

## SIR WILLIAM D'AVENANT'S SO-CALLED IMPROVEMENTS OF *MACBETH* (1674)

Blanca López Román  
University of Granada. Spain

Reworkings and adaptations of Shakesperean drama were frequent during the Restoration period and in the eighteenth century. Two approaches have dominated the criticism of Shakesperean adaptations. On the one hand they are often studied as products of the rules of Restoration and eighteenth-century stage. On the other hand they are compared critically with the Shakesperean originals as a part of the history of attitudes towards Shakespeare and attacked in terms of dismay or amusement. Christopher Spencer attempted to regard them as new plays, taking into account the fact that they were extremely successful in their own time. We shall reconsider D'Avenant's adaptation of *Macbeth*<sup>194</sup>, published in 1674, both as a product of the Restoration and as part of the history of attitudes towards Shakespeare. On the other hand the study of this adaptation might help to understand the process of adaptation in the more general context of contemporary adaptations. Modern theatre, television drama and films often rewrite Shakespeare with the intention of making his plays adequate for mass communication and the new audiovisual techniques. Shakesperean adaptations offer a unique opportunity for the comparison of techniques of transformations of literary works in different periods of the history of drama.

We shall reproduce some quotations from two of the most important critical voices of the Restoration period, Thomas Rymer and John Dryden, to illustrate the critical background of D'Avenant's adaptation of *Macbeth* (1674).

---

<sup>194</sup> *Five Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare*, edited with an introduction by Christopher Spencer (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965).

Thomas Rymer (1641-1713) was an antiquary and archeologist who defended classic drama and showed great grievances against English drama in *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (1677). John Dryden replied to him defending the English drama in *Heads of an Answer to Rymer* (1677). However in both cases, they admire or they attack, because they discover neoclassic principles in the great drama of the past. Rymer defends classic tragedy because it pleases and also profits, and because it reproduces the "constant order, that harmony and beauty of Providence."<sup>195</sup>

I am confident whoever writes a Tragedy cannot please but must also profit; 'tis the Physick of the mind that he makes palatable.

And besides the purging of the passions something must stick by observing that constant order, that harmony and beauty of Providence, that necessary relation and chain whereby the causes and the effects, the vertues and rewards, the vices and their punishments are proportion'd and link'd together.

Rymer finds neoclassic virtues in the classic drama. Dryden in his reply to defend English drama and Shakespeare, does not discuss the neoclassic principles. On the contrary he defends that these great virtues are also found in the English "as well as in the ancients, or perhaps better". Dryden was so closely associated with D'Avenant that he collaborated with him in an adaptation of *The Tempest*.<sup>196</sup>

It is a well known fact that D'Avanant, like other adapters of Shakespeare plays, tried to make *Macbeth* more suitable to the theatrical taste of the Restoration period. Hazelton Spencer ironically used the term of *improving* Shakespeare in his well known book on the Restoration versions of Shakespearean adaptations<sup>197</sup>. We shall examine the so-called

---

<sup>195</sup> Thomas Rymer, *The Tragedies of the Last Age* (1677), in *Shakespeare, the Critical Heritage*, Vol. 1, 1623-92, (ed.) Brian Vickers (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974) 196.

<sup>196</sup> John Dryden, *Heads of an Answer to Rymer* (1677), in *Shakespeare the Critical Heritage*, vol. 1, 1623-92, 198.

<sup>197</sup> Hazelton Spencer, *Shakespeare Improved. The Restoration Versions in Quarto and on the Stage* (New York: Frederick Ungar publishing Co., 1927,1963).

*improvement* of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through the neoclassic admiration for operistic devices, and through the new conception of characters and action, which make the play approach heroic tragedy. The third so-called *improvement* will be the destruction of Shakespearean metaphor and poetry with the obvious intention of clarifying the language of the play.

#### 1. IMPROVEMENT THROUGH OPERISTIC DEVICES: NEOCLASSIC ADMIRATION.

The full title of D'Avenant's adaptation was: *Macbeth, a Tragedy. With all the alterations, amendments, additions and new songs, as it is now acted at the Dukes Theatre.*

This long title reflects what our Laureate Restoration playwright wanted to do with Shakespeare's text. It shows his intention of altering Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, by adding new elements, specially songs. This operatic character is the first ammend introduced by D'Avenant.

