Weyward *Macbeth*

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WEYWARD *MACBETH*

INTERSECTIONS OF RACE AND PERFORMANCE

Edited by

Scott L. Newstok and Ayanna Thompson

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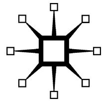

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To our students

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You put me in *Macbeth*…
And in everything but what's about me.

—Langston Hughes,
"Note on Commercial Theatre" (1940)

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Series Editors' Preface

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Preface page

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Acknowledgments

This volume has been deeply collaborative since its outset, emerging from ongoing conversations between us long before we even imagined such a collection.

Rhodes College supported the January 2008 symposium on *Macbeth* that provided the seed for *Weyward Macbeth*. This symposium brought together Ayanna Thompson, Peter Erickson, Marguerite Rippy, Amy Scott-Douglass, Wallace McClain Cheatham, and Harry J. Lennix, as well as Aleta Chappelle and performers and directors from the Hattiloo Theatre and Opera Memphis. The Rhodes College Center for Outreach in the Development of the Arts (CODA) was the main sponsor, with additional support coming from the Departments of Theatre, English, and African American Studies, as well as Provost Charlotte Borst.

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We dedicate this collection to our students—those whom we have taught in the past as well as those whom we look forward to teaching in the future. For their work on helping us edit this book, we are particularly thankful for the assistance of Heather Ackerman, Valerie Fazel, and Julianne Mayer. Brent Butgereit's work on the Appendix was supported through the Rhodes College Student Research Assistant Program.

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Note: All citations from Shakespeare in this collection are taken from the Norton anthology. *The Norton Shakespeare: Based on the Oxford Edition*. Ed. Stephen Greenblatt *et al.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1997). We thank to the following poets for permission to reprint excerpts from their work: Al Young, "Identities," copyright © 1975, 1992 by Al Young; reprinted with permission of the author; Rita Dove, "In the Old Neighborhood," reprinted with permission of the author.

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1

Beginnings

Looke what I haue.

2. Shew me, ſhew me.

1. Here I haue a Pilots Thumbe,
Wrackt, as homeward he did come. *Drum within.*

3. A Drumme, a Drumme:
Macbeth doth come.

All. The weyward Siſters, hand in hand,
Poſters of the Sea and Land,
Thus doe goe, about, about,
Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice againe, to make vp nine.
Peace, the Charme's wound vp.

Enter Macbeth and Banquo.

Macb. So foule and faire a day I haue not ſeene.

Figure S.1 Text from *Macbeth*, *Scena Tertia*, First Folio, 1623.

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1

WHAT IS A "WEYWARD" *MACBETH*?

Ayanna Thompson

Let's begin at the beginning, that is, at the first word—*weyward*. As Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass explain:

> In most editions of [*Macbeth*], the witches refer to themselves as the "weird sisters" [see Figure S.1], and editors provide a footnote associating the word with Old English *wyrd* or "fate." But we look in vain to the Folio for such creatures. Instead we encounter the "weyward Sisters" and the "weyard Sisters"; it is of "these weyward Sisters" that Lady Macbeth reads in the letter from Macbeth, and it is of "the three weyward sisters" that Banquo dreams. (263)

Wondering why editors choose "weird" instead of "wayward" as the modern gloss for "weyward," de Grazia and Stallybrass note that "a simple vowel shift" transposes "the sisters from the world of witchcraft and prophecy . . . to one of perversion and vagrancy" (263). In thinking about the roles *Macbeth* has played—and continues to play—in American constructions and performances of race, we want to maintain the multiplicity *and* instability of the original text's typography. Unlike other critical texts that seek to capitalize on the subversive potentials of perversity through an appropriation of "wayward," this collection recognizes the ambivalent nature of the racialized re-stagings, adaptations, and allusions to *Macbeth*.[1] "Weyward"—as weird, fated, fateful, perverse, intractable, willful, erratic, unlicensed, fugitive, troublesome, and wayward—is precisely the correct word for *Macbeth*'s role in American racial formations.[2]

