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# Davenant and *Macbeth*

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## Abstract

This paper examines the nature of Davenant's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Although Davenant's *Macbeth* is often dismissed as a failure, it is worth considering what led him to make certain alterations to the original. I would like to argue that some of Davenant's alterations reflect his keen theatrical awareness: he tried to adjust the play to the form of his theatre, providing the audience with a point of view that sees Macbeth's deeds, especially his ambition, more objectively throughout the play. His attempt, however, ironically reveals that the rapport between Macbeth and the audience is crucial to the play, and that it cannot easily be separated from the thrust stage, on which it was originally performed.

In his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (performed in November 1664 or December 1666),<sup>1</sup> William Davenant made three major alterations to it, all of which have been subject to severe criticism of scholars, especially in the twentieth century: Davenant simplified some of the imaginative but obscure words of Shakespeare, increased the proportion of songs and dances of the witches in the play, and expanded the roles of the Macduffs to such an extent as to vie with the Macbeths. These changes may partly be elucidated by historical changes in the drama. Part of the simplified words indicates that visual and aural effects replaced the roles which language had played in Shakespeare's time. As for the new emphasis on the relationships

between the couples, the Macbeths and the Macduffs, it is not unreasonable to suggest its correlation with the advent of actresses.

There are a few critics who justify Davenant's *Macbeth*, arguing that those alterations are entailed by his thorough study of ambition which cannot be seen in the original.<sup>2</sup> In fact, Davenant consistently pursues this dramatic design. The first interpolated scene concerning the Macduffs is seen as early as in 1. 5, in which Lady Macduff stays with Lady Macbeth to wait for their husbands to return from the war; after the assassination of Duncan, unlike in Shakespeare, the Macduffs meet the three witches and hear prophecies, too, although they stay unaffected by them, contrary to the Macbeths. What is remarkable about Davenant's alteration is to balance the Macbeths and the Macduffs in terms of language as well as structure. The Macduffs' speeches in their meeting the witches echo those of Macbeth and Banquo in 1. 2.

If you can any thing by more than nature know;  
You may in those prodigious times fore-tell  
Some ill we may avoid. (2. 5. 77-79)<sup>3</sup>

This speech of Macduff reminds the audience of Banquo's "If you can look into the seeds of time, / and tell which grain will grow, and which will not" (1. 3. 57-58). Similarly, Lady Macduff's remark on her husband's response to the prophecy, "why are you alter'd, Sir?" (2. 2. 84), corresponds to Banquo's "Good Sir, what makes you start?" (1. 3. 54)

In spite of such elaboration of Davenant, critics like Peter Dyson condemn his attempt at producing a balance between the couples on

the ground that the Macduffs' experience and inner conflict cannot match those of the Macbeths in the first place, arguing that this design consequently reduces the postures of the Macbeths.<sup>4</sup> I agree with his argument and the conclusion of this paper is in line with it. However, it is worthwhile to examine what kind of dramatic effect Davenant tried to achieve by the alterations, or where the necessity for these alterations arises, before dismissing this adaptation as a failure.

First of all, I would like to focus attention on the major feature of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. What makes this play singular among his plays is the rapport between the audience and the protagonist. It stands in remarkable contrast to the (other) history plays, for instance, which were written on the assumption that the audience knew the consequences of the incidents they deal with. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare manages not to produce psychological distance between the audience and Macbeth by providing them with a similar amount of information. The enigmatic nature of the witches also enhances this dramatic scheme, for the knowledge of the audience and Macbeth is always controlled not to go beyond that of the witches. In addition, the play concentrates on depicting the Macbeths, especially in the first half of the play where Macbeth turns into a murderer, not attracting our attention to the other characters. We are required to experience the events with the protagonist.

