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From *Macbeth* to *Dunsinane*: Appropriation as Practice and Process



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Abstract

Appropriation is a creative and artistic practice in which the writer reworks, re-imagines, and rewrites a canonical source text. William Shakespeare's plays have been an important foundation for exploring such approximations. David Greig's *Dunsinane*, whose title distinctly evokes the tragedy of *Macbeth* and the Dunsinane castle set at the end of *Macbeth*, describes a contact zone. Hence, on the one hand, *Dunsinane* becomes a ground for enhancing the cultural relationships between Scotland and England, along with David Greig as a Scottish playwright and the English bard, on the other hand, it simultaneously addresses contemporary conflicts in the Middle East and elsewhere. Greig deconstructs Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, who has been characterised as a ruthless dictator and usurper, and presents *Macbeth* as a successful Scottish king who has ruled Scotland for fifteen years, a view accepted by most modern historians. While Shakespeare's tragedy proclaims that peace has been reinstated in Scotland under Malcolm's new kingship, Greig's witty play presents the opposite, underlying the fact that Scotland is too complicated, tribally, and regionally diverse to ever be understood by the English. The paper analyses that as a sequel to *Macbeth*, *Dunsinane* is a new work that Greig has appropriated to understand and present contemporary politics and that *Dunsinane* has been written out of its author's need to correct a counter-dramatic and historical "fact". The paper also attempts to explore Greig's ethico-political intentions as a sensible playwright, highlighting the ways in which *Dunsinane* appropriates history and fiction in complex ways. While the play preserves the original framework of *Macbeth*, it creates a contemporary work, with military and (post)colonial discourses creating associations between eleventh-century Scotland and today's international power dynamics.

Keywords

Dunsinane · David Greig · Appropriation · *Macbeth* · British Drama



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Introduction

Shakespeare's dramatic oeuvre has become an inspiration and a source for adaptation and appropriation in literary history. David Greig's *Dunsinane* (2010) and Tim Crouch's *I, Shakespeare* (2012) reconstruct Shakespeare's plays in which minor characters become the major characters so that the audiences experience new plots in the contemporary world. As Lachman (2022) suggests, the readers/audiences are exposed to imagine the accuracy of historical realism and also acknowledge a sense of fictional reflection and speculation. Greig mentioned in an STC interview that long before appropriating *Macbeth*, he wrote a sequel to *The Tempest* as his first play in his undergraduate years, which told "the story of Caliban and Ariel after everyone had left the island and gone home to Milan" (Greig, 2015, para.19).

As Julie Sanders suggests "Appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product...(they) tend to have a more complicated, intricate and sometimes embedded relationship to their intertexts" (2006, p. 35). In *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Sanders asserts that "a political or ethical commitment shapes a writer's, director's, or performer's decision to re-interpret a source text" (2006, p. 2). Different from adaptation, appropriation is associated with intertextual reference and allusion, reproduction, and "rewriting". In the literary sphere, For Roland Barthes, any text is an intertext as it is "a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash" (1977, p. 146). To interrelate Sanders and Barthes, this article analyses how Greig reimagines and rewrites the story of *Macbeth* as an appropriation and how the two texts have intertextual liaisons. Greig not only exploits *Macbeth* as a foundation text for his *Dunsinane*, but he also appropriates the original resource material towards a criticism of present political situations in the Middle East.

