

# EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



***Macbeth*, presented by the National Theatre at the Grand Opera House, Belfast,  
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Directed by: Rufus Norris. With Kirsty Besterman (Lady Macbeth), Joseph Brown (Malcolm), Elizabeth Chan (Witch), Nisa Cole (Fleance), Reuben Johnson (Doctor/Ensemble), Helen Katamba and Brad Morrison (Murderers), Frances Mayli McCann (Gentlewoman/Ensemble), Tom Mannion (Duncan), Michael Nardone (Macbeth), Hauk Pattison (Witch/Murderer), Evelyn Roberts (Witch/Boy), James Robinson (Lennox), Patrick Robinson (Banquo), Duncan Ross (Siward/Ensemble), Rachel Sanders (Ross), Ross Waiton (Macduff), Dekka Walmsley (Porter) and Lisa Zahra (Lady Macduff).

This was a touring version of a National Theatre revival of *Macbeth*. The London production received poor reviews. The faults found were, frankly, faults that are apparent in most contemporary productions of Shakespearean plays: distracting extra-textual stage business, pointless gender re-casting, confusing doubling and tripling of roles, intrusive music and unnecessary cutting of text. The touring version of the play was not an improvement on the London original, but Norris' original production had a few distinctive touches which were retained and performed with committed gusto here in Belfast. These touches deserve to be appreciated and noted.

The production was set on a stage dominated by a large ramp-like structure that constantly moved in a clockwise or anticlockwise direction. That might have been suited to the Greek-style space at the Olivier Theatre but under a proscenium arch such as the Grand Opera House's it jarred somewhat. The play opened with a brutal act of violence: a ruthless stabbing. It was not apparent who the attackers were or who the victim was; it is never a good idea to render an audience confused before a word has

been spoken. All the killing did was establish a mood of distrust, paranoia and suspicion. A mood, to be fair, that is not unfamiliar to members of the Ulster audience who were old enough to have endured the so-called 'Troubles' between 1969 and 1998. The Witches, one male, two female, then came on stage and screeched ineffectually. With their rubber-soled footwear all-too-conspicuous, they clambered up metallic parodies of trees like demonic monkeys from hell. No worldly fauna or flora was alive in this war-wracked environment. Ahistorical, but vaguely modern because of dress and electricity (the victory over the Norwegians was celebrated with a disco that was powered by a ramshackle generator), the post-apocalyptic milieu owed more to John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* or Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* than medieval Scotland. The Witches, in fairness, suffered from having their lines badly cut in 1.3 and again in 4.1 – Greymalkin was not mentioned.

The first scene done reasonably well was 1.4. There was a pregnant sense of hubris as Macbeth lapped up the praise lavished on him. Duncan, who looked like a sort of tasteless gangster rather than a puissant king, was one of the few characters to look clean. He wore a lurid red jacket and trouser combination. (There was a good laugh later on when Macbeth entered the stage wearing the same clothes – his ill-gotten clothes of office literally did not suit him). Everybody else was grotty, battle-besmirched. But the production's annoyances kept coming. When Macbeth spoke in soliloquy every other character froze into a sort of background tableau. This might sound like an intriguing metatheatrical effect but it served only to interrupt the dynamic drive of Shakespeare's shortest, arguably most fast-paced play. Fleance made a promising introduction in the scene: female in this production, she was initially girlish and giggly, babyish even. She ran around the stage with a huge cardboard box covering her, a picture of infant joy. Her evolution through the play was rather quick though: after the assassination attempt she was seen in the company of the English-led forces in Act Five. Even if we accept the epic, years-long background narrative of many tragedies, this transition from giggly child to determined adult soldier was too abrupt. Malcolm was portrayed for laughs in this scene: he was impossibly nervous and, in the macho context of war-making, hopelessly effete. When the followers of Duncan acknowledged his role as Duncan's heir they did so with cackling irony – it reminded one of the sarcastic cheering the Praetorian Guard give to the stammering Claudius in Robert Graves' version of Julio-Claudian history. This was a lonely Malcolm; Donalbain was cut entirely so he didn't even have a brother. It was a shame here in Belfast that Donalbain was absent because in the text he announces, after his father's murder, that he will flee to Ireland; obviously a touring production cannot be tailored for local audiences but it is a shame that *Macbeth's* most blatant allusion to the Plantation of Ulster was cut from this Ulster performance.

The first sight of Kirsty Besterman's Lady Macbeth was memorable. She read the letter from Macbeth about the Witches' prophecies with growing interest and eventual excitement. When she determined to denounce her femininity and embrace evil she did so kneeling down, earnestly gazing upwards into a darkness seen only by her. Sincere and focused, this kneeling supplication to darkness was a disturbing, grotesque inversion of Christian prayer. Michael Nardone's gruff, soldierly Macbeth deliberately dropped his sword when he met her later in the scene – dropping the sword felt like a temporary retirement from military obsession as he literally embraced the domestic and the sexual as embodied in his wife. Briefly, Macbeth was a lover, not a fighter. After some appropriately stomach-churning, hypocritical welcoming of Duncan to the house, the murderous deed, of course, was done. The Porter's response to the atmosphere in the house was novel. His lines were heavily cut but, significantly, it was made clear that he had witnessed the aftermath of the murder. He made a point of wiping blood off a wall: no mere drunken fool, this unloquacious Porter was complicit in regicide. The facade of the Macbeths' happy marriage breaks down quickly; in this production it seemed to happen even more quickly than usual: Lady Macbeth's stoppiness at her husband's inability to clean up after his knife rampage was both comic and violently impatient.