Davenant published his adaptation of *Macbeth* in the year 1674, after the reopening of the theatres. On the whole his adaptations were admired by his contemporaries although there were other dissenting voices who reproved him. Pepys's entries in his diary illustrate what the average educated spectator thought about D'Avenant's adaptation. Pepys saw *Macbeth* first on November 5, 1664, and frequently thereafter. He considered the play excellent, enjoyed the good acting and admired it in all respects, but specially in divertisement. He also enjoyed its dancing and music. Although it may seem incredible for us, the Restoration audience approved of a tragedy being transformed into an operistic divertisement, with great variety of music and songs<sup>198</sup>.

---

<sup>198</sup> These entries are recorded in "Samuel Pepys on Shakespeare in the theatre, 1660-9", *Shakespeare, The Critical Heritage*, Vol. 1 1623-92, 30-2:  
(November 5, 1664): with my wife to the Duke's house to a play, *Macbeth*, a pretty good play, but admirably acted.  
(December 28, 1966): to the Duke's house, and there saw *Macbeth* most excellently acted, and most excellently played for variety.  
(January 7, 1667): to the Duke's house, and saw *Macbeth*, which, though I saw it lately, yet appears a most excellent play in all respects, but specially in

The admiration for D'Avenant's *Macbeth* continued during the neoclassic period. Downes, writing in 1708, tells us that a special production of this play was made after the opening of the Duke's company at Dorset Garden and that this event took place in 1671. Downes describes *Macbeth* operatic character as follows<sup>199</sup>:

The Tragedy of Macbeth, alter'd by Sir William Davenant; being dressed in all it's Finery, as new Cloath's, new Scenes, Machines, as flyings for the Witches; with all the Singing and Dancing in it: The first Compos'd by Mr. Lock, the other by Mr. Channell and Mr. Joseph Priest; it being all Excellently perform'd, being in the nature of an Opera, it Recompenc'd double the Expence; it proves still (1708) a lasting play.

Through this quotation we see that magnificent clothes, new songs, dances, complicated stage machinery and new scenes were added to the Elizabethan play and he clearly affirms his intention of making it into an Opera. He mentions finery and new clothes and pays attention to the new theatrical machinery enjoyed by the audience. D'Avenant maintains the opening scene of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, but his witches enter and exeunt flying. The supernatural Elizabethan evil is transformed into an acrobatic device by three actors, who hanging from ropes appeared on the new tennis court stage, which substituted the Elizabethan stage after the Restoration.

Dryden defines opera as "a poetical tale, or fiction, represented by vocal or instrumental music, adorned with scenes, machines, and dancing". But actually the type was less definite, and in common usage included what we would call spectacle and extravaganza. It consisted of spoken dialogue, songs, dances and mechanical effects--the last being quite as important as the music in turning a play into an opera. D'Avenant's version of *Macbeth*, for instance was operatic, since not only new songs and dances were provided for the witches, but those weird sisters frisked about in the air on slack wires

---

divertisement, though it be a deep tragedy; which is a strange perfection in a tragedy, it being most proper here and suitable.

(April, 19, 1667): We saw *Macbeth*, which, though I have seen it often, yet is it one of the best plays for a stage, and variety of dancing and musique, that ever I saw.

<sup>199</sup> "John Downes, Shakespeare in the Restoration Stage, 1708" in *Shakespeare, The Critical Heritage*, Vol. 2, 1693-1708, (Ed.) Brian Vickers, 189.

and trapezes. For example, in 3.5.40, there is one stage direction informing us that "Machine descends for the flight of the witches". In IV,1, another stage direction let us know about Musick, the witches's dance and a their cave sinking. D'Avenant allowed the witches additional scope for display and developed further Shakespeare's lines<sup>200</sup>:

Come, sisters, cheer we up his sprites,  
And show the best of our delights.  
I'll charm the air to give a sound,  
While you perform your antic round.  
(Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, 4. 1. 127-30)

