

## “‘Strange Garments’: Borrowing Africa’s Robes”

Todd Landon Barnes

*This essay analyzes cultural appropriations within Macbeth and within the play’s performance history in the US, the UK, and a number of nations in central Africa. The project began in July, when I was asked by Michael Kahn, Artistic Director of the Shakespeare Theatre Company in Washington, D.C., to write an essay for their Guide to the Season’s Plays. A version of this essay will appear in this publication. A shorter version will also appear in the program of the April-May 2017 production of Macbeth, which will be set in central Africa and directed by Liesl Tommy, whose recent Broadway production of Eclipsed, starring Lupita Nyong’o, was nominated for six Tony awards; it was also the first Broadway production to have an all-female cast, director, and playwright.*

Early in the play, Macbeth learns that he has acquired a new title and power as the Thane of Cawdor, yet in his mind the Thane still lives. He asks, “Why do you dress me/In borrowed robes?” (act 1, scene 3) Authority and clothing will be associated throughout the play. Banquo remarks that “New honors come upon him/Like our strange garments, [which] cleave not to their mold” but only fit, over time, “with the aid of use” (act 1, scene 3). As King James labored to locate the essence of authority in the sovereign’s blood and body, *Macbeth* raised the possibility that kings merely *inhabit* an authority which, like prop, is passed down and therefore risks being appropriated. As political figures are invariably supplanted, others slip into their royal robes. This language of “borrowed robes” and “strange garments”—“strange” being a Jacobean synonym for “foreign”—has long suggested to me that *Macbeth* is a play about tragic borrowings, a tragedy of misappropriation.

Sartorial choices (or borrowings) hide one’s figure, accentuating and distinguishing certain features while hiding or minimizing others. For Shakespeare’s contemporaries in early modern England, clothing’s power to distinguish and diminish was literally woven into the fabric of everyday life. Elizabethan “sumptuary laws” or Acts of Apparel meticulously defined the colors, fabrics, and accoutrements each type of citizen could wear. The regulation of apparel often went hand-in-hand with conquest, as when Henry VIII forbade Irish dress and required the Irish in Galway to wear English caps. Some scholars have suggested that the Tudor monarchs, who instituted many such laws, protested too much and that such decrees were in fact a reaction to the widespread abuse of sumptuous dress. England’s mercantile capitalism was creating ambiguity within the feudal order, producing a “middling sort,” a new class that challenged traditional assumptions about apparel’s ability to proclaim the station of men (women were regulated otherwise). This middling sort, it was feared, were “passing” as their “betters.” What’s more, this new merchant class also imported borrowed fashions from the Continent, threatening the English wool trade and further diluting the ostensible purity of English robes. The Porter alludes to such trends when he opens the gates of hell to welcome a deceptive tailor, one condemned for “stealing out of a French hose” (act 2, scene 3). French fashion, when worn by Scots, often signaled their allegiance to England’s enemy. However, in 1604, shortly before Shakespeare composed *Macbeth* in 1606, King James gave into pressure from parliament and finally repealed the last of these laws. Suddenly, clothing was legally detached from rank, class, and trade. We might imagine the borrowing that ensued.

Shakespeare's theater served as an exception to laws tethering bodies to costumes, much to the chagrin of its Puritan critics. On the stage, the actors performing *Macbeth*—who were technically servants of their patron, King James—were licensed to borrow the robes of their betters (many of which were bequeathed or sold to the company upon the owner's death). When players passed for kings, however, such performances exposed the possibility that the Emperor himself might be nothing more than his clothes. If players could become kings, could kings become players? At the end of his tragedy, Macbeth laments such a fate, finding himself “a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more” (act 5, scene 6).

