



ASIDES 1.3: *Macbeth*, The Bell Invites Me

Date: May 5, 2020

Featuring: Katie Blankenau, Sara B.T. Thiel, Ian Merrill Peakes, McKinley Carter, Theo Germaine, Emily Ann Nichelson, Chaon Cross, Matthew Floyd Miller, Jennifer Latimore, Phoenix Anderson, Micah Wilson, Christopher Donahue, and the Musical Instruments of Darkness, designed and constructed by Kenny Wollesen, performed live onstage by Ronnie Malley

Katie Blankenau: The play's set in the eleventh century, but its violence is, unfortunately, timeless.

Macbeth is a perennially fascinating character precisely because he agonizes over the evil choices that he makes, and yet he makes them, regardless. And in this, I think he's different from Shakespeare's other tragic heroes.

My name's Katie Blankenau. I'm a PhD candidate at Northwestern University where I study Renaissance drama.

Sara B.T. Thiel: Hello and welcome to ASIDES, the new podcast from Chicago Shakespeare Theater. I'm Sara B.T. Thiel, Public Humanities Manager at CST. Today we'll hear Katie Blankenau introduce our 2018 production of *Macbeth*, directed by Aaron Posner and Teller (of Penn & Teller). This episode comes from our Pre•Amble program, pre-show talks that take place at CST before most weekend matinees. This Pre•Amble was originally recorded on June 24, 2018.

Katie Blankenau, one of our newest scholars at Chicago Shakespeare, is a PhD candidate in English literature at Northwestern University where she specializes in early modern drama and poetry. Katie joined the Pre•Amble program in 2018, and what you'll hear today was one of her very first talks at CST.

Throughout this episode, you'll also hear the Musical Instruments of Darkness designed and constructed by Kenny Wollesen, performed by Ronnie Malley.

I'll let Katie take it from here.

KB: *Macbeth* is my personal favorite of Shakespeare's tragedies. I love the play's gorgeous, evocative imagery, the way it mixes bizarre and beautiful metaphors with the most basic, heartfelt human emotions. Plus, there are witches who tell riddles. So, I think you'll enjoy it!

Although, I have worried about what my love of *Macbeth* says about me, because in the play, the title character commits terrible crimes in pursuit of the Scottish crown.

Macbeth's partner in life and partner in crime is his wife, Lady Macbeth. She has no other name other than "The Lady," and together they embark on a tumultuous, terror-filled reign that eventually tears them and their country apart.

Although, there is already plenty of trouble in Scotland when the play begins. The first act features the end of a battle between the forces of Duncan, the Scottish King, and a Norwegian invasion aided by Scottish traitors. And after winning this battle, as Duncan's generals, Macbeth and his friend, Banquo, famously (and fatefully) encounter three witches, or as they're called in the text, the three "Weird Sisters." And the Weird Sisters greet Macbeth with the title of Thane (or Lord) of Cawdor, which is the title of one of the fallen Scottish traitors and promise that he will be King. And they predict that Banquo's children will be kings.

This moment encapsulates some of the play's central themes and questions: whether the motivation for evil deeds comes from within or without, the relationship between truths and lies, and the crucial role played by children in inheritance in this play.

To get to those themes, I'd like to start not with the plot of the play, but with the text. The text of *Macbeth* was first printed in the great collection of Shakespeare's works, the First Folio, which was published in 1623, although *Macbeth* was probably written around 1606. And the printers of the First Folio seem to have used the theater's prompt book copy of the text—that is, they used the copy that would have been kept backstage and consulted by the prompter, whose job was to remind actors of their lines if they forgot them.

One of the reasons that scholar's suspect that the printers were using a prompt book copy is the presence of explicit stage directions, like the repeated directions to "Ring the bell!" (*ringing bell*) and "Knock!" (*pounding knocks*). And stage directions like this are fascinating reminders of all the people who were (and still are) involved in the production of a play. And reading those directions, for a moment, we can catch a glimpse of the seventeenth-century prompter, sitting backstage and jumping up to ring a bell (*ringing bell*) or knock on wood (*pounding knocks*) when he gets to his cue.