Dunsinane was first performed by the Royal Shakespeare Company at the Hampstead Theatre in February 2010. As Trish Reid observes, *Dunsinane* looks "both inward, towards Scotland's past, and outward to comment on twenty-first-century global politics, thus embodying the tension between national and international concerns" (2013, p. 65). The complexity of *Dunsinane*'s rewriting of *Macbeth* also results from the underlying mythological aspect. As Anja Hartl states, both *Macbeth* and *Dunsinane* mythologise and fabulate the historical figure. Therefore, *Dunsinane* belongs to a wider mythological setup which has materialized over the centuries around the character of *Macbeth* (Hartl, 2020). This myth draws a negative image of *Macbeth* as a tyrant and a murderer. *Dunsinane* reconsiders *Macbeth* from a wider mythological perspective by applying an indirect and ambivalent strategy of appropriation, which is understood in Julie Sanders's definition of the term as a cultural practice with "distinct political and ethical implications" (2006, p. 42). In this sense, *Dunsinane*'s intertextual affiliation to *Macbeth* and the mythological connection built around the character of the Scottish king occurs as "dialogical" (Desmet, 2014, p. 42) and mutual rather than one-sidedly manipulative. Similarly, Nick Aitchison observes that "*Macbeth* is a figure of enduring fascination. No Scottish king has captured the artistic and popular imagination as vividly as *Macbeth*" (1999, p. viii). On the other hand, Fiona Watson, in her fictional biography "*Macbeth: A True Story*", suggests that "the *Macbeth* portrayed by Shakespeare bears almost no resemblance to the king who ruled Scotland between 1040 and 1057/8" and that it is therefore "difficult to exaggerate how great an injustice history has inflicted on him (the historical figure)" (2010, p. 2). Hartl remarks that such considerations ignore the fact that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* based on a rich mythological heritage that had already been established centuries ago (Hartl, 2020, p. 6). At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that "the evolution of the myth did not end with Shakespeare" (Aitchison, 1999, p. 130), and that the myth has been adapted to different contexts and purposes. Therefore, the modern insights of *Macbeth* must be valued as "based on a complex mix of historical, mythological and dramatic sources" (Aitchison, 1999, p. v). Greig also stages a series of clear reverses of Shakespeare's inspiring version, as he explains, "to some degree for Scottish writers it's always felt a little bit

cheeky that unquestionably the greatest Scottish play was written by the great English playwright” (Wallace, 2013, p. 92).

In *Dunsinane*, Macbeth’s wife, Gruach, is not dead; on the contrary, she has survived the English army’s conquest and became the powerful leader of her clan. In addition, Gruach’s son, Lulach, is the rightful successor to the throne and rivals Malcolm for power. Indeed, in an interview, Greig stated, “I didn’t take Shakespeare’s queen at all. She dies at the end of *Macbeth*. “My Gruach is based on all the knowledge I could find about the real queen, Gruach.” And he continues, “There was a real king Macbeth. Many Scots can tell you that Shakespeare’s portrayal bears no relation to Macbeatha who ruled for a long time and was, quite possibly, a good king. So I wondered about setting my play not in Shakespeare’s world, but in the ‘real’ Scotland of the 11th century” (Greig, 2015, para. 3).

Dunsinane resists the image of Macbeth as a cruel oppressor. Indeed, Gruach depicts a significantly more encouraging and pleasant picture of the figure when she states that

[h]e was a good king.

He ruled for fifteen years.

Before him there were kings and kings and kings but not one of them could rule more than a year or so at most before he would be killed by some chief or other. But my king lasted fifteen years. My king was strong. (p. 32)

Throughout the play, Gruach upsets Siward's attempts at colonial conquest:

SIWARD: Look at you smiling. You smiling and your women laughing at me. Which of us is really the conqueror here and which of us the conquered?

GRUACH: Oh, you’re the conqueror (p. 70).

The most outstanding metaphor is when Siward says I’m England, you are Scotland:

SIWARD: Gruach, what work do you do here in Dunsinane?

GRUACH: Work?

SIWARD: What is your place here?

GRUACH: My place here is Queen. (p. 25)

Dunsinane is divided into four sections based on the framework of the four seasons. The story is narrated via the Boy Soldier’s monologues in letters to his mother in his home country, England. He becomes the symbol of the English soldiers in *Dunsinane*, who are challenged by the crude Scottish landscape. This is the Boy Soldier’s first war, and his letters to his mother enable the readers/audiences to understand the English soldiers’ feelings about the war in Dunsinane. The anonymous Boy Soldier is a generic and archetypical character who feels a sense of estrangement by the alien highland culture and a sense of discomfort and hardship from the severe Scottish climate and barren landscapes:

BOY SOLDIER: I have not been on a boat before

Not a boat like that before

Not on a boat like that

On a sea like that, swells rising about us. (p. 1)

The Boy Soldier’s speech is rather lyrical and poetic. His monologues at the beginning of each act contribute to the aesthetic quality of the appropriation amongst the severe political conflicts. His speech

adds an expressive character with repetitions and various figures of speech. His comic dialogues and his alienation are also reminiscent of the ordinary infantry, the soldiers who fought and died in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, who were also unfamiliar and uncomfortable with the local culture and geography.