Why *Macbeth* and race? What is "weyward" about the intersections of race and performance in *Macbeth*? In some respects the intersections seem arbitrary: just as easily, and perhaps more logically, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, or any of Shakespeare's so-called "race" plays could serve as the theatrical placeholder in this book. This collection itself grows out of the 2008 symposium that Scott L. Newstok organized at Rhodes College when he noticed the coincidence of the Hattiloo Theatre Company staging Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with a predominantly black cast in conjunction with Opera Memphis staging Verdi's *Macbeth* with black principals. So perhaps thinking through *Macbeth* and race together might seem something of a fluke, since these companies

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could have staged several other play-opera combinations. Would there be as much to say, or different things to say, about the intersections of race and performance for *Othello* and Verdi's *Otello*, or *Romeo and Juliet*, and Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*? Is *Macbeth*'s place in this volume thus capricious?

Yet there remains something unique about *Macbeth*: the haunted play, the play that shall not be named, in which "nothing is / But what is not" (1.3.140–41). Whether or not its very essence is unique, people have historically treated *Macbeth* as anomalous, different, and Other—as "weyward," in fact. At its very core, the "Scottish play" is about the very real distinctions between a king and one who dons "borrowed robes" (1.3.107), the English and the Scottish, the physical and the metaphysical. So should we be surprised that *Macbeth* is *not* the antithesis of a "race" play: that is, not an un-raced, non-raced, or normatively-raced play (you see how the English language bucks the sense that something is not raced!)? After all, the "weyward" qualities of the witches seem to stem in part from their Scottishness—a sort of seventeenth-century joke about King James's ethnicity. And it is these "weyward Sisters" who most clearly verbalize how racially inflected the play is in their famous (and famously censored) incantation[3]:

> Double, double, toil and trouble,
> Fire burn, and cauldron bubble.
> . . .
> Liver of blaspheming Jew,
> Gall of goat, and slips of yew
> Slivered in the moon's eclipse,
> Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips
> (4.1.20–21, 26–29)

However, it is not simply the witches' brew, with bits of a Jew, Turk, and Tartar, nor even the play's consistent recourse to early modern figurative invocations of whiteness and blackness that makes *Macbeth* read as much more racially engaged than is conventionally assumed.[4] The play's very rhetoric of blood and staining informs—or seeps into—early American racial rhetoric as well. *Macbeth*'s focus on the indelible quality of blood, that staining and smelling substance that Lady Macbeth cannot fully wash from her hands, unnervingly coincides with early American debates about the nature—the essence—of race. On the one hand, the proponents of slavery (and later segregation) insist that the *blood* is the thing; the essential substance that identifies, divides, and classifies races, even down to a single drop. On the other hand, many opponents of slavery (and later segregation) appropriate *Macbeth*'s construction of blood into their protest speeches; the *mark* that stains America's formation and history. On January 7, 1828, for example, J. C. Clark, a Congressman from New York, argued on the House floor that slaves could not be considered property, and he did so by appropriating lines from *Macbeth*:

> Is the ghost of the Missouri question again to be marched, with solemn and terrific aspect, through these halls? Is it again to "shake its [*sic*] gory locks at

> us," and, pointing with one hand to the North, and with the other to the South, and gazing its blood-shotten eye on slavery, written on the escutcheon of the Constitution, to proclaim, with unearthly voice, "out damned spot?" (917–18; *Macbeth* 3.4.49–50; 5.1.30)

Clark "imagined" that the debate about the status of slaves had been put to rest, but he conjures its ghostly re-vision both in terms of Banquo's ghost and in terms of a bloody stain on the Constitution—something that cannot be removed with ease (918).