And if you're familiar with the play, you might also remember that those two sounds, the ringing bell (*ringing bell*) and the knock at the door (*pounding knocks*), are very important in *Macbeth*. And in the production today, Posner and Teller, the co-directors, of course follow those stage directions, and I'd like to suggest that we, too, can follow those stage directions to create an

audible guideline of sorts that leads us through sound to one of the first puzzles of the play, the problem of evil and where it comes from.

Macbeth is a perennially fascinating character precisely because he agonizes over the evil choices that he makes, and yet he makes them, regardless. And in this, I think he's different from Shakespeare's other tragic heroes. Lear goes mad, Othello is deceived by Iago, but Macbeth knows exactly what he's doing, and he describes the wickedness of his own actions with devastating clarity.

But the driving force behind those actions is less clear. Is it some evil already within him or some external malice that prompts his crimes? And the play, I think, demands that we ask this question, but it doesn't tell us how to answer it. And one of the small ways that I think the play is alerting us to this question of internal versus external forces is through that stage direction "Ring the bell!"

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth arrange the bell as a signal that the coast is clear to murder Duncan. Spoilers! When he hears it, Macbeth says, "I go and it is done, the bell invites me," and he continues on, but I think it's worth pausing over that particular line, "the bell invites me." Macbeth seems to be looking for ways to externalize the motivation for his crime. He knows he's making the choice, but his language still reaches outside himself. "The bell invites me." He puts the impetus for action, the invitation, on the bell. To me, this suggests that Macbeth, at least in this moment, sees himself, or wants to see himself as being led or worked on by outside forces.

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes)

And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it.

Weird Sisters (McKinley Carter, Theo Germaine, and Emily Ann Nicholson)

Thou Shalt be King.

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes)

Whiles I threat, he lives:
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.
A bell rings
I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.

KB: There are other significant bells, too. You'll notice, Posner and Teller also use bell chimes to signal soliloquies, particularly in the early moments when Macbeth and Banquo are mulling over the Witches' prophecies in their own heads but not overheard by each other. And each man is trying to figure out what the Witches' predictions might mean, how he feels about them, how he thinks his companion might react, and what it might mean to react to those predictions. When they do, we hear the chimes. (*Ominous percussion sounds and chimes.*) And when I hear

them, for me, they operate as an outside signal of an interior thought process, and this suggests that the bell's invitation is actually coming from within, that what Macbeth chooses to interpret as an outside force perhaps originates in his own thought. And in this way, for me, the soundscape of the production is inviting us to consider the tension between Macbeth's interior motivation and his sense of being driven or invited by outside forces. (*The Weird Sisters sing.*)

However, bells aren't the only suggestion of outside forces that might or might not be working on Macbeth. There is, of course, his wife, whose influence on Macbeth has led one scholar to comment that "It is as if marital intimacy were akin to demonic possession." I've never been married. Hopefully, those of you who have been married don't experience it like that. But Lady Macbeth certainly uses her intimate relationship with her husband to keep him committed to their course of action.

But Lady Macbeth's motivations are as murky as her husband's. And I'll touch on the Lady again later, but I do want to suggest that if there is possession here, it's mutual. Both husband and wife seem to trust each other deeply. They understand and even love one another, but as their plots spiral into ever-increasing paranoia and violence, their marriage becomes yet another casualty.

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes)

If we should fail?

Lady Macbeth (Chaon Cross)

We fail!

But screw your courage to the sticking-place,

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes) and Lady Macbeth (Chaon Cross)

And we'll not fail.