The failure of borrowed robes in *Macbeth* highlights the inherent dangers of a theater built around appropriating the props or cultural properties of others. Shakespeare, after all, may have borrowed a few yards of Scottish tartan in order to dress his English players as Scots. Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, perhaps knowingly and strategically, appropriated medieval Scottish history and culture to tell a particularly British tale—as opposed to a Scottish or English one. Shakespeare's public theaters offered their audiences a portal to other worlds and other times, both of which were refracted through the lens of the here-and-now. The only surviving illustration of a performance of one of Shakespeare's plays drawn during his lifetime, what scholars call the “Peacham Drawing” (c. 1595), depicts characters from *Titus Andronicus*. Scholars have noted how the actors on this stage wear costumes from distinct historical eras and geographical regions: Titus wears an ancient Roman toga, Tamora wears an English medieval gown, and the rest wear contemporary English attire. We might consider how the “hurly-burly” drama of *Macbeth* similarly layers the past and the present, the native and the strange.

The danger of appropriating the clothes of strangers is nowhere more apparent than in the Africanization of Shakespeare's plays. The long history of habiting Shakespearean plots in African robes, of course, includes the American minstrel tradition's appropriation of both Shakespeare and the property of blackness. This tradition illustrates, perhaps better than any other, how costuming exaggerates some features while hiding others. As certain traits are caricatured, the human complexity of a culture can be reduced or obscured. But such borrowings have trafficked in both directions, with artists within the African diaspora, many of whom read Shakespeare throughout their schooling, likewise tailoring Shakespeare to fashion their own tales. Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest (Une Tempête)* is only the most famous example of such appropriations. Politicians have also appropriated Shakespeare. Julius Nyerere, Tanzania's first president, translated both *Julius Caesar* and *The Merchant of Venice* (“*The Bourgeoisie of Venice*”) into Swahili. In 1971, when Ugandan President Idi Amin told Radio Uganda that his friends in Scotland consider him their uncrowned King, the *Daily Express* in London ran an article dressing him in Macbeth's robes: “Hail! Now It's King McIdi [*sic*].” In an attempt to tear at the seams of British imperialism, King MacIdi often dressed himself in Scottish garb as he crowned himself “Conqueror of the British Empire in Africa in General and Uganda in Particular.” From stages to pages to palaces, African appropriations of Shakespeare abound, as do such intercultural borrowings in most of Britain's former colonies.

Of all the plays, *Macbeth* might seem an unlikely candidate for a company seeking to set a Shakespearean drama in Africa. Those wishing to address issues of cultural difference, race, or colonialism, we might think, would gravitate toward *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, or even *Titus Andronicus*. When compared to the dramatic horizons of

these plays, *Macbeth*'s geographical and cultural scope feels rather narrow. Not so, it turns out. The connection between *Macbeth* and the African diaspora runs deep. One study, Scott Newstok and Ayanna Thompson's *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, counts over one hundred performances of *Macbeth* using non-traditional (or "colorblind") casting between 1821-2010, the vast majority of which emphasized their black actors and/or a setting within the Afro-Atlantic world.

From Ira Aldridge to the Royal Shakespeare Company, from Out of Joint's 2005 production reimagining *Macbeth*'s Scotland as Idi Amin's Uganda, to a 2007 *Macbeth* set in "Dred Scotland," the number of such performances in the US alone prompted Scott Newstok to call *Macbeth* "arguably the most popular Shakespearean play for contemporary black repertory." Throughout Africa, *Macbeth* is far-and-away the most popular, and most often performed, of all Shakespeare's plays. Perhaps no all-black *Macbeth* is better known than the one staged in 1936 by the Harlem Negro Theater Unit of the Works Progress Administration's Federal Theater Project. Quickly dubbed the "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, the wildly successful production was directed by a twenty-one-year-old Orson Welles, who set the play's drama in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century Caribbean in order to draw upon the life of Haitian Emperor Henri Christophe. The witches, a group of chanting and drumming voodoo priestesses, and Hecate, a male witch doctor, literally took center stage in this production. Marguerite Rippy notes how "The promise of an authentic Haitian voodoo experience lies at the center of several critical reactions to the show." This, despite the fact that the drummers who carried the show were actually from Sierra Leone.

While this production, which launched Welles' career, certainly challenged contemporary assumptions about race and performance, Rippy and other scholars have noted how the production also profited from the use of dangerously racist tropes. In particular, the production relied upon the conceit of racial primitivism, which condescendingly casts Africans as "noble savages" within a exotic world, a lost and magical realm where naïveté comingles with barbarism. Like many Africanized *Macbeths* before and since, the so-called "Voodoo" *Macbeth*, more than anything else, accurately presented white, colonial fantasies of Africa and blackness.