On the other hand, Davenant's version, even in the first half, does not focus merely on the Macbeths, and we are given viewpoints other than those of the Macbeths. Lady Macduff talks with Lady Macbeth about man's vanity and ambition in 1. 5, which serves to criticize the subsequent deeds of Macbeth. Macduff makes a relatively prominent

appearance in 1. 6 by his appreciating Lady Macbeth for taking care of his wife during his engagement in a war. After Macbeth's regicide, Davenant interpolated the scene, in which Macduff says to his wife, "Great Duncan's bloody death / Can have no other Author but Macbeth" (3. 2. 1-2), while, in the original, thoughts of other characters about Macbeth are made blurred to the audience until the last part of the play. Thus, unlike the original, the audience is required to observe Macbeth's deed from greater distance. If Dennis Bartholomeusz's argument that Davenant "used the witches to achieve operatic and comic effect"<sup>5</sup> is right, the viewpoint of the audience would have been more alienated. This distanced viewpoint of the audience toward the stage brings into the forefront such themes as subtle relations between couples, ambition, and its desolate result.

Then, a question arises: why does Davenant dare to create distance between audience and stage which cannot be seen in the original? The key to this question lies in examining the way in which he alters Shakespeare's words. What is interesting in his adaptation is his concern for erasing or changing the protagonist's monologues in particular, rather than minor characters' speeches. This is rather odd because Macbeth's monologues are unmistakably impressive, and one of the distinguished poets of the Restoration cannot have overlooked their dramatic and poetic appeal.

A feature in Macbeth's monologues is Shakespeare's effective use of the dramatic convention that a speech of the actor describes scenery. The public theatre in Shakespeare's time, like the Globe, had a projected stage with no settings, whose three sides were surrounded by the audience, and the audience had to imagine the scenery or reality of

the play-world as characters reported it. There is no evidence left to show that *Macbeth* was performed at court or the private theatre at Blackfriar, but it is certain that *Macbeth* was performed at the Globe, as an astrologer called Simon Forman saw the performance on the twentieth of April, 1611.<sup>6</sup> An example of Shakespeare's use of this convention is the dagger' scene.<sup>7</sup> In this scene, Macbeth describes how the dagger looks to him, and the audience cannot know whether they should accept this description as reality, according to the convention: they cannot rationally judge whether the dagger is the mere product of his imagination, like Macbeth himself. Consequently, the imagination of the audience is synchronized with that of Macbeth.

However, Davenant shortens this monologue by no less than twelve lines. In addition, it is notable that Davenant deletes the description of the dagger "I see thee yet, in form as palpable / As this which now I draw" (Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, 2. 2. 40-41), and his dagger is not as active as Shakespeare's dagger, which actively moves and changes its appearance as the speech proceeds, as is seen in "Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going" (42) and "on thy blade, and dudgeon, gouts of blood, / Which was not so before" (46-47). Davenant deliberately erases such lines as would have effect on the apron stage to make the imagination of the audience synchronize with that of Macbeth.

This alteration seems related to the fact that the stage Davenant used was different from the thrust stage used in Shakespeare's time. The stage of the Duke's Theatre, according to Elizabeth G. Scanlan, measured 34 ft. in depth and 30 ft. in width, which contained the proscenium stage which was 9 by 20 ft.<sup>8</sup> Though the stage had not been completely separated by the "fourth wall" as in the modern theatre, it

is not too much to say that the main place for the action receded backward to some extent as compared with the Elizabethan and Jacobean thrust stage. Besides, the scenery is believed to have been used in the rear stage behind the proscenium arch. Words did not have to play a role of settings to such an extent as in Shakespeare's theatre. Judging from the alteration in the dagger scene, Davenant seems to have noticed that the verbal effect in Shakespeare's dagger scene is inextricably linked to the convention and the form of an open stage. It therefore does not suggest his aesthetic ignorance but his keen theatrical sense to discern the difference in medium.

