
Review by Kate Pogue

Newstok, Scott L. and Ayanna Thompson, eds. *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*. Signs of Race 7. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 288 pages.

In this year of the sesquicentennial of the American Civil War, the connections between American nineteenth-century history, the Civil War, and *Macbeth* should inspire English departments across academia to offer classes using this book as a primary text. Its essays, co-edited by Scott Newstok and Ayanna Thompson, are revelatory concerning this important era; however, they are not limited to history. A number of the contributors address such modern issues as color-blind casting (Amy Scott-Douglass, “Shades of Shakespeare...”) and the relationship of *Macbeth* to playwrights such as Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake Shange, August Wilson, and Suzan-Lori Parks (Philip C. Kolin, “Black Up Again”).

The Palgrave Macmillan “Signs of Race” series sets out to explore the relationship of race, ethnicity, and culture in the English-speaking world. *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* is the newest of the seven titles in this series. Initially, the choice of *Macbeth* as the early modern text (rather than *Othello* or *The Tempest*) through which to look at race and culture may be unexpected. But Ayanna Thompson opens the volume (“What is a ‘Weyward’ *Macbeth*?”) by shifting the identifiers of race from skin color to blood and images of darkness, stating:

The play’s very rhetoric of blood and staining informs—or seeps into—early American racial rhetoric. [. . .] *Macbeth*’s focus on the indelible quality of blood, that staining and smelling substance that Lady Macbeth cannot fully wash from her hands, unnervingly coincides with early American debates about the nature—the essence—of race [. . .]. On the one hand, the proponents of slavery (and later segregation) insist that the blood is the thing; the essential substance that identifies, divides, and classifies races, even down to a single drop. (4)

She quotes J. C. Clark, a Congressman from early nineteenth-century New York, who used examples from *Macbeth* on the House floor to argue that slaves could not be considered property:

Is the ghost of the Missouri question again to be marched, with solemn and terrific aspect, through these halls? Is it again to 'shake its gory locks at us,' and, pointing with one hand to the North, and with the other to the South, and gazing its blood-shotten eye on slavery, written on the escutcheon of the Constitution, to proclaim, with unearthly voice, 'out damned spot?' (Thompson 5)

Thompson's is one of the two opening essays that contextualize the twenty-five remaining studies divided amongst six further sections. In these essays, *Macbeth* is discussed in terms of the history of its American productions. Following "Beginnings", sections are called "Early American Intersections," "Federal Theatre Project(s)," and "Further Stages." The commitment of the authors to a wide diversity within each themed section is exemplified in the next two sections called simply "Music and Screen." The volume's final section is entitled "Shakespearean (A)Versions."

The "Music" section takes us from Verdi's *Macbeth* and the subject of non-traditional casting in opera (Wallace McClain Cheatham, "Reflections on Verdi..."), through Duke Ellington's portrait of Lady Macbeth in a Shakespeare suite entitled "Dark Lady" (Douglas Lanier) all the way to the present day represented in the discussion of a number of pop culture Macbeths used in classrooms (Todd Landon Barnes, "Hip-Hop *Macbeths* ...")

Barnes's essay about music ties the play firmly to current popular culture and creates a transition into three chapters concerning *Macbeth* on film. After a chapter on Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (Francesca Royster) and an analysis of *Macbeth* and the military (Courtney Lehmann, "Semper Die: Marines Incarnadine in Nina Menkes' *The Bloody Child: An Interior of Violence*"), the "Screen" section ends with the Scott-Douglass essay, deftly book-ending the two sections.

The essays vary in style as well as subject. The straightforward biographical style of the essay on the actor Ira Aldridge (Bernth Lindfors, "Ira Aldridge as *Macbeth*") is followed by the academic and theoretical "Reading *Macbeth* in Texts by and

about African Americans, 1903-1944: Race and the Problematic of Allusive Identification” by Nick Moschovakis. Later, “A Black Actor’s Guide to the Scottish Play, or, Why *Macbeth* Matters” (Harry J. Lennix), allows us directly into an actor’s process of making decisions about how to play Macbeth, and refracts off the insights revealed in the essay on Ira Aldridge. This essay is part of the “Further Stages” section, where “Asian American Theatre Re-imagined” (Alexander C. Y. Huang) comes into play as well as Native Americanism in the Tlingit *Macbeth* (Anita Maynard-Losh, “The Tlingit Play...”). The entire “Federal Theatre Project(s)” section is given over to analyzing Orson Welles’s *Voodoo Macbeth* (Scott L. Newstok), with four essays concerning its origins and influences. Essays about this familiar production are balanced by the discussions of contemporary treatments of themes from *Macbeth* in poetry and modern plays found in “Shakespearean (A)Versions.”

It is impossible in this review to discuss all the rich material contained in *Weyward Macbeth*. The essays are original, insightful and of great value. The race question never goes away; it’s there but simmering, and we don’t talk about it enough. Books like *Weyward Macbeth* and the others in this series provide the reader—student or teacher—with personal illumination; but even more important, they give us a valuable framework for invaluable discussion.

Kate Pogue
Independent Scholar/Freelance Director, Houston TX