

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Macbeth* by William Davenant, presented by the Folger Shakespeare Theatre,  
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*Macbeth* as adapted and amended by Sir William Davenant. Adapted, curated, and directed by Robert Richmond. Music performed by the Folger Consort. With Louis Butelli (Duncan), John Floyd (Donalbain), Chris Genebach (Macduff), Jeff Keogh (Seyton), Andhy Mendez (Banquo), Rachael Montgomery (Witch), Emily Noël (Witch), Kate Norris Eastwood (Lady Macbeth), Ian Merrill Peakes (Macbeth), Karen Peakes (Lady Macduff), Owen Peaks (Fleance), Rafael Sebastian (Malcolm), Ethan Watermeier (Witch), and Jaysen Wright (Lennox).

Production Images:

[Image 1: Lady Macbeth](#) (Image by Brittany Diliberto)

[Image 2: The Witches and Macbeth](#) (Image by Brittany Diliberto)

On press night, several bas-relief sculptures on the Folger's exterior – all featuring memorable scenes from Shakespeare's plays – were hidden behind caution tape and plywood while undergoing maintenance. It was a reminder that even a place steeped in tradition needs a touch-up now and again. So too did the plays of Shakespeare, according to those who mounted them during the Restoration. The Folger's most recent *Macbeth* included numerous 'touch-ups' by a playwright from this milieu, William Davenant (1606-1668). The result of two years of research and more than a quarter-of-a-million dollars in investment, the production was dedicated to recreating how Shakespeare's plays were staged after Charles II re-opened London's theaters in 1660.

To evoke the period, the show employed candlelight as well as baroque music performed by the Folger Consort. Yet director Robert Richmond was not content to let

his *Macbeth* be an historical study. He made several independent creative choices, the most conspicuous of which was setting the action in Bethlem Royal Hospital, or Bedlam. The time was precisely pinpointed as well: 1666, two weeks after the Great Fire of London, which razed Bedlam's original home near Bishopsgate. Inmates and warders stepped up as cast for a version of the Scottish tragedy, intended, according to Richmond's program note, as 'a one-time...fundraising event' to support Bedlam's reconstruction. Everyone who appeared on stage thus realized not only a Shakespearean character but also a seventeenth-century individual. (In one of many clever metatheatrical moments, Rafael Sebastian as the inmate playing Malcolm used a cheat sheet when he forgot his lines.) The duality of a play-within-a-play underlined the double-mindedness of the tragedy's eponymous hero. At the same time, this duality raised thought-provoking questions about *Macbeth* – questions that were not conclusively answered when the final curtain dropped.

Before the first line was uttered, the skillful stagecraft of scenic designer Tony Cisek made the atmosphere off-putting. Stained curtains, which looked improvised, covered parts of the stage, and crude banners strewn with rags crisscrossed overhead. Prison cells lined either side, and another cell appeared up center. The feeling conveyed was that performers were penned in, except when facing the house. Because of the aforementioned candlelight, the space teemed with shadows, adding to the ominous vibe.

Once the play-within-a-play was set in motion by the prison warden (Louis Butelli doubling as Duncan and costumed like Charles II to boot), Davenant's modifications appeared in numerous, subtle ways. For instance, the witches chanted not about 'fog and filthy air' (1.1.12) but about 'foggy filthy air'.<sup>1</sup> After learning of his wife's death, Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes) said not 'Out, out, brief candle' (5.5.23) but 'Out, out, short candle'. Other changes manifested on a larger scale. The Porter – an emblem of irreverence – was eliminated by Davenant. So too was the Doctor who attends the manic Lady Macbeth (Kate Eastwood Norris), keeping the focus squarely on her as she is consumed by guilt. Along with such excisions, Davenant made notable additions. Lady Macbeth was haunted during her final hours by visions of the bloody Duncan, much as her husband earlier saw the accusatory ghost of Banquo (Andhy Mendez). More parallels were created by the increased prominence of Macduff. In this role, Chris Genebach took the early lines of the 'bloody man' (1.2.1) who reports Macbeth's puissance against the rebels. In addition, Macduff shared several slow but tender scenes

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<sup>1</sup> All Shakespeare quotations are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016).

with his family, showcasing emotional depth lacking in Macbeth. Lady Macduff (Karen Peakes) was similarly positioned as a figure of virtue, contrasting with the perfidious Lady Macbeth. The former noblewoman warned her husband to modulate his ambition, even as the latter stoked fires that led her husband to commit regicide.