Minor alterations also testify to this theatrical sense of Davenant. In Shakespeare, when Banquo meets the witches, he says:

*You* seem to understand me  
 By each at once *her* choppy finger laying  
 Upon *her* skinny lips: you should be women  
 (1. 3. 43-45, italics mine)

Interestingly enough, he employs the two pronouns, "you" and "her," in one sentence addressed to the witches. The use of the third-person pronoun derives from the fact that the stage is highly aware of the audience's presence in Shakespeare: Banquo reports to the audience what is before him on the stage. It informs the audience of the sex of the witches; it was necessary especially because of the absence of actresses. In a sense, he is a choric figure as well as a character in this speech. On the other hand, Davenant's Banquo says

*You* seem to know me

By laying all at once *your* choppy fingers  
 Upon *your* skinny-lips. (1. 3. 45-47, italics mine)

The speech becomes a part of the dialogue between Banquo and the witches. The world of the play is rather enclosed and pretends to be less aware of the presence of the audience. This tiny change from “her” to “your” shows how attentively Davenant made the play fit for the theatre which had less proximity between the stage and the audience. This kind of alteration is reflected even in Davenant’s use of an article. Banquo’s description of a swallow, “*this* guest of summer” (1. 6. 3, italics mine) in Shakespeare becomes “*the* guest of summer” (1. 6. 3, italics mine). Whereas, on Shakespeare’s stage, the swallow must be evoked in the audience’s mind strongly by “this,” it is sufficient for Davenant to imply the existence of the swallow somewhere behind the proscenium arch, where the audience supposes that the world of the play extends.

Other alterations to Macbeth’s monologues also suggest the different purposes of the playwrights, especially Davenant’s awareness of the difference between the two kinds of theatres. The following monologues are spoken while Duncan stays at Macbeth’s castle.

If it were done when ‘tis done, then t’ were well  
 It were done quickly. . . .  
 . . . . .  
 . . . . . that but *this* blow  
 Might be the be-all and the end-all -*here*,  
 But *here*, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
 We’d jump the life to come. - But in these cases,  
 We still have judgement *here*, that we but teach



Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
 To plague th'inventor: this even-handed Justice  
 Commends th'ingredience of *our* poison'd chalice  
 To *our* own lips. He's here in double trust:

(Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, 1. 7. 1-12, italics mine)

If it were well when done; then it were well  
 It were done quickly; if his Death might be  
 Without Death of nature in *my self*,  
 And killing *my* own rest; it wou'd suffice  
 But deeds of this complexion still return  
 To plague the doer, and destroy his peace  
 Yet let *me* think; he's here in double trust.

(Davenant's *Macbeth*, 1. 7. 1-7, italics mine)

In Davenant, not only is disorder of syntax straightened out, but also Shakespeare's "we" and "our" are carefully replaced by "my" and "me," while "This" and "here" are deliberately erased. The frequent use of "we," "our," "this," and "here" in Shakespeare promotes the audience's identification with the protagonist.<sup>9</sup> It is as if he were talking in generalities. As for "our own lips" (12), it makes a vivid impression on the audience beyond a mere generality.

Davenant however eliminated these words. Instead of the closeness between Macbeth and the audience produced by these words, Davenant rather encloses the protagonist within his self-absorption, and creates an alienated viewpoint of the audience. For the words, "we," "our," "here," and "this," can appeal to the audience to the fullest extent when the stage is surrounded by the audience, who shares the same sense of place and time with the actor. Davenant's audience was seated a little more distantly from the stage than those in

Shakespeare's time, and he chose therefore not to involve the audience in Macbeth's imagination as intensely as in the original.

When thinking about the murder for the first time, Shakespeare's Macbeth makes the following aside.

Two truths are told,  
 As happy prologues to the swelling act  
 Of the imperial theme. - I thank you, gentlemen.-  
 [Aside] This supernatural soliciting  
*Cannot be ill, cannot be good:-*  
 If ill, why hath it given me earnest of success,  
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:  
 If good, why do I yield to *that suggestion*  
 Whose *horrid image* doth unfix my hair,  
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,  
 Against the use of nature? Present fears  
 Are less than *horrible imaginings*.  
*My thought*, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
 Shakes so my single state of man  
 That function is smothered in *surmise*,  
 And nothing is but what is not. (1. 3127-142, italics mine).

The dramatic device which establishes the rapport between the audience and Macbeth is embedded in the use of the words such as "that suggestion" (134), "horrid image" (135), "horrible imaginings" (138), "my thought" (139), and "surmise" (141). Just repeating the fact that he imagines a murder which is horrible, he never touches upon any concrete description, and every member of the audience is made to imagine his or her own horrible murder. It is effective because, in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama, language is the main means to describe the fictional world.

