



SHAKESPEARE AND LATINIDAD

Edited by Trevor Boffone and Carla Della Gatta

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What I Learned from My Shakespeare Staycation with
Macbeth and *Richard III*

Migdalia Cruz

The idea: study revered texts by one of the most revered playwrights in the white male Western canon and help them speak to a twenty-first-century audience that includes everyone else – leaving intact the poetry, rhythms, place and characters.

The Oregon Shakespeare Festival's (OSF) *Play on!* project was thought up by Lue Douthit (a dramaturg at OSF) and Dave Hitz (of the Hitz Foundation). The goal was to create a revitalised canon that allowed for a modern ear to understand all of Shakespeare's original intentions without dumbing down the text or poetry.

Cons: Everyone will think you are crazy to do such a thing. Why fix what isn't broken? Why risk the negative press of trying to mess with a white theatrical icon? Why let yourself be compared to the 'Bard?' (A bard is simply a poet – and poets come in all colours, abilities and genders.)

Pros: Answer/echo the work of a master, and from this, learn how to use semicolons and iambic pentameter to emphasise action. Feel entitled to the inspiration of this and any poet. Appreciate how your work can vibrate off another writer's work and help you understand your own work more deeply. As you begin to take one thing apart to rebuild it, you have to believe in your strengths and use them to rebuild. Work on the craft as an artist.

People are quick to criticise anything they don't understand, but that has never stopped me from trying something new. And how delicious, as a Puerto Rican woman from the Bronx, to become part of the Western canon in this subversive way. If it worked, it could mean that people of colour are clearly entitled to these classic works, and, in a deeper way, entitled to poetry without question, explanation or rancor.

The Choice

Macbeth was a natural choice for me – a play about how mourning the loss of a baby, of kingdoms, of country, leads to an inevitable tragedy that is guided by fate. I write about mourning. My first piece of real writing was about the death of my friend who was raped and murdered at age eight. That is how I mourned her. After Douthit offered me other plays to translate for *Play on!* at OSF, I asked to see what hadn't been taken yet and was amazed to see *Macbeth* on that list. That was it. Mourning, ambition, the powerless seeking by any means to become powerful, the fall of people who search for power without remembering the consequences of their actions: this read like a Migdalia Cruz play to me. Yes.

Richard III was a title I inherited from another writer, and I took it on gladly because I saw the direct link between Richard and Macbeth. *Richard III* was Shakespeare's fourth play, the work of a young writer searching for his voice, not completely realised, and leading to *Macbeth*, his twenty-eighth play, which is beautifully crafted and poetically precise.¹ I found that Shakespeare stole lines from himself and placed them into *Macbeth*.

For instance, take the imagery of blood in both plays. In *Richard III*, Richard says before the murderer Tyrell enters:

Murder her brothers, and then marry her.
Uncertain way of gain. But I am in
So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin.
Tear-falling pity dwells not in this eye.²

And from *Macbeth*, Macbeth says after the murderers have killed Banquo, whose ghost appears to him at the banquet:

All causes shall give way. I am in blood
Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.³

Finding parallel lines in *Richard III* gave me insight into the writer Shakespeare would become – from plot-heavy history play writer to a stage poet. I saw how he developed his poetry and gave his characters more humanity. *Macbeth* helped me understand Richard and enabled me to find a way to humanise him. And so, here are the two passages as I translated them. First, *Richard III*:

Murder the princes, and marry the princess.
Unholy way to prosper. But I am

So steeped in blood that sin will pluck out sin.
Tear-dropping mercy dwells not in this eye.

And now *Macbeth*:

Nothing shall halt my way. I am in blood
Stepped in so far, that should I wade no further,
Returning were as bloody as crossing o'er.

Shakespeare made a choice for Richard to be 'Steeped in blood' so Richard had already been subsumed by his actions, his murders accumulating so much that he was almost comfortable and proud of the level of blood he had shed. In contrast, Macbeth had 'stepped in blood', as he fell into his fate rather than choosing it. Understanding this contrast helped me define the desperation of Macbeth as opposed to Richard's ruthlessness – ruthless ambition versus ambition from which there's no turning back.