Even Hecate has a flight with the witches on a machine in 3.3. Moreover, D'Avenant adds new songs sung by the witches and Hecate, such as the following one that we shall quote as an example:

*Hec.*           Black Spirits, and white,  
                  Red Spirits and gray;  
                  Mingle, mingle, mingle  
                  You that mingle may  
*I Witch*       Tiffin, Tiffin, keep it stiff in,  
                  Fire drake Puckey, make it lucky:  
                  Lyer Robin, you must bob in.  
*Chor.* A round, a round, about, about  
                  All ill come running in, all good keep out.  
(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 4. 1. 44-49)

The operatic nature of the play also appears in the stage directions that indicate that the ghost descends (3, 4, 92) and that the ghost of Banquo rises at his feet (3. 4. 116).

## 2. IMPROVEMENT IN THE CONCEPTION OF ACTION AND CHARACTERS

---

<sup>200</sup> *Macbeth*, edited by Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1987) 115.

Taking into account the fact that the action of a play is not the plot but the central motive or objective of the hero, in D'Avenant's *Macbeth* Shakespearean evil ambition is transformed into Restoration heroic ambition. In the same way Elizabethan values are substituted for neoclassic moral virtues and the new neoclassic conception of character.

#### i) TRANSFORMATION OF EVIL INTO AMBITION AND INTRODUCTION OF NEOCLASSIC VIRTUES

D'Avenant added five major passages, three new scenes of dialogue between the Macduffs, one of which involves the witches as well, a new scene between the Macbeths, and a passage between Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth

The main reason for these additions, is that D'Avenant had altered the focus of *Macbeth* from evil to ambition and that the adapter was more interested in discussing his subject, and in showing the effect of ambition on the action of the play. Spencer mentions a passage added to V.ii in the Yale MS, but not in the printed versions of the play, in which Lennox comments on ambition, speaking to Malcolm and his army:<sup>201</sup>

Ambition is a tree whose Roots are small,  
Whose growth is high: whose shadow ever is  
The blackness of the deed attending it,  
Under which nothing prospers. All the fruit  
It bears are doubts and troubles, with whose crowne  
The over burdened tree at last falls downe.

The theme of the evil of ambition , with a young king returning among a chorus of praise to ascend his murdered father's throne , was no doubt complimentary to Charles II in the early 1660's. One notes that D'Avenant has Charles's ancestor Fleance return from France for the victory.

At some crucial moments we see grim Macbeth hesitating in the conventional manner between love and honour:

Yet why should Love since confin'd, desire  
To control Ambition.

---

<sup>201</sup> Christopher Spencer, 16.

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 4. 4. 14-15)

In a parallel way Lady Macbeth comes in also broken by remorse and heaping reproaches on her husband for having committed the initial crime. She thinks that Banquo's ghost is pursuing her and recognizes her errors:

*Lady Macbeth.* But the strange error of my Eyes  
proceeds from the strange Action of his hands.  
(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 4. 4. 37-38)

Lady Macbeth asks her husband to resign his "ill gain'd Crown" (4.4.46). When Macbeth accuses her of having blown his ambition she answered:

You were a man  
And by the Charter of your Sex you shou'd  
Have govern'd me.  
(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 4. 4. 54-57)

The porter scene disappeared completely pehaps, because the mixture of tradedy and comedy was rejected. The murder of Lady Macduff and her children was not acted in front of the audience due to the fact that its brutal violence might shock the polite audience. Duncan's murder is softened. The scene of Banquo's murder does not appear on the stage. Even Lady Macbeth's wickedness, which is so important in the Elizabethan play, disappears in the end. The report of Macbeth's head being shown at the top of the castle is also supressed. Extreme violence also disappears from the imagery of the play. As illustration of it we shall watch the transformation of the following lines:

What hands are here? Ha! they pluck mine eyes  
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
The multitudinous seas incardine,  
Making the green one red .  
(Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, 2. 2. 58-61)

The shakespearean imagery is substituted by what Joseph Donahue<sup>202</sup> called "the frigidly polite diction" of D'Avenant's version:

What hands are here! can the Sea afford  
Water enough to wash away the stains?  
No, they would sooner add a tincture to  
The Sea, and turn the green into a red.