Weird Sisters (McKinley Carter, Theo Germaine, and Emily Ann Nicholson)

Sing softly in the background

Lady Macbeth (Chaon Cross)

When Duncan is asleep—

Whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey

Soundly invite him—his two chamberlains

Will I with wine and wassail so convince

That memory, the warder of the brain,

Shall be a fume. When in swinish sleep

Their drenched natures lie as in a death,

What cannot you and I perform upon

The unguarded Duncan? What not put upon

His spongy officers? Who shall bear the guilt

Of our great quell?

KB: And I'd encourage you, as you watch this afternoon's show, to pay attention to when the Macbeths seem to understand one another and when that mutuality starts to break down. In Posner and Teller's staging, the first half closes with the couple united in possession of the throne, but I think it's interesting to ask whether they are still able to understand one another. After this moment, they never appear on stage together again.

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes)

I will to-morrow to the weird sisters.

Lady Macbeth (Chaon Cross)

NO!

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes)

More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know,
By the worst means, the worst. I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

Weird Sisters (McKinley Carter, Theo Germaine, and Emily Ann Nichelson)

Begin to sing softly

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes)

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

Lady Macbeth (Chaon Cross)

You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

Weird Sister (McKinley Carter)

Sleep

Weird Sister (Emily Ann Nichelson)

No

Weird Sister (Theo Germaine)

More

Weird Sisters (McKinley Carter, Theo Germaine, and Emily Ann Nichelson)

Sleep no more!

Drum rolls and cymbal crash

KB: Now I'd like to turn to the most mysterious of the outside forces that seem to be at work on Macbeth, and in this production, on Lady Macbeth as well—namely the Witches. One of the

central puzzles of the play is where the Witches fit into this problem of evil, of interior versus exterior motivation. Do they cause Macbeth to do what he does, or do they merely foresee what he will do? Are they onlookers or instigators of this tragedy? And it's a question that I think Shakespeare, very intentionally, leaves unanswered.

Macbeth's Witches are often linked to King James' fascination with witchcraft. James was king of Scotland, and eventually succeeded Elizabeth to become the king of England in 1603, and he was also the patron of Shakespeare's company, and the players were probably eager to please their new Scottish king by appealing to his interests. James believed that witches had been involved in a plot against him in Scotland, he wrote a book on witchcraft, and he even attended several witch trials.

But Shakespeare's Witches can't be caught and tried. There are quite a few pieces of seventeenth-century witchcraft lore that are scattered throughout the play, and some of those echo information in James' own book. But they aren't particularly comforting witches to present to an anxious king. James, I think, sought to protect himself from supernatural evil by outlining how to punish supposed witches and amassing facts and knowledge about them. But it's impossible to pin down the Witches of *Macbeth*. It's not clear where they come from, what, if anything, they want, or whether they are more or less than human.

As Charles Lamb wrote in the nineteenth century, "They come with thunder and lightning and vanish to airy music. This is all we know of them." And because this is all we know of the Witches (and they don't appear very often in the text), it's up to each production to figure out how to use them. In the portrayal of the Weird Sisters that you'll see today, they are, in one sense, onlookers. Posner and Teller bring them onstage much more often than they're actually called for in the text, and you'll see them sometimes when you don't expect it, and they're always watching closely. They become, in fact, a kind of second audience.

But the Witches, I think, are not just onlookers in this production. They also contribute dramatically to the soundscape of the play. It's interesting to me that Lamb chose to describe everything we know about the Witches in terms of sound. "They come with thunder and lightning and vanish to airy music." The thunder and lightning, is of course, a reference to the Witches' first lines, but it's the airy music that really stands out in this production.

Weird Sister (McKinley Carter)

When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Weird Sister (Theo Germaine)

When the hurlyburly's done,

Weird Sister (Emily Ann Nicholson)

When the battle's lost and won.

Weird Sisters (McKinley Carter, Theo Germaine, and Emily Ann Nichelson)

That will be ere the set of sun.

Weird Sister (McKinley Carter)

Where the place?

Weird Sister (McKinley Carter and Emily Ann Nichelson)

Upon the heath.