Though keeping the length of the speech almost the same, Davenant erased such effect from the monologue.

Th'have told me truth as to the name of Cawdor,  
 That may be prologue to the name of King.  
 Less Titles shou'd the greater still fore-run,  
 The morning Star doth usher in the Sun.  
 This strange prediction in as strange a manner  
 Deliver'd, *neither can be good nor ill.*  
 If ill; 'twou'd give no earnest success,  
 Beginning in a truth: I'm Thane of Cawdor;  
 If good? why am I then perplext with doubt?  
 My future bliss causes my present fears,  
 Fortune, methinks, which rains down Honour on me,  
 Seems to rain bloud too: Duncan does appear  
 Clowded by my increasing Glories: but  
 These are but dreams. (1. 3. 124-137, italics mine)

As is suggested by the difference between “Cannot be ill; cannot be good” (Shakespeare, 131) and “neither can be good nor ill” (Davenant, 129), there is less disorder of syntax in the speech of Davenant’s *Macbeth* and he can grasp his feeling better. For in Davenant, “neither” gives us the impression that the speaker has already constructed the whole sentence at its beginning, whereas Shakespeare’s version expresses the vacillating mind of the protagonist in the repetition of “cannot.” *Macbeth* in Davenant looks a little more determined to murder Duncan than in Shakespeare. While Shakespeare involves the audience in *Macbeth*’s imagination, Davenant makes the protagonist rather objectively report his murderous and ambitious thought as a fact to the audience. As we saw

in the above examples, even on a verbal level, Davenant was well aware of the difference in form between the theatres, and altered Shakespeare's words that have such an effect of identification between the audience and Macbeth as would have been produced on Shakespeare's apron stage.

When we consider Davenant's expanding roles of the Macduffs as a foil of the Macbeths together with this subduing Macbeth's imaginative language, we may say that Davenant tried to produce more psychological distance between Macbeth and the audience. As the stage physically receded backward from the audience, he tried to adjust the play to this drastic change. In other words, discarding the devices that make the best use of the convention of the original stage, he tried to produce an epic drama rather than a drama that psychologically involves the audience with the tragedy of the protagonist.

This treatment of Davenant's reflects his keen theatrical sense, and cannot be easily dismissed as absurd. Surely, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was written for the open stage, not for the proscenium arch stage.<sup>10</sup> A modern production which misunderstood this aspect of *Macbeth* elicited a response in the dagger scene and the banquet scene that Shakespeare and perhaps even the director himself probably did not dream of. It is a production directed by Yukio Ninagawa, which was "much admired in Britain for [its] extraordinary beauty and for the overlay of Japanese elements on the Jacobean originals."<sup>11</sup> In this production, the stage was designed as a huge Buddhist altar with double doors, and the entire play was performed within this altar. Consequently, the production emphasized the so-called fourth wall

even more than an ordinary proscenium stage. Tetsuo Kishi, questioning the validity of this staging, states that “in Shakespeare’s plays actors are often required to play to the audience. Building a proscenium arch stage on the stage can work as an obstacle to such acting.”<sup>12</sup>

When I saw a revival production of *Ninagawa Macbeth* in Osaka on the seventeenth of May, 1997,<sup>13</sup> almost half of the audience had the giggles when Macbeth was scared by his imaginary (or supernatural) dagger and Banquo’s ghost. They reacted to the protagonist’s deeds rather objectively, and this is fatal to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Although it is extremely difficult to define the reason for a certain response of the audience, this reaction may suggest that the fourth wall emphasized by the double doors of the Buddhist altar created psychological distance between the stage and the audience. This well-known production, as Kishi argues, contains this incongruity between the direction and the nature of the play.

Davenant, as a distinguished playwright of the age, had a theatrical sense keen enough to discern that the effect designed on the Jacobean thrust stage in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* could not be gained in his theatre. This proper theatrical realization made him give up such rapport between Macbeth and the audience as in the original, and transforms the play into an epic drama by emphasizing the relation between the couples and balancing the Macbeths and the Macduffs.

