

Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance,

edited by Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson.

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The essays in this collection examine the role of race in various productions (and appropriations) of *Macbeth*. *Weyward Macbeth* seeks to "position performances of the 'Scottish Play' in American racial constructions" — a thesis proven in no small part by the thorough appendix documenting over one hundred productions of *Macbeth* that have featured non-traditional casting (8). The contributors include Ayanna Thompson, Celia R. Daileader, Heather S. Nathans, John C. Briggs, Bernth Lindfors, Joyce Green MacDonald, Nick Moschovakis, Lisa N. Simmons, Marguerite Rippey, Scott L. Newstok, Lenwood Sloan, Harry J. Lennix, Alexander C. Y. Huang, Anita Maynard-Losh, José A. Esquea, William C. Carroll, Wallace McClain Cheatham, Douglas Lanier, Todd Landon Barnes, Francesca Royster, Courtney Lehmann, Amy Scott-Douglass, Charita Gainey-O'Toole, Elizabeth Alexander, Philip C. Kolin, Peter Erickson, Richard Burt, and Brent Butgereit. It is a collection of extraordinary scope. While one might expect a volume on race and *Othello* or *The Tempest*, this collection draws attention to a frequently overlooked intersection between *Macbeth* and the construction of race in America. Ayanna Thompson's introduction, "What is a 'Weyward' *Macbeth*?," makes a compelling case for the importance of race to the play. The book includes discussion of productions by African-American, Asian-American, Native American, and Latino theater companies to show how *Macbeth* has been used to express various identities throughout the history of the American stage.

Thompson argues that *Macbeth* appeals to directors as a play about race partially because the history of the play's intersections with race have been obscured and overlooked. Divided into seven sections, the book traces the connection between race and Shakespeare's "Scottish play" from Jacobean England to film adaptations. The earliest chapters focus on the intersection of *Macbeth* and race in Jacobean England and Antebellum America. The middle two sections examine the federal theater project and modern stage performance. The book's last three sections deal with the play's appropriation in various modern genres (music, film, and literature). The

individual chapters present remarkable variety in topic and critical approaches. This extremely wide range in topics is mirrored by an extremely diverse group of contributors — from graduate student to professor emeritus, from actor to scholar, from Shakespearean to Americanist. These varied responses no doubt reflect Gary Taylor's stated purpose in the preface — to provide an "interdisciplinary perspective" on the "cross-cultural performance of race" (xiii). The collection as a whole offers a conglomeration of various topics that open up a new approach to *Macbeth*.

Heather S. Nathans's look at Antebellum appropriations of *Macbeth*, in "'Blood will have Blood': Violence, Slavery, and *Macbeth* in the Antebellum American Imagination," offers an excellent example of the fresh and unique readings that populate this eclectic collection. Nathans argues that *Macbeth* was a popular choice for allusions in both pro-slavery and abolitionist tracts because of the play's focus on "destiny and individual agency," as well as a fear of being haunted by past violence (25). As forces on both sides of the civil war appropriated *Macbeth* into discourses about slavery and abolition, Banquo's ghost came to stand in for dead Africans who haunt slave owners, while violence in the abolitionist movement was sometimes compared to the actions of Lady Macbeth or the witches. The essay as a whole is laudable for its thorough research and fresh insights.

Bernth Lindfors's chapter on Ira Aldridge's performance as Macbeth offers a fascinating study of one of Aldridge's lesser known roles and places it in the context of his larger acting career. Marguerite Rippey's examination of Orson Welles's famous "Voodoo *Macbeth*" explores the combination of "racially progressive politics and racially insensitive opportunism" that defined the production, arguing that theater historians have failed to acknowledge "the production's more disturbing aspects" (83, 89). Francesca Royster's contribution, "Riddling Whiteness, Riddling Certainty: Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*," offers the same practical application of literary theory and nuanced reading of film as her earlier *Becoming Cleopatra*.

Like Royster's critically challenging examination of tropes of whiteness, Todd Landon Barnes's reading of hip-hop's integration into literature curriculum at the secondary level offers a unique perspective on *Macbeth* and race. Barnes argues that when teachers use hip-hop to teach Shakespeare they often overemphasize potential connections between different cultures and media instead of emphasizing differences. Such an approach oversimplifies the cultural contexts of hip-hop while presenting Shakespeare to students as an artistic "universal" (164). Encouraging educators "to focus on performance's ability to register and rehearse historical change and cultural difference," Barnes points out that using hip-hop to explore Shakespeare offers teachers a chance to emphasize historical and cultural differences instead of a "universal" homogeneity that ultimately prioritizes the works of Shakespeare (164). In other words, Barnes argues that hip-hop in the

classroom has to be used to give information back to students, to show the conflicts created when Shakespeare and hip-hop collide. A unique approach to "innovative" Shakespeare pedagogy, Barnes's essay reveals both the benefits and limitations of current classroom practices.

Amy Scott-Douglass's essay, which examines audience responses to interracial couples in *Macbeth* productions using colorblind casting, finds that some of these performances inadvertently forward racist stereotypes. Like the collection as a whole, this chapter focuses on diverse source texts to draw larger connections (including performances from *Macbeth in Manhattan*, *Grey's Anatomy*, and *Prison Macbeth*). Charita Gainey-O'Toole and Elizabeth Alexander examine African-American female poets' use of the Weyward Sisters through appropriation, allusion, and metaphor. Pointing out that female poets seem strangely drawn to Shakespeare's witches, they ultimately argue that "African-American artists . . . adopt conjure, haunting, and possession as a means of *enacting agency* in their own writing processes" (207).

While the diverse topics and perspectives of necessity cause the collection as a whole to lean toward breadth rather than depth, the infinite variety of perspectives and topics opens up many points of inquiry for later studies. The diversity of perspectives here is rich and provocative and will no doubt encourage further studies of *Macbeth* and race. Of equal interest to Shakespeareans, Americanists, cultural historians, teachers, and theater professionals, the collection as a whole is notable for its thorough and strikingly original readings of a largely overlooked topic.

References

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