

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Macbeth*, presented by the Berkeley Repertory Company at the Berkeley
Repertory Theater, Berkeley, California, February 19-April 10, 2016.**

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Directed by Daniel Sullivan. Scenic Design by Douglas W. Schmidt. Costume Design by Meg Neville. Lighting Design by Pat Collins. Composition/Sound Design by Dan Moses Schreier. Video Design by Alexander V. Nichols. Dramaturgy by Barry Kraft. Fight Direction by Dave Maier. Fight Direction by Dave Maier. Voice Coach Lynne Soffer. Casting by Amy Potozkin, CSA and Tara Rubin, CSA. Stage Management by Michael Suenkel.

With Conleth Hill (Macbeth), Frances McDormand (Lady Macbeth and Witch), James Carpenter (Duncan/Porter/Doctor), Scott Coopwood (Lennox), Derek Fischer (First murderer/Servant to Duncan/Messenger), Gene Gillette (Bleeding Captian/Seyton/Lord/Old Man), Christopher Innvar (Banquo/Siward/Lord), Eddie Ray Jackson (Donalbain/Lord/Soldier), Korey Jackson (Macduff/Lord), Paul Jennings (Mentieth/Messenger), Billy Eugene Jones (Roth/Third Murderer), Leon Jones (Maduff's Son), Adam Magill (Malcolm), Rami Margron (Witch/Gentlewoman), Nicholas Pelczar (Angus/Second Murderer), Tyler Pierce (Fleance/Servant/Siward's Son), and Mia Tagano (Lady Macduff).

There are many challenges in making *Macbeth* relatable to modern audiences. Shakespeare's play, likely written as a tribute to the Scottish King James, features themes and topics of intellectual and political interest to the new king: witchcraft, the limits of monarchical power, the extent of a subject's loyalty to their king, to name a few. James traced his lineage back to Macbeth's friend Banquo, whose connection to Macbeth is recounted in Shakespeare's main source, *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587). Shakespeare wisely omits any reference to Banquo's involvement in the murder of Duncan, making Lady Macbeth the only accomplice to that crime. This

choice trains the audience's attention on the domestic sphere, particularly on the Macbeths' marriage, and forces questions about gender, sexuality, and love to the fore. If audiences in 2016 might not find early modern political debates of particular interest, the fascinating intricacies of love and marriage are perennially compelling. Daniel Sullivan's production of the Scottish play, with the stunningly intricate performances by Frances McDormand and Conleth Hill as the Macbeths, transcended four hundred years of history and brought this 'power couple', with all of their complexities, to life.

Sullivan's production was subtle; the stage was mostly bare, with effects produced through projection and sound. Outdoor scenes featured clouds, shadows, and the caws of ravens; indoor scenes used projection to create the texture of castle walls. The opening scene featured a huge, gnarled tree with a man tied to it who was being tortured by the witches. At the conclusion of the scene, the tree flew up into the air and seemed to disappear. The effect was delightfully surprising, and set a mood of expectant unease.

The pacing of this show was furiously fast – as doubtless Shakespeare meant for it to be. The many short scenes flowed into each other, dictating a quick tempo. Sullivan's production captured this effect, often by linking scenes with actors playing multiple roles. For example, the man being tortured by the witches in the opening scene ran in place into the second scene where he played the Sergeant who reports Macbeth's battlefield valour to Duncan. No lines were noticeably cut or edited, and the play's total run time was exactly two hours.

Actors playing multiple roles facilitated the pacing, and the pairings were very effective. The most notable of these was the choice to have two of the witches played by McDormand and Mia Tagano (Lady Macduff). Act 1 of Shakespeare's play alternates between scenes featuring either the witches on the heath or Lady Macbeth at home, and scenes involving the men on the battlefield, contrasting the political realm with the domestic one in gendered terms, and suggesting an eerie correlation between the witches and Lady Macbeth. McDormand's witch wore a beard, and she played the part with a masculine strength that seemed to enable her to find nuance and vulnerability in the character of Lady Macbeth that is rarely realized in performance.

The Macbeths in Sullivan's production were older; the play suggests they have lost a child, but most productions present them as still young and passionate. It is often sexual energy that seems to charge Lady Macbeth's various challenges to her husband's

masculinity: ‘when thou durst do it, then you were a man’ (1.7.49).¹ But presenting the Macbeths as middle aged – the heyday in the blood perhaps somewhat cooled – changed this dynamic, making their intimacy more of a seasoned partnership, and this alteration was mesmerizing. McDormand found the fierceness to help her husband ‘to the golden round’ (1.5.25), but she also uncovered greater depths. Instead of a character that is bold, manipulative, and perhaps jarringly evil, McDormand’s Lady Macbeth seemed at times fragile, and even vulnerable. When Macbeth insists that she ‘be innocent of the knowledge’ of the plot to murder Banquo and Fleance in act 3 scene 2, McDormand appeared visibly hurt, as if realizing in that moment the extent to which her husband was pulling away, and what that would mean for her and for their marriage. Similarly, in the pivotal banquet scene when the ghost of Banquo haunts Macbeth, McDormand’s constant appeals that Macbeth attend to his guests increased in a crescendo of helpless frustration about her inability to smooth things over, until she drew chuckles from the audience with the line, ‘you have displac’d the mirth’ (3.4.109). This scene, perhaps more than any other, was recognizable to the audience, offering a glimpse into the annoyances that nag many a weathered marriage. But that realization testifies to this production’s success: not all couples plot and carry out murder, but all couples can recognize this moment of aggravated tension, when one partner refuses to behave appropriately before company.

The frailty and humanity that McDormand brought out in her performance of Lady Macbeth made her mad scene all the more heartbreaking. This was a Lady Macbeth not only guilt-ridden and sleep deprived, but completely devastated by the loss of her husband’s love and attention. The realization that ‘what’s done cannot be undone’ includes the understanding that her marriage will never be put right, and that everything that defined her existence no longer exists. McDormand’s performance brought this depth to the fore.

McDormand’s wonderfully nuanced performance was enabled and complemented by Conleth Hill’s solid depiction of Macbeth. His wildly popular role as the eunuch Lord Varys in HBO’s TV series *Game of Thrones*, a character who derives power by craftily wielding information, took nothing away from his performance of the bloody Macbeth, whose valour and prowess on the battlefield is never in question. In the performance of the domestic scenes, Hill brought nuance and intensity, as his performance, too, tapped into a tenderness and familiarity we have come to associate with veteran marriages.

¹ Act, scene and line references are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

The rest of the cast and the production staff should also be commended for well-informed, complex, and moving performances. Adam Magill's Malcolm was particularly subtle, successfully conveying uncertainty about his succession of Macbeth as the Scottish king. All in all, Sullivan's production was savvy, profound, and moving – a deeply satisfying rendition of the Scottish play.