Likewise, in his June 11, 1854 speech in Westfield, Massachusetts, protesting the North's lack of a stance against Southern slavery, the Methodist Reverend Gilbert Haven intoned,

> We were indifferent to the perils and defeats of freedom. We eagerly snatched and swallowed the few beggarly slops of office and enactments which our shrewd Southern masters tossed us.... Look on your hands! Blood! Cry, "Out damned spot! out, I say!" It flees not; it blears our eyes; it stains our souls; it smells to heaven. Not all the perfumes in Arabia can sweeten this Northern hand. (71)

Haven employs *Macbeth* not only because the play presents the visceral aspects of blood (it "stains" and "smells"), but also because it constructs blood in essentialist terms ("It flees not").

Even into the twentieth century, America's history is often described as analogous to the invisible yet seemingly permanent bloodstains on Lady Macbeth's hands. Writing about the structural nature of inequality in the United States in 1995, John Sedgwick notes, "Then there is the matter of racism in America, which, like bloodstains on the hands of Lady Macbeth, cannot be washed away" (158). The legal scholar Norman Redlich cites the "out, damned spot" passage directly in the title of his essay on the persistence of race in American law, and invokes the "spot" repeatedly as a governing metaphor throughout. And finally, Stephan Lesher, the biographer of the infamous segregationist George Wallace, writes, "Like the imagined indelible bloodstain on Lady Macbeth's hands, the stains of racism on Wallace's reputation will never be washed away" (xiii).

The convergence of Memphis's non-traditionally cast productions of *Macbeth*, then, is not as singular as it might at first appear. While *Macbeth* may not fit neatly into the category of a "race" play, like a specter it is nevertheless haunted by, and haunts, the rhetoric and performances of race. Unlike the over-determined role *Othello* plays in historical *and* contemporary constructions of racial difference (especially blackness), *Macbeth* often lures actors, directors, writers, and others into thinking that the "Scottish play" does not carry "the onerous burden of race" (see the Lennix essay). This lure is so powerful, as the totality of *Weyward Macbeth* demonstrates, that actors, directors, and writers often assume that they are the first to see the connections.

Quite to the contrary, *Macbeth* has long played a role in *American* constructions of race, from its appearance as the first Shakespearean play

documented in the American colonies in 1699 (owned by the Virginia lawyer and plantation owner Captain Arthur Spicer [Teague 14]) to a proposed Hollywood film version with an all-black cast (as of this writing, to star Terence Howard, Sanaa Lathan, Harry J. Lennix, Blair Underwood, and Danny Glover). In the nineteenth century, *Macbeth* provided the context for the black actor Ira Aldridge's experimentation with whiteface performance (see the Lindfors essay) as well as the classist-, racist-, and nationalist-based Astor Place Riot in 1849 (see the Nathans and MacDonald essays). Although Orson Welles's 1936 Federal Theatre Project version of *Macbeth*—commonly referred to as the "Voodoo" *Macbeth*—is often discussed as the creation of Welles's singular and immense creative genius (see the Rippy essay), there was an all-black FTP production the year before in Boston (see the Simmons essay). Likewise, there have been numerous contemporary theatre companies that assume that they are unique in attempting to re-stage Welles's "Voodoo" version (see the Newstok and Sloan essays). Moreover, there have been African-American, Asian-American, Native American (Alaskan and Hawai'ian), and Latino theatre companies that turn to *Macbeth* to help stage their own unique racial, ethnic, and cultural identities (see the Lennix, Huang, Maynard-Losh, Carroll, and Esquea essays).

Macbeth's lure—that it does not come with "the onerous burden of race"—comes at a price, however. Despite the fact that many of the non-traditionally cast productions bill themselves as unique translations—the first to change Scotland to the Caribbean, Africa, the Alaskan tundra, a multiracial post-apocalyptic future, etc.—they can only do so by employing a type of historical amnesia. Unlike *Othello*, *The Tempest*, or the other supposed "race" plays, *Macbeth* does not readily announce itself as already weywardly racialized. The writers, directors, performers, and scholars of weyward *Macbeth*s are thus enabled in forgetting (or never knowing) the play's long history of literary and performance intersections with race. This is precisely the void *Weyward Macbeth* seeks to fill. This collection is designed to combat the historical amnesia that this weyward play, its performance history, and its scholarship engenders.