Greig employs verbal irony skilfully, especially when the Boy Soldier asks Gruach whether she eats babies. By using verbal irony, Gruach satirizes the foolishness of the English soldiers:

'GRUACH: Have you ever eaten baby meat?

BOY SOLDIER: Me - no.

GRUACH: You should try it.' (p. 55)

By using irony and humorous language Greig in a way transfers the original text into a tragi-comedy. Not only the plot but also the genre is appropriated from tragedy to tragi-comedy. He satirizes the irrationality of foreign invasions in the Middle East and elsewhere by referring to the English intervention in Scotland in the 10th century.

Gruach is an intricately mysterious character not only to the Boy Soldier but also to Siward. Her language is her character, and she survives with her powerful language in the patriarchal and colonial atmosphere. Gruach and her three women refuse to speak English. She complains and makes fun of Siward's attitude towards Gaelic. The language emphasizes their difference and challenges King James' opinion about being united under one language.

According to Clare Wallace, *Dunsinane* is a complex political allegory (2013, p. 97). The play works on various levels: on one hand, *Dunsinane* presents a different portrayal of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Gruach), as well as the conflict between England and Scotland. On the other hand, the play becomes a critique of Western intervention in the East, working at a global level. While the play presents the history between England and Scotland, it also represents current global politics that involve various kinds of injustices and unfair intrusions. Indeed, *Dunsinane* was premiered in 2010 when Britain experienced internal conflicts with Scotland as well as with distinctive issues of global conflicts, aggressions, occupations, and military involvements in conflict regions around the world.

Shifts: Marginal becomes the central

Dunsinane, as an appropriation of *Macbeth*, bears certain shifts in which *Macbeth*'s marginal characters become the central figures. Siward, who has little importance in *Macbeth*, is the major character and Shakespeare's protagonist Macbeth does not exist in *Dunsinane*. Macbeth and Siward are devoted soldiers in establishing a new Scotland, while Macbeth is portrayed as a usurper and Siward is depicted as an occupier. Siward acts under the English Government to shape Scotland, as he also explains to the Boy Soldier: "We set light to the forest. Drove them out and into the hills. Eventually, they'll find their way back to their homes and their farms. We'll set a new king in Dunsinane and then summer will come and then a harvest and by next spring it'll be as if there never was a fight here" (p. 24). In several instances, Siward clearly states his intentions about Scotland. He tells Gruach: "I came here to install Malcolm as king so as to secure England's northern border. My job is to build a new kingdom - not to settle old grudges. So I have to clear away the past now...I want you to renounce your son's claim to the throne" (p. 24).

Another significant shift occurs in terms of the genre, tone, and mood in Greig's play. Shakespeare's tragedy is appropriated into a satirical comedy in *Dunsinane*. The comedic element in *Dunsinane* is fostered by the Boy Soldier's monologues and the dialogues between Egham and the soldiers and between Gruach and Siward. The play's aura is also furthered by Greig's diction, especially in the use of metaphors, symbols, and the Gaelic language to emphasize that Scotland is a disparate country with topographical and regional

differences. The play's aura is unique in presenting the 10th century Scottish atmosphere in association with 21st century politics to suggest the political conscience Greig possesses as a prolific contemporary playwright and to present him as an institutional identity for Scottish drama.

The playwright continues to contribute to Scottish drama and culture by ingeniously and timely appropriating the English play, *Macbeth*. Likewise, Emily Linneman underlines deviation and alteration in terms of the audience's responses and perspectives. She observes that "*Dunsinane* is not the play we thought we knew. [...] At the end of *Macbeth*, we are certain of several things. [...] In *Dunsinane*, most of our suppositions turn out to be false" (2010, p. 2). The case is true for most of the English soldiers in the play whose expectations about the situation in Scotland turn out to be deceiving, as Siward eventually experiences a moment of epiphany and is forced to understand the fact:

SIWARD. You told me she was dead.

MALCOLM. Did I?

SIWARD. You told me she went mad and died.

MALCOLM. Mmm.