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 2. 2. 59-62)

In the same way, the great principle of decorum clashed with several passages in D'Avenant's *Macbeth*. For example, "Empty my Nature of humanity and fill it up with cruelty" (1.5. 47-8), was used instead of the Shakespearean line "And fill me from the Crowne to the Toe, top-full of direst Cruelty". There are many other substitutions of words, such as "steel" and "sword" (1. 5. 57), (1. 7. 20) for "knife".

In D'Avenant version Macbeth receives his death wound and says simply: "Fairwell vain World, and what's most vain in it, Ambition". This recognition of error and implied regret, coupled with the visible punishment of Macbeth, apparently pleased the audience. The final speech of the play is given to Macduff, not to Malcolm and the final rhyming couple emphasizes the moral that vice has been punished and virtue reestablished:

His vice shall make your Virtue shine more Bright,  
As a Fair Day succeeds a stormy Night.

There appear in D'Avenant's play many additions to the characters of Macduff and Lady Macduff, following the pattern of honour and developing their contrast with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's lack of it. D'Avenant adds a new scene (1.5), where Lady Macduff lecture Lady Macbeth on honour. At the end of the play Malcolm wishes his Thanes and Kingsmen that the new honours given to them may still *flourish* on their families (5. 9. 27-8).

## ii) MODIFICATION OF THE ELIZABETHAN CONCEPTION OF CHARACTER

---

<sup>202</sup> Joseph Donahue: "Macbeth in the eighteenth century", in *Theatre Quarterly*, Vol. I, No 3, (Jul-Sep. 1971) 20-24.

Following the new model of tragedy described by Dryden, D'Avenant develops the character of the Macduffs and transform them both into foils of the Macbeth. It is not permissible, Dryden declares, to set up a character as composed on mighty opposites.<sup>203</sup>

When a Poet has given the dignity of a King to one of his persons, in all his actions and speeches, that person must discover Majesty, Magnanimity, and jealousy of power; because these are suitable to the general manners of a King... When Virgil had once given the name of Pious to Aeneas, he was bound to show him such, in all his words and actions through the whole Poem... A character... is a composition of qualities which are not contrary to one another in the same person: thus the same man may be liberal and valiant, but not liberal and covetous

This principle lead D'Avenant to the personification of dominant characteristics and it comes pretty close to the humours theory of Ben Jonson. Once he surrendered to this principle, composition became largely a matter of antithesis. If one character stands for pride the other must represent humility. If Macbeth incarnates ambition Macduff must broadcast justice. Davenant saw the hero's Lady as a symbol of wicked ambition. Consequently he expanded the role of Lady Macduff and made her defend the opposing qualities. In his hands Lady Macduff became a most sanctified dame, and a much more important character than Shakespeare had made her.

Lady Macduff is transformed into a pious matron appearing for the first time in 1. 5, with several speeches preceding the reading of Macbeth's letter. Lady Macduff addresses to the wicked lady Macbeth, lecturing her on true human virtues:

The world mistakes the glories gain'd in war,  
Thinking their Lustre true: alas, they are  
But Comets, Vapours! by some men exhal'd  
From others blood, and kindl'd in the Region  
Of popular applause, in which they live  
A-while; then vanish; and the very breath  
Which first inflam'd them, blows them out again.  
(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 1. 5. 22-28)

---

<sup>203</sup> Dryden, Preface to *Troilus and Cressida*, ed. 1679, quoted by Hazelton Spencer in *Shakespeare Improved*, 158.

Lady Macduff gives several other lectures along the play. For example she lectures on the folly of believing these *Messengers of Darkness*, when in a new scene, added by D'Avenant, Macduff and Lady Macduff also watch the apparition of the witches (2. 5). In fact, in her character of good counselor, Lady Macbeth never lets an opportunity to slip:

If the Throne  
was by Macbeth ill gain'd, Heaven Justice may,  
Without your Sword, sufficient vengeance pay  
Usurers lives have but a short extent.