Signifying Something

Unlike Macbeth's fears that life is a "brief candle" and a "tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5.22, 25–27), *Weyward Macbeth* demonstrates the eerie quality of the play's ability to reignite itself all the while signifying a great deal within racial discourses. Thus, we begin with the weyward qualities of the playtext itself. The aspect of *Macbeth* that has invited and enabled numerous adaptations and appropriations—the witches' embodiment of the metaphysical—was actually penned by a ghostly, decidedly non-Shakespearean, hand—Thomas Middleton (see the Daileader essay). Beginning with this spookily invisible yet visible presence, *Weyward Macbeth* then turns to the early American intersections with *Macbeth*. As I indicate above, the "Scottish play" that

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explores the essence of lineage, bloodlines, and bloodlusts haunts debates about freedom, slavery, and racial/national identity. With four essays that address antebellum moments, political figures, and cultural forces (see the Nathans, Briggs, Lindfors, and MacDonald essays), and one that addresses the early twentieth-century hauntings (see the Moschovakis essay), Section Two establishes the complex and ambiguous history of early American allusive references to *Macbeth*. As all of the essays identify, *Macbeth* does not fit seamlessly into either pro- and anti-slavery/segregation rhetoric. Perhaps because of the fact that Macbeth's characterization is ambiguous (he is both a hero *and* a rogue), the play circulates through disparate speeches, images, poetry, and performances about America's racial politics. Shakespeare's equivocal character, then, provides an uncanny medium for our nation's divided self/other racial constructions.

Section Three moves firmly into the twentieth century to focus on Federal Theatre Project(s). Beginning with an often overlooked 1935 Boston FTP production, and ending with the 2001–2005 choreo-drama inspired by the famous 1936 "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, this section demonstrates the strangely amnesiac quality to appropriations of the play. Although Orson Welles's production is frequently cited as radically unique—with an all-black cast and sold out audiences in Harlem—the repetitious nature of constantly re-doing the voodoo forces one to contemplate the strange whiting out of performance histories. The productions also bring to the fore the central role the federal government has played—and perhaps might play again—in supporting unconventional and non-traditional productions.

Addressing the early twenty-first century, Section Four provides snapshots of five distinctly racialized adaptations of *Macbeth*. These short pieces provide an insider's view to why *and* how *Macbeth* is translated to a fictitious diasporic island, ancient Japan, an Alaskan native community, a multicultural future, and a Hawai'ian island. Once again these essays reveal the beckoning and yet contentious relationship between the text and the modern racialized settings. Although the productions often depict distinct cultural and racial environments that are separated from dominant Western influences, the appropriation of Shakespeare's play nevertheless reveals the fiction of this isolation.

The final sections of the collection address different facets of *Macbeth*'s allusive force in music, film, and drama. Although we end with specific allusions in black poetry and theatre to analyze the often combative relationship black artists have with Shakespeare (see the Kolin, Erickson, and Gainey-O'Toole/Alexander essays in Section Seven), Section Five demonstrates the ways American musical renditions of *Macbeth* appropriate the tragedy within dialogues about race and performance. While non-traditional casting in opera still inspires critical controversy, Verdi's *Macbeth* provides a unique exception, with a surprisingly long history of black principals as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Yet one must ask how and why this exception comes about, and what racial stereotypes enable this non-traditional casting (see the Cheatham essay). Likewise in musical adaptations, dialogues about race are

often coded into the analysis. For example, Duke Ellington's turn to Shakespeare in his 1957 jazz suite *Such Sweet Thunder* frequently invites the speculation that he was not actually familiar with Shakespeare's plays. Ellington's *Macbeth*-inspired piece, "Lady Mac," however, reveals his revisionary engagement with Shakespeare (see the Lanier essay). Tracking black popular music from jazz to hip hop, it is also important to analyze the role *Macbeth* plays in modern rap adaptations of Shakespeare's works (see the Barnes essay). In other words, appropriative gestures that unite and divide Shakespeare and modern racial constructions do not solely occur in the realms of theatre and literature, as musicians have grappled with issues of race through *Macbeth* from the middle of the twentieth century onward.