SIWARD. You told me the tyrant had lost the support of the chiefs and he had no son and his queen had died of madness and so there would be no resistance to you but on the other hand, we were likely to see a swift and general acceptance and the chance to establish a new and peaceful order. (p. 28)

In this sense, "constructed first and foremost as a challenge to its *audience*" (Linneman, 2010, p. 2) rather than to Shakespeare, *Dunsinane* inquired into the imperative elements of Shakespeare's account of the story by completely involving the audiences in its searches. Diversions, reversals, and shifts are crucial in the process of appropriation. Whereas *Macbeth* ends with a hopeful note amidst a large number of deaths and with the new king Malcolm's declaration that he will establish a new Scotland in affiliation with England, Greig's *Dunsinane* continues with an alternative story highlighting the encounter between the intervening English soldiers and the native Scottish people. Along with the struggle with the external English power, the play also unveils the opposing struggles between the internal forces of the Scottish clans.

Macbeth and *Dunsinane* bear significant variations: while *Macbeth* is written through the lens of imperialistic suggestions, *Dunsinane* is composed in the light of post-colonial undercurrents, addressing contemporary audiences who can associate the play with Western countries' attempts to build nations in Iraq and Afghanistan at the expense of bloodshed. In addition to the shifts mentioned above, there is also a reversal in the characterization. Whereas Shakespeare's characters are trapped and manipulated by the spiritual sights, Greig's characters are as autonomous and free as Scotland. Indeed, Siward describes Scotland's sovereignty and its combative nature:

Scotland has been at war for many years. On either side, there are parties with wounds and each party wants their wounds avenged and each act of vengeance is punished with vengeance and so if you do nothing now the war will continue until there is nobody left alive in Scotland and all that exists is the mountains and the empty land and the grudge that hangs above it. (p. 83)

“Spring

And all of us both knowing and not knowing what lay ahead of us” (p. 9).

“Summer

So you can tell this, mother, to any boys you happen to meet, if they say they’re being sent up north to join us - say to them this one thing - tell them - my son says, in Scotland always be careful where you put your feet” (p. 9).

“Autumn

We win because if we don’t win - we lose - and if we lose - then what?” (p. 89).

“Winter

And to Siward goes the doubt and to me come the fear and running round and round my head like a mad horse the question I can never ask. ‘Why are we here?’ ‘Why are we here?’” (p. 135)

Michael Billington, in his analysis of the Hampstead Theatre production for *The Guardian*, observes that “Scotland is too complex, tribal and territorially distinctive ever to be understood by the English” (2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/17/dunsinane-review>). The production, however, suggests present 21st century issues about the American and Western armed forces intervening in Iraq and Afghanistan, with the politically correct statement “war on terror”. In an interview for the American production of *Dunsinane*, Greig asserts that the play is adjustable to any place worldwide:

I hope the play adapts to whatever context it finds. For example, when we played the show in Moscow the audience felt powerfully that we were describing Ukraine. I expect in America it will have resonance around Iraq. But, who knows, the audience might also be interested in the way a strong woman can play a tricky political hand of cards? (2015)

The play endures versatile and universal interpretations. As Greig mentions, Gruach is more fearless and virtuous, especially when compared to Lady Macbeth. However, many critics have reviewed the play’s reputation as denoting compellingly Central Asia and the Middle East involvements. McGlone explicitly relates the play to the Middle East military occupation: “Tragically, the continuing unrest and bloodshed in the Middle East makes the timeless *Dunsinane* even more timely today” (2018, p. 6). Similarly, the Scotsman theatre critic emphasizes the presence of the “British troops in Afghanistan” (The Scotsman). Indeed, *Dunsinane* questions the ethical positions when a more “developed” country tries to control a “lesser” nation. Greig’s appropriation, based on Shakespeare’s tragedy, can be employed to understand the current political conditions between the invader and the invaded. When he speaks to the parliament, the clansman Moray defines Scotland with the following expressions:

Look at us. Here at the beck of an English commander. Is this Scotland now? Try to see us as our children will see us when they look back on this day in time to come. They would be humiliated. It should shame us to kneel before an invader, but it seems we have no shame left. (p. 82)

Siward is the mouthpiece of the English Government. He cannot negotiate either with the heads of the tribes or the Gruach. His stubborn approach in this land of impossibility is interesting to notice: “You’re right, I’m tired, Malcolm. I’m tired of ‘appear’ and I’m tired of ‘seem’. I only have bone and flesh and mud and bog and metal. That’s the world my power’s in and that’s the world I’ll fight in, and that’s the world in which I’ll win.” (p. 112). Siward’s genuine confessions here underline the pretense that the English rule imposes on Scotland.