Weird Sister (McKinley Carter)

There to meet with Macbeth.

KB: Andre Pluess, the sound designer, and the three actors who play the Weird Sisters have created an eerie arrangement of music and sound, and when I'm listening to this production, for me, the use of sound elevates the Witches beyond the position of mere onlookers. To the extent that they are making music, they are participating in the onstage action, but what their participation is doing is up for interpretation. Are they sighing with delight at human evil, or are they, perhaps, weaving a spell with their airy music?

There's a lot to be said about the way Posner and Teller are using sound in this production, so I'll move on to one of the other stage directions, "Knock!" (*pounding knocks*). And knocking at a door is heard throughout the central scenes of *Macbeth*, both before and after the interval. And, be on the lookout for the moment when the Witches themselves get a knock at their door in the second half. In that scene, the evil outside and the evil inside switch places or meet in a moment that once again asks us to wonder: "Who is driving whom to create the atrocities that mount up in the second half of this play?"

Weird Sister (Emily Ann Nichelson)

Then the charm is firm

Weird Sister (Theo Germaine)

and good.

Weird Sister (McKinley Carter)

By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.

Three knocks

Open, locks,
Whoever knocks!

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes)

How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!
What is't you do?

Weird Sisters (McKinley Carter, Theo Germaine, and Emily Ann Nichelson)

A deed without a name.

Macbeth (Ian Merrill Peakes)

I conjure you, by that which you profess,
Howe'er you come to know it, answer me
To what I ask you.

Weird Sister (McKinley Carter)

Speak.

Weird Sister (Theo Germaine)

Demand.

Weird Sister (Emily Ann Nichelson)

We'll answer.

Weird Sister (McKinley Carter)

Say, if thou'dst rather hear it from our mouths,

Weird Sisters (McKinley Carter, Theo Germaine, and Emily Ann Nichelson)

Or from our master's?

KB: But perhaps the noisiest and most famous knocking happens after Duncan's murder in a fascinating scene that switches suddenly away from the affairs of kings and lords to the Porter of the castle. And a porter's job was to answer the door, but as you'll see, this Porter has been partying a bit too hard, and he takes his own sweet time when he hears the knocking at Macbeth's gate.

And the sound of knocking (and the Porter's hangover) remind us that there is an outside world beyond the feverish head spaces of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth that we've been inhabiting up until that moment. But that outside world is still a space of uncertainty. You'll notice that there are several doors in the set, and we don't always know who's behind those doors, and for me, this parallels our uncertainty over where the danger, where the evil comes from, inside or outside. The Porter jokes that it might be the Devil knocking, but the irony, of course, is that the Devil might already be inside the castle.

And I'm suggesting that we pay attention to this Porter scene, not only because of its use of sound, but also because this production has treated the scene very carefully. Over the centuries, the Porter scene has puzzled and even irritated scholars because it has seemed unnecessarily comic. Particularly in the eighteenth century, scholars were convinced that Shakespeare would never have put in this scene and ruined the high tragedy with this drunk doorman. But I think one of the points that the play and this production is trying to make is that

the line between horror and humor is very thin, and the space between the two is where this tragedy operates. Sometimes the only approach to horror is laughter, sarcasm, irony, understatement, and in this case, the Porter's comedy in this first act scene sets up dramatic irony that follows.

The sound of pounding knocks on the door

Porter (Matthew Floyd Miller)

Alright, alight I'm coming, I'm coming where the hell's the fire?

Sounds of the audience laughing and knocks pounding on the door

Ahh that's disgusting, you need a hanky?

Oh knock knock knock knock knock

Hey Lady,

Knock knock.

Audience Member

Who's there?

Porter (Matthew Floyd Miller)

An equivocator.

Ah ah! An equivocator *whom?*

Laughter from the audience

Porter (Matthew Floyd Miller)

An equivocator, who'll swear in both scales against either scale. One who'll commit treason, Mark you he'll never equivocate his way into Heaven.