Adaptations of, and allusions to, *Macbeth* in contemporary cinema often reveal a great deal about the racialization of whiteness. Thus, Roman Polanski's 1971 rendition of *Macbeth* and Nina Menkes's 1996 *The Bloody Child: An Interior of Violence* exploit the weyward qualities of the playtext to comment on the vulnerabilities of whiteness (see the Royster and Lehmann essays). These films bring into shocking focus the many ways the twentieth-century world renders whiteness visible and racialized. And finally, interracially cast television shows and films that allude to *Macbeth* often perform a rhetoric of colorblindness that conflicts with how color-sited (and color-sighted) audiences remain (see the Scott-Douglass essay). It turns out that the plot of *Macbeth* provides a surprisingly adept frame to reveal these tensions precisely because of the strange relationship between the Macbeths.

As this collection is designed to combat the historical amnesia about this play's weyward history within dialogues about race, we have included an Appendix of non-traditionally cast productions. Although it is impossible to catalogue every performance (even if one focuses primarily on professional productions in the United States), over one hundred productions featured in the Appendix reveal how often producers, directors, actors, and reviewers imagine themselves working in a vacuum. Documenting the frequency of these productions and analyzing the adaptations, appropriations, and allusions, *Weyward Macbeth* positions the "Scottish Play" in the center of American racial constructions. Shakespeareans alone could not tell this eclectic story: we needed Americanists, filmmakers, musicians, musicologists, actors, directors, film theorists, and artists to tell a tale that signifies something about *Macbeth*, race, and the American imagination from as many viewpoints as possible.

"Note on Commercial Theatre"

When Langston Hughes penned "Note on Commercial Theatre" in 1939, he was protesting the absence of black narratives in American popular culture. As he saw it, white producers, artists, and performers were appropriating black cultural production, like the blues and spirituals, and putting them in the Hollywood Bowl, in symphonies, in musicals, and on Broadway. The problem with this cultural theft, Hughes intones, is that

these appropriations white out the narratives, struggles, and triumphs of the "Black and beautiful" (line 15). Even though these stolen spirituals are promoted as expansive, they nevertheless include "everything but what's about me" (line 11). Coupled with this socio-artistic larceny, Hughes warns, comes the denial of the specificity and uniqueness of racially-informed cultural production. Therefore, Hughes places *Macbeth* in the center of his lament (line 9 of 20) precisely because he identifies the recently-produced "Voodoo" production (1936) as a forced marriage in which the black actors must mute their racial identities in order to fit into the dominantly-restricted Shakespearean narrative.

Looking back at the Welles-directed "Voodoo" *Macbeth* with over 70 years of hindsight, I find Hughes's poem both prescient *and* limited. It is prescient in the way he locates the tensions of being "put" into "*Macbeth* and *Carmen Jones* / And all kinds of *Swing Mikados*" (lines 9–10). The forced nature of these translations, revisions, and adaptations is never as seamless and invisible, neither as logically coherent nor stable, as the creative teams desire and envision. Disruptive junctions inevitably become highly visible precisely because Shakespeare was not writing about modern American racialized environments: he knew about witches, but not about "voodoo."

