays'; p. 180). It's much to Carroll's credit that he shows repeated themes as well as tropes, quoting Bertolt Brecht on how the play is 'a good story not of far away and long ago but recurring again and again in common life without losing its profound appeal' (p. 107). It is this 'profound appeal' which elicits adaptation. Carroll has not only produced a near-encyclopedic guide to adaptations of *Macbeth*, but also shown both the promise and the risk of adaptation as of criticism: Both can reveal or occlude aspects of the work being adapted or criticized. Moreover, he does so with an engaging wit, describing Maggie Power's 1997 *Lady Macbeth's Tale* as 'providing many soft-core porn scenes [. . .] often blunt as a hammer' in a section titled 'Fifty shades of Dunsinane' (p 159), and informing us that 'Punchdrunk's production was one of those you-had-to-be-there events' (p. 218). There are occasional typos (8, 59, 97, 137, 143, 144, 180, 189), but the only real error is an inconsistency in spelling the name of Erich Schumacher, which I would not have noticed had I not attended Schumacher Public School, in Schumacher, Ontario (no relation).