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*: 3. 2. 10-4)

The wish for antithesis leads D'Avenant to ridiculous extremes such as the need to invent a good prophecy for Macduff to be contrasted with that addressed to Macbeth and Banquo in Shakespeare:

1 *Witch*. Saving thy blood will cause it to be shed;  
2 *Witch*. He'll bleed by thee, by whom thou first hast bled.  
3 *Witch*. Thy wife shall shunning danger, dangers find,  
And fatal be, to whom she most is kind.

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 2. 5. 80-85)

### 3. IMPROVEMENT OF SHAKESPEARE THROUGH THE CLARIFICATION OF LANGUAGE

The opening of the D'Avenant's play begins to illustrate the desire to clarify language. Witch 1 asks 'Where's the place?', instead of the Shakespearean 'Where the place?'. Besides all of D'Avenant's witches say: 'To us fair weather's foul, and foul's fair!', in order to make the message as clear as possible. Much of the beauty and variety of Shakespeare's language is in his ability to suggest. The Augustans, however, wanted the plays to be explicit. D'Avenant made great efforts to achieve greater clearness in all the texts. For example his Macbeth soliloquizes in this way:

If it were well when done; then it were well  
It were done quickly; if his death might be  
Without the Death of nature in my self,  
And killing my own rest; it wou'd suffice;

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 1. 7. 1-4)

Shakespeare's soliloquy is cut from twenty eight lines to sixteen. D'Avenant tells us what his hero thought without the deep insight into Macbeth's state of mind provided by Shakespeare. In Act 3, 1, after Banquo has departed on his fatal ride, and the courtiers have been dismissed, Macbeth reveals his intentions unmistakably:

Macduff departed (privately) perhaps  
 He is grown jealous; (I have sent for him  
 To come to supper); he and Banquo must  
 (meet) the same fate.

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 3. 1. 37-41)

There are obvious alterations of the language with the intention of clarifying Shakespeare's text. Let us observe, how Shakespearean poetry is destroyed in the famous speech after Macbeth has heard of the death of his wife. We shall quote Shakespeare and D'Avenant's use of Shakespeare's text.

She should have died hereafter:  
 There would have been a time for such a word--  
 To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
 To the last syllable of recorded time;  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death.

(Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, 5. 5. 15-23)

D'Avenant is not interested in Shakespeare's suggestive poetry but in a clear manifestation of facts and ideas. The metaphorical language disappears completely from his translation:

She should have Di'd hereafter, I brought  
 Her here, to see my Victimes, and not to Die.  
 To morrow, and to Morrow, and to Morrow,  
 Creeps in a stealing pace from Day to Day,  
 To the last Minute of Recorded Time:  
 And all uour Yesterdays have lighted Fools  
 To their Eternal night;

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 5. 5. 12-18)

A second example of the desire to clarify all the obscure points of Shakespeare's plot can be seen in the addition of many new scenes. Donalbain, the second of Duncan's sons disappears from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In D'Avenant Donalbain returns from Ireland and Fleance, Banquo's son, also returns from France to join Malcolm and the English Army against their battle against Macbeth. In scene 4 of act V we meet Malcolm, Seymour, Macduff and Lenox discussing the strategy of the hewn

bough because for D'Avenant everything must be absolutely obvious. Finally Malcolm expresses his gratitude towards the English with these words:

How much we are  
Oblig'd to England, which like a kind Neighbour  
Lift's us up when we are Fall'n below  
Our own recovery.

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 5. 4. 2-9)

D'Avenant literalizes Shakespeare's figures of speech although the result is often annoying and ridiculous:

Approach the Chamber, and behold a sight  
Enough to turn spectators into a stone

(D'Avenant: *Macbeth*, 3. 2. 85-6)

Shakespeare had written:  
Approach the Chamber, and destroy your sight  
With a new Gorgon

(Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, 2. 3. 70-1)

To conclude our paper we shall observe that D'Avenant's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* worked by removing *Macbeth* to the comparatively superficial level on which Restoration tragedy and characterization commonly operated. Simultaneously Shakespearean music and Elizabethan songs developed further to adopt the new fashion of the operatic ways. The hybrid result, although the poetry of his lines was destroyed, is relevant from the point of view of Shakespearean stage history and to understand the process and techniques of adaptation, and of rewriting of literary works.