Yet Hughes's view is also limited in the way he envisions the cultural legacy of Welles's FTP production. The force of Hughes's employment of the verb "put" imagines that the black presence in the "Voodoo" *Macbeth* has less cultural resonance than the Shakespearean text itself. Yet it is not, in fact, *Macbeth* that is remembered, as the iconic image that graces the cover of this volume demonstrates: the word *Macbeth* may be central, but it is the dynamic presence of black Harlem in the 1930s that draws one in. Likewise, it is the fantasy of a black primitive culture that the "Voodoo" *Macbeth* constructs that subsumes the play. The drums, the dancing, the largesse of the cast and the audience (reported crowds of over 10,000 people at opening night!), and the performance of "voodoo" are what are remembered and replayed (through photographs, annotated scripts, production drawings, and one four-minute film clip) over the placement (the "put") in *Macbeth.* While Hughes is correct in thinking that he must, and will, play a crucial role in creating ("put"ting *on*) the stories, songs, and poems about a "Black and beautiful . . . me," many other black and beautiful, Asian and beautiful, Latino and beautiful, and Native American and beautiful artists have seen themselves in *Macbeth* precisely because it is weyward: that is, weird, fated, fateful, perverse, intractable, willful, erratic, unlicensed, fugitive, troublesome, and wayward. This is not to suggest that these visions are uncomplicated—that the translations are not somewhat forced (the "put")—but the fact that these visions so often occur within the framework of *Macbeth* is remarkable and necessarily challenges one's notions of what is—even what can be—"about me."

It is fitting that the collection ends with an epilogue about the current socio-political moment: the presidency of Barack Hussein Obama. While several of the essays allude to the era of Obama and what that might mean

for the future of racial politics and performances, several others emphasize the importance of renewed federal funding for the arts. After all, we would not have the legacy of Welles's "Voodoo" *Macbeth* without the federally-funded Federal Theatre Project of the 1930s. Yet as Richard Burt makes clear in the epilogue, there is a distinct irony in the way *Macbeth* is recalled in these statements in both the popular and academic media. The historical amnesia that I describe above is evident in the way that the "Voodoo" *Macbeth* is re-visioned as solely progressive; its complications, its *weyward* qualities, are forgotten and white-washed in favor of simplistic imaginings of Shakespeare's universal applicability.

Thus the epilogue returns us to the beginning of this introduction: that is, to the weyward nature of historical transmission. As we hope to convey through the creation of our Obamicon-Shakespearicon image, progressive change never comes about through simplistic transferences, applications, or substitutions. Putting Shakespeare in Shepard Fairey's iconic Obama "Change" poster does not make him radical, nor does casting *Macbeth* with non-traditional casts/settings make the play radical (see Figure S.8). The very weyward qualities—in all of their myriad complexities—of the playtext, the performance history, and the critical scholarship must be brought into focus so that our desires for progressive acts are not disabled before they even begin. Thus we include some two dozen concise essays addressing everything from Frederick Douglass' allusions to the play, to hip-hop adaptations on YouTube, to Duke Ellington's revisionary musical rendition, to multiracial prison productions, so that we might learn what it means to remember one facet of our cultural legacy. A conscious remembering, revisioning, and restaging is the true first step to change and progress.

Notes

1. For an example of a book that draws upon the subversive powers of the "wayward," see Carter's *Wayward Girls & Wicked Women*.
2. For another critical collection that capitalizes on Shakespeare's ambivalent meaning of "weyward," see Callaghan, Helms, and Singh.
3. For an example of the elision of the witches' chant, listen to the NPR piece, "Second Graders Take on *Macbeth*, Halloween," in which the "second grade Shakespeare scholars" at Washington DC's Maret School omit the racially inflected lines.
4. "Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.51); "My hands are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (2.2.62–63); "black Hecate's summons" (3.2.42); "night's black agents" (3.2.54); "you secret, black, and midnight hags" (4.1.64); "black Macbeth / Will seem as pure as snow" (4.3.53–54); "black scruples" (4.3.117); "The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!" (5.3.11). At least one all-black production deliberately modified such lines: a reviewer of Peter Coe's 1972 *Black Macbeth* in London lamented that "One or two verbal alterations ('The Devil damn thee white') would have been better avoided" (Lambert 23). See Daileader's following essay for further critical reflections on these passages.