Knocks pound the door

O, come on in, equivocator.

KB: And in the text, Shakespeare also used this moment to work in some topical references. It's actually one of the ways that scholars date the play to sometime in 1606. The Porter makes a very dense joke about a traitor's execution and an equivocator trying to equivocate his way to Heaven. And this is generally taken as a reference to the execution in 1606 of a Jesuit priest, Father Henry Garnet, who was implicated in the Gunpowder Plot. The Gunpowder Plot was a conspiracy to assassinate King James and blow up Parliament, and if it had succeeded, it would have essentially wiped out the English government in one fell swoop, as Macduff would say.

And for the mainly Protestant population of England at the time, Jesuits were associated with a particular kind of untruth known as equivocation. And equivocation can mean quibbling, it can mean paying attention to details to obscure something else, and more broadly it refers to telling a seeming or partial truth while hiding a larger lie.

But, why focus on this one word? Posner and Teller have adapted this scene carefully. They've cut the dense topical jokes that have sort of been old news since 1607, and instead they've gone with something that's a bit more recognizable, as you'll see. But equivocation is still there. It's still relevant, not so much because of the Gunpowder Plot, but because all throughout the play, these characters are grappling with the relationship between truth and lies.

For example, near the end of the play, Macbeth begins to see the ways that the Witches' predictions are coming true. Surprisingly, he's not happy about it, and he says, "I pull in resolution, and begin to doubt the equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth." Lies that are like truth and truths that tell lies run all throughout the play, and like the line between humor and horror, the line between truth and lies starts to wear away, and it gets very hard for characters to tell the difference.

And this effects not only the Macbeths, but also the characters aligned against them. Late in the second act, Duncan's son, Malcolm, meets the most honest character in the play: Macduff, the Thane of Fife. And as you'll see, they go through a negotiation between truths and lies in an attempt to figure out whether they can trust one another. Their truths and lies might not be as insidious as the Witches', but they show the ways that, in this increasingly untrustworthy society, even the best people begin to become equivocators.

So the play insists that we pay attention to moments of equivocation, sometimes amusing moments, sometimes horrifying ones, but they're all moments where a lie is also a truth and a truth is like a lie, and even the children have to figure out how lies work. In one of the only scenes of relative domestic happiness in the play, Macduff's wife and children talk about the fact that Macduff has fled Scotland and been labeled a traitor. And Lady Macduff has to explain to her children that a traitor is someone that swears and lies, and by this point in the play, the irony is clear: the King himself is a traitor, and Scotland is full of liars.

And this scene with the Macduffs is significant because it marks as well one of the performance decisions that really stood out to me in this production. The text includes only one of Macduff's children, but Posner and Teller have introduced a second child to the scene, and they also bring the Macduff family onstage in the first half of the play, although they aren't mentioned in the text there. For me, those performance decisions highlight the weight placed on children in this play.

Lady Macduff (Jennifer Latimore)

Why, I can buy me twenty at any market.

Macduff Daughter (Phoenix Anderson)

Was my father a traitor, mother?

Macduff Son (Micah Wilson)

What is a traitor?

Lady Macduff (Jennifer Latimore)

Why, one that swears and lies.

Macduff Daughter (Phoenix Anderson)

And be they all traitors that do so?

Lady Macduff (Jennifer Latimore)

Every one that does so is a traitor and must be hanged.

Macduff Daughter (Phoenix Anderson)

And must they all be hanged that swear and lie?

Lady Macduff (Jennifer Latimore)

Every one.

Macduff Son (Micah Wilson)

Who must hang them?

Lady Macduff (Jennifer Latimore)

Why, the honest men.

Macduff Daughter (Phoenix Anderson)

Then the liars and swearers are fools, for there are liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang up them.