Clare Wallace defines Greig's projection as "England's paternal control" (2013, p. 205), reminiscent of the long-held tradition of expanding violence and instability. Towards the end of the play, Malcolm explains the impossibility of storing peace in Scotland through impressive metaphors and analogies: "You seem to think peace is a natural state, Siward, and conflict its interruption, but the truth is the exact opposite. Peace is what the sea looks like in a dead calm—a rare and beautiful moment—something impossible—a glimpse of perfection before the wind comes back again. You can no more force peace into existence than you can wander across the surface of the sea stamping the waves flat" (p. 126).

With such a dystopian projection, the playwright could only finish the play with an unclear view of an unknown place. *Dunsinane*'s final tableau depicts a scene that concludes with a move into a moral and political void. The final tableau of the play is impressive and suggestive:

The Boy Soldier walks.
Everything has disappeared.
There is only the Boy and white.
And then there is only white. (p. 125)

The Boy Soldier resides with Siward until the end of the play. In the final scene of the play, Siward finds Gruach in a chapel in a frozen lake. Siward asks Gruach to be under the rule of Malcolm, which Gruach refuses. She shows a baby as Lulach's son to suggest that Scotland has a king. Siward threatens Gruach to kill the baby; however, Gruach does not give up, asserting that Scotland can always find a new king. The baby also represents independent Scotland. In the final scene, the Boy Soldier gives the baby boy to Gruach and disappears.

SIWARD: Imagine a village—a village in a valley, say—and this valley is fertile and green and young and then one day a cloud that descends on it—Gruach – a black cloud that sucks the life out of the ground and leaves it frozen and hopeless. That's what you are, Gruach—you are winter. (p. 122)

The play ends with Siward's downfall and is graphically presented as he leaves the stage. The stage becomes bare and barren as eventually The Boy Soldier also exits the stage:

The Boy Soldier walks.
Everything has disappeared. There is only the Boy and white. And then there is only white. (p. 138)

The final image with the Boy Soldier depicts a sense of futurity. With the Boy Soldier's departure, the stage is left entirely white, which is the opposite of a traditional blackout. The white stage might also indicate future encounters between England and Scotland. Or, rather, many more possible adaptations and appropriations of Scottish history.

In an interview in 2021, Greig underlines a sense of "doubleness" that Scotland experiences as both wild and outer but also as a means at the centre of the Empire. He states that he tells tough love stories and acknowledges, "that's the way I tell stories. A love story is always about self and other, an opposition but also a potential" (<https://morningstaronline.co.uk/article/c/world-bleak-and-difficult-and-i-give-weight-things-pull-us-apart>). Greig advocates the format of interrogation when writing plays, and one of the responsibilities of theatre is to question its era. "The fundamental question that theatre can ask is: 'What would I do in this situation?'" (2021).

Indeed, the play is an amalgamation of the social and political changes in the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and the new millennium. The play is a call for reconsidering Anglo-Scottish relations with its references to eleventh-century Scottish history and the geopolitical and linguistic differences between the two countries. The play was written in 2010, yet it depicts a sense of freedom in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the “Yes Scotland” and “Better Together” campaigns. Campaigning for a yes vote, Greig has written a mini kitchen-sink drama on Twitter, the *Yes No Plays*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Dunsinane* is not only an appropriation of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, but it also takes its place in a complex mythological web of rewritings. Combining variations in texts and perspectives into dialogue, *Dunsinane* becomes a meeting locus in which conventional beliefs, topics, and narratives are fundamentally distanced. As Anja Hartl conveys, rather than merely confronting or speculating on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* by “developing a distinct counter-story”, *Dunsinane* engages in a more elaborate scheme through a playful manner and at times hilarious undertones (Hartl, 2020, p. 4). The play not only re-imagines the past but also reshapes the present. Graham Saunders’s opinion can “incorporate elements from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and at the same time negotiate between medieval Scotland and recent military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq” (2017, p. 9). While depicting the 10th-century Scottish-English relationships, the play conveys implicit political suggestions with the contemporary situations in the Middle East, which is especially reminiscent of the Western intervention in Afghanistan that has been so graphically presented in the media in various forms and genres.



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