Macbeth was soon worried about Banquo. The two murderers were imaginatively directed. They were obvious low-lives, poor-quality thugs who were seemingly working only to get their next drug fix. The female cut-throat seemed only slightly less disorganised and discombobulated than the male one. Later on, Macbeth would praise her as the best of the cut-throats – it got a laugh from the audience because she was only the best cut-throat in comparison with her feckless colleague. The attempted assassination scene was botched, I thought, because of a decision to show it on stage in conjunction with the dinner party scene. So Banquo's ghost had only to walk across the stage from his death scene onto Macbeth's dining chair. Having the assassination attempt seemingly just outside the Macbeths' castle rather than in some thicket miles away made little dramatic sense and, I'm afraid, confused the audience. The dinner party itself ended desultorily – embarrassed and humiliated by her husband's apparently irrational breakdown, Lady Macbeth shooed everyone off stage and then simply wept. Seeing the most celebrated, fearsome virago in Western culture merely cry like a child who didn't get a lollypop felt anti-climactic and even bathetic.

Ross was another character, to add to Fleance and one of the cut-throats, who was rendered female. Overall, this served little apparent dramatic purpose, although her scene with Lady Macduff was affecting because she seemed able to appreciate her friend's complaints about an absent husband with more sincerity than is usually

mustered by Ross. The murder of the children was harrowing even though it happened offstage. At least one child's body (it wasn't clear if it was one or two bodies) was carried into Lady Macduff's kitchen in a grotty, transparent plastic shopping bag and dumped on the floor beside her. Callous, macabre and sardonic, this act served as a grotesque perversion of the old myth about storks delivering children to their parents. For some reason, though, Lady Macbeth walked onto the stage at this point and stared at Lady Macduff. Obviously intended to represent some sort of psychic connection between a murderous, guilty housewife and a brutalised, innocent housewife, this simply left the audience asking sarcastic questions about Lady Macbeth's seeming omnipresence, even omnipotence. It was a daft move. In the English scene, 4.3, Malcolm changes as he hears about atrocities committed by Macbeth. Ross tells him about some of these atrocities. In this production Ross wept with some histrionic outrage as she emotionally recounted these events. If Ross had been played by a man would the character have been directed to cry at this point? I don't think so. The sexism was obviously inadvertent – but asking a female actor to cry when there is no way that a male actor would be asked to cry in the same scenario felt distasteful.

Lady Macbeth's mental demise is irrevocable by the start of Act Five. Her breakdown has been total. But despite fine acting by Besterman her character's immersion in madness suffered from distraction caused by a laughably poor conversation between the Nurse, earnestly played by Frances Mayli McCann, and the Doctor, played with extraordinary woodenness by Reuben Johnson. The Nurse struggled to get the Doctor interested in the plight of his patient. This depiction of a motivated Nurse conflicting with a disinterested Doctor could have been dramatically effective but the disinterest extended to the actor who said his lines with a remarkable lack of conviction. At the end of the scene the Nurse called him 'good Doctor' with considerable sarcasm – it honestly felt like the actress was sarcastically praising her colleague's performance as much as her character was sarcastically praising her male superior.

Lady Macbeth's death was handled well and her husband's response was imaginatively staged. Speaking, for once, calmly and with some sense, he reflected on the ephemerality of life as he cradled her corpse in her arms. In life, Lady Macbeth had carried him; in death; she was a rag-like reminder of what had once been vibrant. The subsequent battle scenes were over-hasty and bordered on the confusing. There was little sense of the dominant English role in what is effectively an invasion of Macbeth's Scotland. The focus was on personal revenge, not on the complexities of English and Scottish power dynamics. When the ghosts of Banquo, Duncan and Lady Macduff all appeared to mark Macbeth's demise it was a personal triumph for these apparitions, not a political one. All vengeance was resolved by the time of Malcolm's victory speech at

the end of the play. Malcolm was now a strutting, impressive leader, an utter inversion of the snivelling wretch he had been in Act One. Unfortunately though, most of his closing lines were cut, so we missed out on the character's self-satisfied dismissal of the fiendlike former enemies and we missed out on the lines about Thaness having their titles changed to Earls. This was typical of this depoliticised production. *Macbeth* is a play that resonates with the fallout from the Union of Crowns of 1603 and the fallout from the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, not to mention the nascent Stuart regime's difficulties in Ulster. The play's focus on borders and the changing relationship between England and Scotland is a seminal part of the play – the linguistic change from Thaness to Earls brought about by Malcolm's new regime underlines that. It is the focus on borders and shifting loyalties that makes the play so crucial to audiences, Irish or otherwise, in the early twenty-first century. The production seemed contrived to make us forget about Renaissance politics, to forget about the inherent internationalism of a play that involves England, Ireland, Norway and Scotland. Shaped as a domestic family meltdown set within a post-apocalyptic gangland free-for-all, the production seemed stripped of grown-up politics. At a production of a very political play we were effectively asked to forget about politics. Dare one even say that this production was contrived to make us briefly forget about Brexit?