

Howard Brenton's Transliteration of *Macbeth*

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Ever since the dawn of human civilization, incomparable Shakespeare shines with his incandescent luminosity through every word he wrote. The Bard of Avon is the most quoted writer in history. His plays have been translated into 50 languages. In the *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* containing about 20,000 quotations, Shakespeare alone monopolises a staggering 60 pages (10 percent). The unique dramatist, with his insight into every aspect of human behaviour and emotion, packed his plays with nearly one million words, out of which 27,870 are different words, the highest vocabulary in history. Many words and phrases – Shakespeare's encyclopedic knowledge of science, history, mathematics, classical literature, sociology, psychology, law, politics, music – reveal the vastness of his vocabulary in relation to various discipline, habits and style of the different sections of the people.

Ernest Weekley, the famous etymologist opined that Shakespeare's phraseology of English is 10 times greater than that of any other writer in any language in the history of the world. Some of the colourful phrases and expressions in his plays have been liberally used as titles for their books by famous authors. For example, Faulkner chose the phrase 'sound and fury' as the title for his novel from the verdict of a mentally shattered Macbeth who views life as a "Tale told by an idiot. Full of sound and fury signifying nothing" (Macbeth. V, 5, 2).

Robert Frost's 'Out and Out' and Rose Macaulay's 'Told by an Idiot' are also from *Macbeth*. There are several other phrases from that one play alone which have been used as title of the book by several authors. The title of Robert Stone's book *Dogs of War* has been taken from *Julius Caesar*. John Gunther's *Taken at the Flood*, Lance Hill's *The Evil that Men do*, Frederick Reynold's *Fortune's Fool*, Philip K.Dick's *Time Out of Joint*, Ogden Nash's *The Primrose Path*, Dorothy Parker's *Not so Deep as a Well* are all from Shakespeare.

The greatest dramatic genius, mankind has ever known, with his magnitude of intellect and imagination, imparted individuality and personality to the characters who behave like 'real people' not 'types'. Howard Brenton, one of Britain's best known and most controversial dramatists from the Fringe theatres of the late sixties, writes on 'public' issues, borrowing from Shakespeare's model in a number of ways. His play *Thirteenth Night* is modelled on *Macbeth*. For a political dramatist like Brenton concerned with 'message', the

question arises, why Brenton took the risk of invoking the model of *Macbeth*, the task of transliterating the Bard. The answer lies in the Brechtian notion of telling the audience a story end of which it already knows and the focus of interest moves from what happens to why and how it happens, reframing Shakespeare's analysis of tyranny in the contemporary political context.

The play *Thirteenth Night* was written in the form of a dream, out of mounting terror at events in public life. It acknowledges that the portrayal of events are unlikely to occur in Britain; the foreseeable future. The intention of Brenton is to challenge a contemporary left divided by bitter disputes over the authenticity of its socialist programmes to face the great issue of the past, i.e., the threat of Stalinism.

So the play is – if you like – a licence to be totally paranoid and to investigate one's worst fears as a socialist. It struck me that *Macbeth* is a bit like that. It's like a paranoid dream, a stripped down text... it struck me that everything was honed away from that play. Normal scenes of courtiers and comic under – tow are stripped away: it's short and like a dark vision.^[4]

Hence, in terms of general shape and central thrust, the plot is similar to *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* is both a lure and a snare for Brenton because it concentrates on the internal corruption of the present state as well as the future prospects of Britain itself with the message that power corrupts and means shape ends.

Jake Beaty, a left-wing leader of a Labour Party Ward, is hit on the head during a fight with fascist thugs after a party meeting. He dreams the rest of the play, a version of *Macbeth* set in contemporary Britain. The setting of his dream is future Britain run by its first elected Marxist Government of which he is playing the lead role. Egged on by his mistress, Jenny Gaze, Jack kills the Labour Prime Minister, Bill Dunn with a fire axe, and takes over the country. He has a fellow Cabinet Minister, Feast, eliminated, while Murgatroyd, a drunken Macduff figure, drowns in his Californian swimming pool. Beaty mistakes the Ambassador from Chad for Banquo at chequers, and in a bunker beneath Whitehall, he is confronted with the ghosts of his victims together with Stalin, before being discovered as a withered corpse by three female anarchist witch figures. The play concludes with a brief Epilogue, set in the 'real world', Beaty with a lame leg and a stick, recalls his dream to Jenny. Brenton sets the characters of Shakespeare to find the elements in

the British character which could transform an Englishman into a Stalin.

With the exception of Malcolm, Brenton finds counterparts for all *Macbeth's* main characters, signaling their equivalence through the names given to his own dramatic characters: Macbeth becomes 'Jack Beaty'; Lady Macbeth 'Jenny Gaze'; Duncan 'Bill Dunn'; Macduff 'Murgatroyd'; Banquo 'Feast'. In Brenton's version, the ghost of Feast, whom he has imprisoned, then murdered, returns in the form of an Ambassador of Chad. The introduction of Brenton's witches echoes Shakespeare's (where hast thou been sister/killing swine)

Where have you been?

One more room, one more meeting, you?

Watching pig get stuck. (*Thirteenth Night* 110)

Thirteenth Night, as the title suggests- the night after twelfth night, when the celebrations have to stop- carries Shakespeare's associations beyond *Macbeth*. The political association recalls *Julius Caesar*, Brenton jokingly acknowledges his debt to Shakespeare in a scene where Bill Dunn, the Prime Minister, holds a cabinet meeting in his bathroom. "DUNN gets out of the bath and wraps a towel around him like a toga as he walks. Comrades! How many years hard? All our life-times. Years hard, for the party we built" (126).