The Research

I wanted to treat the translation of *Macbeth* as if it were a new play. So I'd think, 'this is my new play', and somehow I'm shadowing this other writer, and I'm going to try to take the same journey. Research took me down many roads. I read several essays, articles and books: from *Bawdy Shakespeare* to lexicons and scholarly works about semiotics and language. They were often dense and difficult, but they were necessary to understanding the play as a whole and respecting all the research that had come before me. Then, I had to find the character, and I had to spend time discovering Macbeth the man. To that end, I did some travelling.

Something I do with all my plays is create altars to my characters, a spiritual place that contains talismans, music, colours and objects. It's not necessarily something with crosses or any kind of religious symbols. It's about sacred objects that belong to characters, or a time in my life, or a place that is important to the character or the story. To find items, thoughts and photographs for my Macbeth altar, I travelled to the Isle of Iona in the Hebrides to find his grave and pay my respects. In a way, it was also a spiritual journey to my own thoughts on who he was and what he meant to Scotland and to Shakespeare as he wrote about Macbeth for James I.

Macbeth, for me, is about the witches. What are they, and what do I want them to say? For me, they are women of colour surrounding this world, contextualising it in order to recreate it. Their power comes from their sexual attraction – this power is scary and powerful and alluring – in particular to men who think they hold the power. I don't want old hags in the forest.

That witch idea died decades ago. So, what does a modern witch look like? What do powerful women look like? Or women who understand fate and destiny. I wanted to play with them and contextualise the play through them, so I added words for them. But Shakespeare also added words for them, or somebody added words for them; they added songs from Thomas Middleton in the middle of Shakespeare. I thought: 'if he's stealing from other people, he might as well steal from Cruz', so I added intros to scenes, songs and more, making it sound more like a play of mine. From there I began to reconstruct the play as I understood it from a modern woman's gaze.

It was important to choose words that might resonate with a modern audience. There was an openness to the witches, who are outside the play, so I used them to modernise the play. And I thought, 'oh, everybody's gonna hate this'. But audiences appreciated the way that the witches helped bring this play into the twenty-first century. I also made the witches musical, so they sing soul songs from the 1960s. To me that was the point of the project: if you choose a specific contemporary playwright to do this kind of work, they're going to bring themselves to it.

For *Richard III*, I went to Bosworth Field to see where he died and then to Leicester to see where they found his body – in a car park that was once a Catholic church – and then visited his official tomb at Leicester Cathedral. Next, I found Richard's sound track. For all my plays, I find the music of the characters and/or the music I need to hear to write them – music that somehow embodies them. For Richard, it was the Clash, especially the songs 'London Calling' and 'London's Burning'. I saw him as a punky rebel, who effected change by breaking through England's inertia – a hated outsider. Then, I went through videotapes from the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) of classes in how to speak iambic pentameter – those John Barton tapes. They're kind of ridiculous, from the 1970s or something. Everyone is smoking, it's like they're talking in a fog. But it's funny, and it's interesting to see how everyone struggles with the language. And part of the struggle with the language is that it's not always clear, and we've forgotten the context for all that language. So we make up context all the time, that's what humans do to make sense of the world. That gave me further permission to refine the text and define it and give it context that was both historical and personal to Richard III, Shakespeare and Migdalia.

The Work

Painstaking, word-by-word analysis and clarification. Sometimes at the rate of one sentence per hour. Together with my intrepid dramaturg, the British actress Ishia Bennison, I combed through the script: with her reading aloud with all her RSC cred and me with my Bronx-bred *coraje*, we put the play

together in a way where we both understood all the words, the context and the poetry.

Ishia made sure I didn't change the well-known phrases too much, and I made sure she stepped away from my recreation of the witches.

