



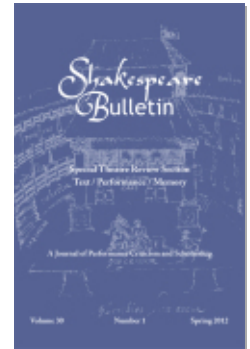
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Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance (review)

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BOOK REVIEW

Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance. Edited by Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Pp. xviii + 288. \$28.95.

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This rich and provocative collection of essays is a compilation of historical, theoretical and interdisciplinary viewpoints on ways in which performances of *Macbeth* have engaged issues of race. Part of Palgrave Macmillan's series "Signs of Race" (series editors Arthur L. Little, Jr, and Gary Taylor), the book originated in a 2008 symposium at Rhodes College, organized by the volume's co-editor Scott L. Newstok. That conference, like many of the essays that it engendered, had its origin not so much in "Shakespeare studies" in the literary sense, but in performance: Newstok was inspired by the perhaps coincidental occurrence of two racially marked *Macbeths* in the Memphis area—Hattiloo Theatre Company's production with a largely black cast, and Opera Memphis' production of Verdi's opera with black principals. Newstok and co-editor Ayanna Thompson are to be commended for the impressive speed with which they have brought this important post-conference volume to publication.

The twenty-seven contributions (more numerous than in many such collections) form a kind of miscellany, comprising a number of methodologies (performance history, theory, testimony and polemic, to name a few) and written by both academics and non-academics, including several actors and directors. But they share a common goal: to "combat," as Thompson writes, "the historical amnesia" about *Macbeth's* "long history of literary and performance intersections with race" (6). Though lacking obvious explicit markers of race, the "Scottish play" is revealed in this volume as a site of long-standing—and continuing—racialized contention in the United States. Some of the essays focus on vexed questions of casting: the appropriateness of so-called "white" roles for black actors, and ongoing debates about color-blind casting. Others give accounts of the long after-life of *Macbeth* in racially charged political discourses. Still others chronicle the many ways in which the play has been displaced from medieval Scotland to other settings, thereby speaking more directly to the racial struggles of those other times and places.

I received this volume for review just as my Shakespeare classes at Oberlin were discussing a racially inflected campus production of *Macbeth* directed by faculty member Justin Emeka (a similar production by the same director at the University of Washington in 2005 is briefly chronicled in the volume's listing

of “Selected Productions of *Macbeth* Featuring Non-traditional Casting” [250]). The production, set in the American South during Reconstruction, had white Macbeths, he from the North and she from the South; Banquo was a freedman who had served with Macbeth in the northern army; the witches were freed slaves. The murder of Banquo was staged as a lynching by disgruntled southern whites whom Macbeth had motivated to form the KKK. The controversy resulting from the production, in classes as well as in the student newspaper, made it clear how much a book like this is needed. Even on a liberal and race-conscious campus, too many students easily evoked the tired position that Shakespeare’s text, in which there are no black characters, makes a racialized production irrelevant or even irreverent to a misconceived notion of the originary genius of Shakespeare.

The essays are organized in a rough chronology. To begin the volume, co-editor Thompson addresses the anthology’s title, particularly the word “weyward,” which in the Folio is the word used by the witches to describe themselves: “The weyward Sisters, hand in hand. . . .” In most editions, the word is changed to “weird.” This volume, Thompson asserts, wants “to maintain the multiplicity *and* instability of the original text’s typography” in order to recognize “the ambivalent nature of the racialized re-stagings, adaptations, and allusions to *Macbeth*” (3). An essay by Celia R. Daileader follows, continuing Thompson’s textual-theoretical inquiry with an examination of the instability latent in Middleton’s additions to Shakespeare’s play, including the line about “secret, black and midnight hags” (4.1.64), a resonant phrase in a volume about race.

A recurring episode in the performance history analyzed in this volume is Orson Welles’s famous 1935 Harlem production of *Macbeth* for the Federal Theatre project. That event is contextualized first by a series of essays about the play’s meaning for the century preceding it. Heather S. Nathans shows how allusions to the play were ubiquitous in antebellum slavery debates: she cites, for example, Melville’s famous epithet, “(Weird John Brown) / The meteor of the war” (from “The Portent,” 1859) as a reference to the fatal prophesying of the weird sisters (29). For the great orator Frederick C. Douglass, as John C. Briggs points out, Macbeth was a recurring “exemplar of the haunted man trying to break the manacles of his diabolical enchantment, his psychological and sleepless slavery” (38). For Douglass, the ghost of Banquo became a figure of slavery’s inescapable visage of guilt for north and south alike. We also learn from Briggs that Douglass frequently evoked Macbeth as a figure of heroic action against all odds, a doomed but valiant hero crying defiantly, “Hang out our banners on the outward walls” (5.5.1). Extending the account of the antebellum fascination with *Macbeth*, Bernth Lindfors draws on his deep knowledge of Ira Aldridge, showing the ambivalence of white responses to this passionate black actor for whom Macbeth was a favorite role. The inflamed nationalism of the Astor Place Riot of 1849, as Joyce Green MacDonald points out in “Minstrel Show *Macbeth*,” is deeply implicated with race, inseparable from the racial politics of minstrel burlesques. Nick Moschovakis analyzes allusions to *Macbeth* in early twentieth-

century African American writers, for whom both the ghost of Banquo and the defiant Macbeth of the end of the play remain important and problematic tropes. Lisa N. Simmons, a filmmaker, details an all-black production of the play in Boston half a year before Welles's Harlem production, about which she is making a documentary.