Brenton used the model of *Macbeth* to present a dream play in which a Stalinist Labour Leader successfully mounts a coup on a socialist administration. When the play was produced, Brenton was quite aware that the Macbeth figure, Jack Beaty, will be associated with that of Tony Benn, the figure head of the grass-roots left movement. Brenton was concerned to re-open an area of socialist history that the Left had tried to ignore and the right to make political capital from. He once considered writing a biography of Stalin. He wrote *Thirteenth Night* as a play 'speaking the unspeakable for the left'. He was quite aware that "to put it crudely the reason people don't vote for the left in this country is because they don't want their nails torn out by men in grey boiler suits...that's the gut reaction" (n.2). The play is addressed to the 'troops', for the general theatre-going public to confirm the kind of received attitude to Marxism which equates Communism with Stalinism and the socialist republic with the police state.

Thirteenth Night asks the question "how can you sustain a revolution without becoming the thing you seek to destroy?" (n.23). The central theme of the play is the correlation between the 'micro' and 'macro', between the politics of personal relationship and the politics of the state. Brenton's main concern is to portray the psychology of power. So he deals with the personal allegiances, loyalties and desires of a small group of characters in a series of interior settings: a bathroom, a bedroom, a lavatory, a dining room. Of the seventeen dream scenes, only two scenes- Beaty's great speech at central Hall, Manchester and the show by a divided cabinet of 'government solidarity' at a northern miners' gala- take place in an overtly public context.

Beaty is by politics a radical socialist but by temperament, an agonizing liberal. He advocates a politics to end politics, a new democracy, free of dependence on American money and making alliance with new friends in the Third World. His audience takes his word, burns down the American Embassy, kills the Ambassador and Beaty finds himself at the head of a popular mass movement demanding real, egalitarian socialism. He is ambushed in an underground car park by the three women radicals. They ask "Is the revolution won or lost. Jack Beaty...you raised a ghost tonight...Give it flesh, Mr. Politician. Give it flesh" (123). It echoes Macbeth's temptation by the three witches. Though Brenton's 'witches' are not supernatural, their origins are mysterious. They describe themselves as 'Delegates' and identify themselves as manifestations of 'people power'.

Beaty turns to his 'Lady Macbeth', his mistress Jenny Gaze, babbling a massive extension of democracy right through movement. In the interplay of politics and sex, she pours scorn on him and manoeuvres Beaty to the point of murder through a 'black seduction'. She identifies herself as a hard-line radical echoing Lady Macbeth's words 'unsex me'. She labels herself "a political animal and a woman in a man's world. I despise women who say 'I am a woman and don't say 'I am a revolutionary socialist'" (151).

Her sexuality is her only political weapon. Her sexual rejection of him is to puncture Beaty's ego sexually as well as politically. She manipulates the device logically, "so what do you suggest? Tomorrow in my home, I take the Prime Minister into the toilet and knife him?" (136), calling Ross from the shadows providing Beaty with the means of capture of government and country. In the end, the truth comes as a blow that Ross and Gaze are lovers. In the dream, their characters are mediated through Beaty's fantasy, their betrayal of him a function of sexual paranoia.

Beaty's seduction to murder is manipulated by Ross and Jenny. He continues to feel the pangs of conscience and pauses before committing the murder. But when he thinks of the chance of changing history, his goodness and decency are smothered by their brutality. His slaughter of Dunn with a fire-axe deprives himself the means of governing justly and morally.

In the second half of the play, Beaty has his best friend Feast brought to his country garden, offers the office of Foreign Secretary, then arranges to have him killed and orders the destruction of Feast's body. Brenton adapts Macbeth's imagery of poisoned nature to portray the outright madness at the dinner party given for the Ambassador from Chad. He accuses the African of being Feast. He removes Ross from the position as head of the secret police, assuming control himself. He distances himself from Gaze who becomes powerless. Brenton deviates from Shakespeare in making Gaze, not 'Macbeth' who returns to the three witches for further help. Her attempt to use existing, masculine politics for her own purpose has backfired on her and the three women radicals reject her. In their last scene, Beaty and Gaze meet in the

wood where Feast's body was buried. She desperately feeds herself an overdose of sleeping pills and dies.

The final scene of the dream finds Beaty alone in a bunker beneath Whitehall. His government is collapsing in a second coup organized by the women radicals. The ghosts of his victims- Dunn, Feast, Gaze, Murgatroyd and Ross return to accuse him. Beaty's effective speech insists the audience to consider the realistic alternatives if socialism is to take hold and survive in Britain. The three women represent-a radical, anarchic, communal form of democratic balance- a real politics to end politics. They are creatures of Beaty's fantasy without correlatives in real life. Brenton seems to articulate that before policy for violent revolution is formulated, the shape of a better world must first be conceived in the imagination of the individual.

It is interesting to note that with the advent and continuing domination of Thatcherism, and with the death of political theatre in Britain in the eighties, Brenton challenges the nature of society in Thatcher's Britain.

Brenton's reworking of Shakespeare's play, based on base instincts- greed, hunger for power, ambition, not only deals with specific political issues but also physicalises the psychological in the modern context.

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