It was all respectful and collaborative. Together we changed words, syntax and placement, and we tried to keep the best of Shakespeare intact without sacrificing the originality of Migdalia. Ishia as an actress also helped me double-check that the words were speakable for both American and British actors. Two years for *Macbeth*. Six weeks for *Richard III*, because I took him on so close to the June 2019 *Play on!* Shakespeare Festival of readings at Classic Stage Company in New York City, where both plays were presented along with the entire Shakespeare canon – all translated by contemporary playwrights, directors and dramaturgs. Lucky for me that *Macbeth* came first, so I had some short cuts to finding the soul of *Richard III*.

The Productions

So far, I have been blessed with two productions of *Macbeth*. I was surprised that anyone would produce these plays, especially when they can cut to shreds Shakespeare and not pay royalties. Dealing with a living playwright was a tough sell to many Shakespeare companies. Two brave companies stepped up: Actors' Shakespeare Project in Boston and the African-American Shakespeare Company in San Francisco. Both productions were successful in their own ways.

I credit the fact that they both used actors of colour in their casts – for major characters, not just sword-bearers and servants. Both companies addressed my greatest wish, that this play – as with all my plays – be performed by actors of colour. I wanted to create works that could be spoken by, be understood by, and resonate with audiences that may have felt left out of the Shakespeare canon in the past except for minor roles written to make them sound like white British people. A language and a text for all the people, even my own – that was my goal.

The Aftermath

There is so much resistance to touching these texts, particularly from the American Shakespeare studies community, as if the translators are blaspheming a sacred text. Because of this resistance in academia to *Play on!*, I'm always prepared for a fight or some kind of discussion that's such a waste of time in a lot of ways. Scholars and artists come from different worlds. Scholars try to explain the world through rigorous analysis; artists try to explain it by smashing it to bits and putting it back together again. I wish scholars in general

would open their minds to different directions that work can go in. They need to be open to the different avenues their scholarship might take and stop trying so hard to make everything fit their theories. Maybe their theories need to move or transform with each production. And we need to understand why people are making certain choices, as opposed to just reacting, ‘wow, that was a bad choice’. Maybe it was, but why? Why did they make that choice? What were they trying to do? Why is it negative if it doesn’t fit your theory? That kind of scholarship is just tedious because it’s reductive.

It’s important that scholars understand that this approach – mine, and that of *Play on!* – is different. It’s not just some reductive No Fear Shakespeare. I already have a sensibility that is theatrical and unique. I have a specific voice that I’m applying to this translation that means it’ll have a different kind of resonance than a literal translation or a translation from a grad student in Shakespeare studies. I’m looking at these plays as a dramatist – not as a scholar. Thereby, I’m enhancing the drama with modern language, not detracting from it.

Shakespeare isn’t going away. He will survive all of us, no doubt. His plays have lasted four hundred years and will persevere. I think people need to keep translating and keep adapting so that he can remain present and pertinent in a way that is modern and not based on antiquated ideas about language. When Shakespeare was writing, he was writing for all the people who were there, from queens to groundlings, so that they could hear good stories enacted by wonderful players in a poetic form that was easy to remember and repeat because of its rhythms. He wasn’t writing to be studied. Nowadays we treat his plays like they’re ancient museum pieces, fun to visit, but audiences don’t necessarily walk away feeling like his words speak directly to their own human experience. Good plays should resonate in the soul. I think there needs to be a way to open the field for Shakespeare to continue to be lively and interesting and resonant to society. All writers need to ask questions that fiercely explore and reveal the human condition.

Even translators. Maybe especially.

Notes

1. These numbers can be debated. Current thought is that Shakespeare wrote anywhere from thirty-eight to forty-one plays. The numbers in this chapter reflect the count that OSF used for *Play on!*
2. William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd edn, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, Walter Cohen, Suzanne Gossett, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus and Gordon McMullan (New York: W. W. Norton, 2016), IV.ii.61–3.
3. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, III.iv.138–40.