While Africanizing *Macbeth* certainly presents these unique dangers, we might also consider how every performance of Shakespeare risks falsely equating present and past, collapsing important cultural and historical differences. Further, every performance, because it borrows robes in order to represent others, hazards the risks inherent in such appropriations. Shakespeare's culture, too, can be reduced to the caricature of "Merrie Olde England" one might find peddled at tourist sites or Renaissance Faires. However, we should note that such images of England were often manufactured by the English themselves to hide internal divisions or the unpalatable features of medieval feudalism.

Africanized *Macbeths* since Welles have continually struggled to tailor Africa to Shakespearean dimensions, or to properly dress Shakespeare in African robes. Which robes are imported? To what port, and by whom? Can we combine these cultures while respecting each's integrity and history? In his critique of a 1995 Royal Shakespeare Company performance set in an unspecified (and thus largely fictional and fantastical) African country, S. Ekema Agbaw draws our attention to the dangers of equating medieval Scots and contemporary Africans, an equation which suggests, to him, "that Africans are at a point in their social development where Europeans were

eight or nine hundred years ago, a common enough way of looking at Africa that appears to be resistant indeed to change.” When Africanized performances of Shakespeare carelessly represent or conflate the continent’s varied cultural geography, they risk perpetuating and projecting colonial assumptions and impressions of a mythical “Africaland,” a location that necessarily homogenizes (or worse) an entire continent’s varied cultures. African critics have noted such caricatures of Africa, from *The Lion King’s* Pride Lands to “Zamunda,” the caricature of Africa represented in 1988’s *Coming to America*, a film in which African royalty trade their royal robes for the humble Scottish plaid of their “McDowell’s” fast-food uniforms.

When Shakespeare set his plays in foreign lands, he likewise catered to his audience’s assumptions and anxieties about cultural difference. Shakespeare was writing at a time when English colonialism was only nascent, and modern notions of race, too, were only beginning to emerge. Ania Loomba describes Shakespeare’s era as “a time which can be characterized as either the last period in history where ethnic identities could be understood as fluid, or as the first moment of the emergence of modern notions of ‘race’.” *Macbeth* dramatizes significant, proto-racial shifts in English attitudes toward the Scottish during the reign of King James I of England and VI of Scotland, who sought to unite both countries under the mantle of “Great Britain” (a wish fulfilled almost exactly one hundred years later, in 1707’s Act of Union). As King James angered the English aristocracy by swelling their ranks with newly knighted Scots, Shakespeare, the King’s Man, labored to carefully dress Scotland’s past in contemporary English clothing. This PR campaign sought to rehabilitate the image of Scotland in England’s eyes. In his *Treatise on the Union of the British Realms* (1603-8), Sir Thomas Craig defended his countrymen from accusations that they are “uncivilized, wild, [and] barbarous...the most perfidious and barbarous of all nations, devoid of an alter of faith, as the saying is, not to be tolerated in the courts of kings, and of a bloodthirsty and treacherous disposition.” Craig bemoans “that in public representations of comedy a Scotsman is always treated as a fitting subject of ridicule.”

Stagings of *Macbeth* often feel claustrophobically centered on its royal couple as they struggle against the tight-knit web of the witches’ magic. We are often so enchanted by the magic of *Macbeth* that we fail to see the play’s broader secular and political concerns. Many have claimed that the play’s magic makes staging its drama in the Afro-Caribbean feel like a seamless and natural fit. But the ease with which one Africanizes this magic, transforming it into a literal “black magic,” hides the fact that the play’s magic is strikingly European. Like King James, the scholar and author of *Daemonologie* (1597), England was as obsessed as any nation with the mysteries of witchcraft. When the West turns its gaze inward, it still fails to recognize its own magic. Over time and with relative ease, early modern witches donned estranging costumes, morphing into the seemingly-fictional Halloween cartoons every child knows today. Similarly, when the West locates the play’s exotic magic in Africa, it fails to see how this projection emphasize the “superstitions” of Africans while erasing its own, equally-magical beliefs and anxieties—some of which spawned literal witch-hunts. Such Africanizations of *Macbeth* illustrate how familiar religions, in the hands of others, quickly become “magic” or “superstition.”