KB: When Banquo and Macduff first meet the Witches, Banquo asks them whether they can “look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow and which will not,” and the language of growth and barrenness runs throughout *Macbeth*, and is I think, especially meaningful in its association with children. Banquo has a son, and the Witches tell him that his children will be kings, Macduff is separated from his children, and Lady Macbeth states that she has nursed and loved a child. Amongst all these children, which grain will grow, and which will not? Unlike the question of the source of evil in the play, this question is answered quite clearly in the text, except in one respect.

Lady Macbeth implies that she has had a child, but the Macbeths do not have children, and every production of *Macbeth* has to deal with this conundrum. This includes film adaptations. The very influential Japanese film by Kurosawa takes one route, a more recent 2015 film starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard takes another route, and in Posner and Teller’s staging, we see Lady Macbeth with an infant’s coffin. It’s a moment that visually connects the Macbeths, the child, and the Witches in an image of grief and anger and loss. I found it particularly fascinating that the Witches are included in this scene, because for me, once again, it raised this mystery of evil’s source. The Witches are there. Have they caused this somehow? Are they working on Lady Macbeth? But at the same time, the purely human motivation of grief and rage are equally and emphatically present. So, who’s to say?

In any case, the effects of the Macbeths' childlessness echo throughout this production, all the way to Lady Macbeth's famous sleepwalking scene.

Doctor (Christopher Donahue)

What is it she does now? Look, how she rubs her hands.

Gentlewoman (Jennifer Latimore)

It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands: I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour.

Lady Macbeth (Chaon Cross)

Yet here's a spot.

Doctor (Christopher Donahue)

Ah! She speaks. I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

Lady Macbeth (Chaon Cross)

Out, damned spot! Out, I say! —

She rings an imagined bell

One. Two. Why, then, 'tis time to do't.

Cymbal crash

KB: And you'll hear it, too, in Macbeth's recognition that, as he says, he holds a "fruitless crown" and a "barren sceptre." Their grain will not grow. In one sense, then, we can see the play as a very dark fairy tale, in which children play a consequential and a tragic role.

And, of course in any fairy tale, magic is important, and we can't think about truths and lies in this production without thinking about the illusions of magic. Teller, who co-directed today's production, is one half of the entertainment and magic team, Penn & Teller. And he and Posner also directed *The Tempest* at Chicago Shakespeare in 2015, which some of you may have seen. In *The Tempest*, the magic was intensely theatrical because in that play, magic is a metaphor for the theater itself. Prospero and Ariel use their magic to manipulate, but also to amaze and entertain their audiences. In *Macbeth*, however, magic is equally important, but rather than a metaphor for the wonder of theater, magic serves as reminder of the breakdown of interior and exterior realities. It elicits the psychological horror of not being able to tell the difference between what is outside and what is inside, what is real and what is not.

By the end of the play, the only other people who have seen all that Macbeth has seen are the audience, and we and Macbeth share this experience in potentially unsettling ways. You might find yourselves trying to figure out how the magic is working, and what's interesting about trying to figure that out is that in doing so, we're following what Macbeth himself is trying to do: trying to figure out who's ringing the bell, who's knocking at the door, and what that might portend. Thank you.

Sara B.T. Thiel: That's it from us this week. We'll be back next time with a Pre•Amble from our recent production of *Emma*, a musical adaptation of Jane Austen's novel by Paul Gordon and directed by Artistic Director Barbara Gaines. That talk will come to you from yours truly:

SBT (Clip from Episode 1.4): During this production, you're going to see the world through Emma's eyes. And we fall in love with her, but it's a bit confusing because, though we *love* her, we're not really sure if we *like* her.

SBT: What does Chicago Shakespeare Theater mean to you? What questions do you have for CST scholars and artists? We'd love to hear from you! Send an email to asides@chicagoshakes.com or leave a voicemail at 312-667-5631 and we'll respond in a future episode.

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Thanks for joining us!

Sounds of from the Instruments of Darkness play faintly in the background