The contradictory racial aspects of the Welles production itself are analyzed by Marguerite Rippey in "Black Cast Conjures White Genius: Unraveling the Mystique of Orson Welles's 'Voodoo' *Macbeth*." In an important centerpiece essay for the volume, co-editor Newstok details the theatrical and racial afterlife of Welles's production, which as he says has attained a "hyper-canonical status within the history of African-American theatre" (92). As Newstok writes, "even when you do not really re-do voodoo, you are bound to re-do it . . . Welles places you in a color-bind" (96, 98). A collaborative and community-based attempt to simulate Welles's performance in the twenty-first century is the subject of Lenwood Sloan's contribution to the volume: this operatic *Vo-Du Macbeth* was never fully realized, due in part to the millennial events of September 11 and Hurricane Katrina. We are reminded that the real world and that of *Macbeth* are not sometimes so distant as we might wish.

As the volume goes on to consider race-inflected productions closer to our own time, the actor Harry J. Lennix, Jr., leads off with a frank, thoughtful and assertive account of an all-black production at the Lillian Theater in Los Angeles. Alexander C. Y. Huang explores the Asian American resonances of the play in discussing John R. Briggs' 1985 adaptation, *Shogun Macbeth*. Further race-conscious productions are described by Anita Maynard-Losh (a 2003 Alaska production in English and Tlingit), José A. Esquea (a Latino adaptation produced in Los Angeles by LA TEA), and William C. Carroll (an "elaborately multilingual" production at the University of Hawai'i at Manoa). A common element here is the increasing sense that, as Esquea writes, "art," including a classic such as *Macbeth*, "belongs to everyone" (135).

In a section dedicated to music, composer Wallace McClain Cheatham discusses the importance of Verdi's *Lady Macbeth* for African American singers, especially Shirley Verrett. Douglas Lanier contributes a telling close reading of Duke Ellington's much-maligned Shakespearean suite, *Such Sweet Thunder* (1957), arguing that it deserves more attention in the context of the composer's own aspirations and the cultural shifts of African Americans in the 1950s. Todd Landon Barnes considers the phenomenon of hip-hop *Macbeths* in the context of the culture wars, and, while critical of racially naïve appropriations of Shakespeare by hip-hop and vice versa, sees some hope for "modes of understanding . . . that might keep us from jumping Jim Crow while playing the Upstart Crow" (163).

Francesca Royster addresses race in an unexpected place, the familiar 1971 film of *Macbeth* by Roman Polanski, which amongst its many exposures "shows us multiple white and imperfect bodies" (180) and thus, in her view, interrogates the supposed neutrality of whiteness. Courtney Lehmann also explores the problems

of whiteness in Nina Menkes' Gulf War film, *The Bloody Child: An Interior of Violence*. Here, as in Royster's analysis of Polanski, to be white—"fair"—is problematized by the ambiguities of ambition, power, and fatality: "fair is foul indeed, as the fairest of all countries are also the most unfair" (188). Amy Scott-Douglass considers a 1999 independent film called *Macbeth in Manhattan* as well as a 2006 episode of the television program *Grey's Anatomy*. Grounding her essay on her personal experiences of race (among them her extensive work with Shakespeare performance in prisons), Scott-Douglass sensitively questions, "are there spaces in which colorblind Shakespeare exists?" (199). The continuing importance of *Macbeth* for African American poets Rita Dove, Julia Fields, and Lucille Clifton is the subject of an essay by Charita Gainey-O'Toole and Elizabeth Alexander; Philip C. Kolin analogously discusses the play as a ghostly presence behind the work of contemporary African American dramatists Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, August Wilson, and Suzan-Lori Parks. Finally, Richard Burt adds a brief contribution about the election of Barack Obama, which, as he says, "haunts this volume, recurring like Banquo's ghost" (235).

After a final essay by Peter Erickson, to which I return below, the collection ends with a necessarily incomplete listing of productions of *Macbeth* with non-traditional casting, from The African Theatre in 1821 to a not-yet-released Caribbean-set film. This record confirms what this volume implies: that, as Cornel West has made it indelibly clear that race matters, so also, in the words of the title of the essay by Harry J. Lennix, Jr., "*Macbeth* matters" (113).

Weyward Macbeth leaves a reader strangely unsettled—as, of course, does *Macbeth*. I closed the volume with a new sense of *Macbeth's* importance to issues of race in the United States, more acutely aware of the ferment and potential of engaging with this intersectional study, and yet also conscious of the still fragmented state of this aptly named "weyward" pursuit. As Thompson's eloquent introduction to the volume asserts, many artists on the margins "have seen themselves in *Macbeth* precisely because it is weyward: that is, weird, fated, fateful, perverse, intractable, willful, erratic, unlicensed, fugitive, troublesome, and wayward" (9). Inevitably, such a characterization results in a volume that celebrates the circumferences over the center, and that as a result has something of a fragmentary nature. Many diverse perspectives are at work in this volume, and not always towards the same ends. But in the last analysis, that diversity seems utterly appropriate: the move here is not to establish a new orthodoxy but to break down received ideas about race and Shakespeare.

In his moving essay at the end of the volume, Peter Erickson reminds us of James Baldwin's reflections on what he terms the "cowardice and waste" in American society that tragically hindered the fulfillment of the talents of Paul Robeson and other black American actors. Lamenting this, Baldwin still finds value in what survived:

What the black actor has managed to give are moments—incredible moments, created, miraculously, beyond the confines of the script: hints of

reality, smuggled like contraband into a maudlin tale, and with enough force, if unleashed, to shatter the tale to fragments. (231; quoted from Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work* [1976], 554).

As Erickson says, the contemplation of those fragments can give us “confidence that there is another place to go, that we can live in more than one world” and urges us “to insist that we do not have to put all our eggs into one Shakespear-ean basket” (232). Newstok and Thompson’s volume corroborates that vision of multiple Shakespeares and multiple Shakespeareans, both within “the confines of the script” and beyond it.