However, Davenant has gone a little too far in this orientation. Though making Macduff vie with Macbeth throughout the play, the last fight between Macbeth and Macduff loses the intensity and dramatic tension of the original, which Lionel Abel praises as “an

encounter of two true daemons.”<sup>14</sup> It is partly because, in the last half of the play, Davenant still keeps subduing the stature of Macbeth so as to explore the relation between couples and the desolate effect of ambition. In 4. 4, the scene interposed by Davenant, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth blame each other about the murder of Duncan. He also erased all episodes concerning medicine and doctors. In Shakespeare the condition of Macbeth and that of Scotland are somewhat overlapped, and the army who rescues Scotland from the tyranny can also be interpreted as a means of salvation of Macbeth’s soul. Furthermore, in Davenant, Seyton, in his aside, makes a sarcastic comment at Macbeth’s presence and even jeers at his deeds in the final act.<sup>15</sup> As a result, this monstrous hero is considerably dwarfed, and subsequently, the fight at the climax between Macbeth and Macduff loses its original dynamism.

It is ironical that Davenant’s thorough care to produce a parallel between Macbeth and Macduff ends up making the opposition between them less dramatic. In fact, Shakespeare himself often contrasts characters to explore certain themes. But unfortunately for Davenant, the rapport between the audience and the protagonist is too vital for *Macbeth*. It is also ironical that Davenant’s keen theatrical awareness to discern the difference between the stages eventually led to diminishing the characters. Davenant’s deliberate effort to make *Macbeth* fit for his theatre consequently reveals that it cannot easily be separated from the thrust stage.

#### Notes

1 A. R. Baumuler 62.

- 2 See Mongi Radaddi 99-118, and Christopher Spencer 14-16.
- 3 All the citations from Davenant are from *Five Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare*, numbers indicating act, scene, and line respectively.
- 4 See Peter Dyson 402-407.
- 5 Dennis Bartholomeusz 17.
- 6 Braunmuller 57-58.
- 7 **Shakespeare's dagger scene**

Is this a dagger, which I see before me,  
 The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee  
 I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
 Art thou not, fatal vision sensible  
 To feeling, as to sight? Or art thou but  
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
 Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
 I see thee yet, in form as palpable  
 As this which now I draw.  
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;  
 And such an instrument I was to use. -  
 Mine eyes are made of the fools o'the other senses,  
 Or else worth all the rest: I see thee still;  
And on thy blade, and dudgeon, gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before. -There's no such thing.  
 It is the bloody business which informs  
 Thus to mine eyes. (2. 1. 33-49)

**Davenant's dagger scene**

Is this a dagger which I see before me?  
 The hilt draws towards my hand; come,  
 let me grasp thee:  
 I have thee not, and yet I see thee still;  
 Art thou not, fatal Vision, sensible  
 To feeling as to sight? or, art thou but  
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation  
 Proceeding from the brain, opprest with heat.  
 My eyes are made the fools of th'other senses;

Or else worth all the rest: I see thee still,  
 And on thy blade are stains of reeking blood.  
 It is the bloody business that thus  
 Informs my eye-sight. (2. 1. 31-43)

All the citations from Shakespeare are from the Arden edition of *Macbeth*, edited by Kenneth Muir, the Arden Shakespeare, numbers indicating act, scene, and line respectively.

- 8 Elizabeth G. Scanlan 50.
- 9 It is possible that Shakespeare plays on the homophones, “here” and “hear.” Even if not, an actor could use this word in both meanings, and, by this “hear,” the speech could sound as if Macbeth addresses the audience more directly.
- 10 Tetsuo Kishi also emphasizes this point in examining *Ninagawa Macbeth* (116).
- 11 Dennis Kennedy 315.
- 12 Kishi 116.
- 13 Yukio Ninagawa, dir., *Ninagawa Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare, trans., Yushi Odajima, perf. Kinya Kitaoji, Komaki Kurihara, et. al., Kintetsu Gekijo, 17 May 1997.
- 14 Lionel Abel 5.
- 15 [Aside]Not to Obey your Orders, but the Call of Justice. I'lle to the English Train whose Hopes are built  
 Upon their Cause, and not on Witches Prophesies. (5. 3. 42-45)

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