It’s telling that, when we evoke—in order to counteract—the play’s legendary curse, we call it “The Scottish Play,” a euphemistic title that merely begins to illuminate the play’s geographical tensions. We might more appropriately call it “The British Play” in order to acknowledge how its

English playwright revises Scotland's role in an expansive, brave new world. Act I alone directly or indirectly alludes to areas we today call Italy, Norway, Scotland, Israel, the Hebrides, Ireland, and Syria. Subsequent acts add references to Turks, Tartars, Greece, and the "rich East." The play's fluid racial landscape depicts a world wherein a shared possession of "whiteness" has yet to connect Norway, Scotland, England, or Ireland. Protestant England, in the wake of the Gunpowder plot, imagined itself surrounded by Catholic nations and infiltrated by foreign and domestic traitors hatching terrorist plots. The unity of England and Scotland, with which *Macbeth* ends, registers James' desire for a united kingdom, but this unity also dramatizes the slow erasure of divisive intra-European distinctions. The play presents the first stages of what we now recognize as the construction of modern whiteness, the infancy of a people another James—Baldwin—famously described as "those who call themselves white."

Performing Shakespeare requires that we borrow the robes of others, from the here and now, or from distant times and distant places. Costume, like allegory, metaphor, or analogy, will always accentuate certain cultural features while erasing or obscuring others. When we dress the past in the costumes of strangers, we often see differences where there are uncomfortable similarities (e.g. exotic magic); or, alternately, when we dress distant others in familiar attire, we often find sameness as we erase politically and culturally significant differences (i.e. flattening history or culture in favor of vague universals). Intercultural theater presents dangers, but our increasingly globalized world makes such dangers unavoidable. Ethical borrowing will demand that we respect the complexity, and history, of multiple performance traditions while paying keen attention to what our conjunctions hide or illuminate. Cultural cross-dressings holds the potential to locate hidden commonalities or to alert us to asymmetries and failed equations. Such borrowed robes may not fit at first, but depending on how we wear or share them, they may fit—or even change us—"with the aid of use."

**Todd Barnes** is Associate Professor of Literature at Ramapo College of New Jersey. His essays and reviews have appeared in *Shakespeare Bulletin*, *Public Books*, *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance*, *Shakespearean Echoes*, *Hamlet Handbook*, and the Arden Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar: A Critical Reader*. Barnes served as dramaturge for the African-American Shakespeare Company in San Francisco, where he also worked in educational outreach.

## Works Referenced

- Agbaw, S. Ekema, "Africanizing *Macbeth*: 'Down-Fall'n Birthdom,'" *Research in African Literatures* 27:1 (Spring, 1996): 102-109
- "Amin Plans to Visit Britain to Advise Liberation Units," *New York Times* (January 23, 1975), 10.
- Baldwin, James, "On Being 'White'...And Other Lies," in *Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken Books, 1998).
- Craig, Thomas, *A Treatise on the Union of the British Realms* (1603-8), in *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts*, ed. William C. Carroll (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999): 288-290
- Hayward, Maria, *Rich Apparel: Clothing and the Law in Henry VIII's England* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009).
- Lebdai, Benaouda, "Traces of Shakespeare's Tragedies in Africa," in *Shakespeare in*

- Performance*, eds. Estelle Rivier and Eric C. Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014): 182-193.
- Loomba, Ania, “‘Delicious Traffick’: Racial and Religious Difference on Early Modern Stages,” in *Shakespeare and Race*, eds. Catherine M.S. Alexander and Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000): 203-224.
- McHaffie, John, “Hail! Now It’s King McIdi,” *Daily Express* (November 27, 1976), 7.
- Newstok, Scott L. and Ayanna Thompson, eds. *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- Rippy, Marguerite, “Black Cast Conjures White Genius,” in Newstok and Thompson, eds. *Weyward Macbeth: Intersections of Race and Performance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).