Along with modifications that lent symmetry to the play, the witches in Davenant's script grew in stature. This was no doubt to satisfy a Restoration taste for spectacle. The witches belted out several songs, some interpolated from Middleton into the First Folio but usually omitted in performance. During these numbers, Rachael Montgomery, Emily Noël, and Ethan Watermeier demonstrated their chops as vocalists. But despite their imposing voices, they conveyed menace. Sporting crude make up – white face paint, dark eyeliner, and dollops of rouge on their cheeks that could have been blood – they looked like macabre dolls. More importantly, the witches took an active part in driving the action. They stole the corpse of the slain Duncan, reanimating it as a puppet for their amusement. And they snatched the body of Macduff's son, who was subsequently transformed into a vessel and mouthpiece for the dark goddess Hecate. During Macbeth's dagger soliloquy in Act II, the witches showed up at Inverness: the lights went down except for a spotlight on Macbeth. Then, in a flash, the witches appeared behind him, embracing Macbeth, making it seem as if they had ensnared him. Later, after his followers had abandoned the tyrant before the advancing army of Malcolm, the witches again popped up to wrap their arms around Macbeth while he sat on his throne and recited prophecies that he wrongly believed would protect him

Such artful *mise-en-scène* appeared throughout the night. However, whether the violent crimes enacted were caused by troubled minds or by embodied evil remained unresolved. Explaining his vision in the program, Richmond stressed the importance of the mind, aligning his play-within-a-play and Shakespeare's tragedy: 'The inmates of the asylum have been rehearsing in roles that are meaningful to their personalities, conditions, and relationships'. However, the notion of a framing narrative was all but abandoned after the murder of Duncan (and the chief warden). So, was darkness within the inmates – or within the characters they played – temporarily released by the elimination of authority? Or did external agency compel the Macbeths to commit misdeeds and meet miserable ends? The prominence of the witches – due not just to Davenant's revisions but also to their portrayal – made them seem figures with power well beyond the bounds of psychology. Richmond endeavored to sustain both interpretations of evil, without committing to either one.

Even if it was unclear whether Lady Macbeth saw the dead Duncan because of her fractured mind or because the witches had set him upon her, Eastwood delivered a

riveting performance. While wearing an eye patch – a gesture toward Lady Macbeth’s limited foresight – Eastwood burned holes through her husband with her single, blazing eye during his moments of self-doubt. The pair had great chemistry, too, feeding a shared mania in their every interaction. For his part, Peakes projected so much anxiety into his twitches and haunted looks that by the time Macduff slew him, it seemed a release. It is worth noting that this was a radically different – but no less effective – version of the Macbeths than the one brought forth by Peakes and Eastwood on the Folger stage a decade before, then under the direction of Raymond Teller and Aaron Posner.

From the beginning to the end of this more recent performance, the musical accompaniment by the Folger Consort matched the intensity of the leads. Numbers ranged from Scottish country dances (with bagpipes) to brief symphonies, from seventeenth-century music composed for *the Tempest* to a rondeau by Purcell. In one light, it would be easy to complain that the music was as at variance with itself as Richmond’s vision. Yet, as music director Robert Eisenstein stated in the program, his goal was not ‘to shape the relationship between music in speech in our production exactly as it would have been done in the Drury Lane or Lincoln’s Inn Fields theaters in the 17<sup>th</sup> century’, but instead ‘to integrate 18<sup>th</sup> century words and music in an organic way’. The result was a rich and haunting sonic accompaniment to a rendition of *Macbeth* that was not entirely lucid yet always interesting to watch.