

MAKING MACBETH FUNNY: A CASE FOR COMEDIC ADAPTATION OF
SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC PLAY

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In

Theatre Arts

by

Emily Ann Stapleton

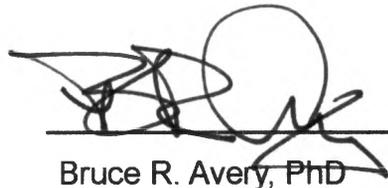
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CERTIFICATION OF APPROVAL

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Bruce R. Avery', written over a horizontal line.

Bruce R. Avery, PhD
Professor of Theatre Arts

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roy Conboy', written over a horizontal line.

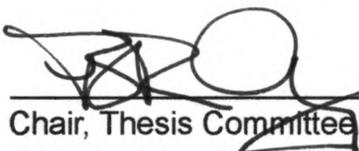
Roy Conboy, MFA
Professor of Theatre Arts/Creative Writing

MAKING MACBETH FUNNY: A CASE FOR COMEDIC ADAPTATION OF
SHAKESPEARE'S TRAGIC PLAY

Emily Ann Stapleton
San Francisco, California
2018

This thesis both explores and promotes the value in adapting William Shakespeare's tragic play, *Macbeth*, into a comedy. The research focuses first on establishing key differences between tragedy and comedy with special attention to the fundamental tragic characteristics of *Macbeth* in its original form. The study then turns to close examination of three notable comedic adaptations of *Macbeth*, assessing the adapting playwrights' specific approaches and techniques as well as the cultural/social commentaries they effectively communicate through their comical conversions. The thesis culminates in an understanding of the immense power in comically retelling tragic stories.

I certify that the Abstract is a correct representation of the content of this thesis.


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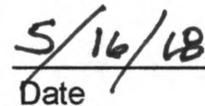

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Examining Tragedy and Comedy	3
The Tragedy of <i>Macbeth</i>	3
Elements of Comedy	13
<i>MacBird</i>	20
MacBett	37
Cahoot's <i>Macbeth</i>	56
Conclusion	74
Bibliography	75

INTRODUCTION

Macbeth is a tale of greed and treachery, a story revealing dark consequences for corrupt ambition. Written by William Shakespeare in 1606, the tragic play depicts the journey of its protagonist from a once noble general possessing great potential to a murderous tyrant, ultimately tortured by his own guilt and meeting his fatal demise. A story so dark may seem to hold little potential for successful comedic adaptation, but as Robert I. Williams states in his book *Comic Practice/Comic Response*, “The joining of serious and comic elements in a work seems to be a problem only insofar as we think of them as irreconcilable modes of being, compartmentalized, so to speak, by our own habits of mind” (Williams 133). Perhaps our tendency to compartmentalize the two modes comes from an assumption that the emotional catharsis evoked by comedy (the pleasurable release of laughter) indicates that the themes and subject matter tackled through comedic intent are innately less serious than those of tragedy — but this is not so. For although tragedy and comedy undoubtedly provoke different emotional responses, there can be great power in merging the two. As Williams elaborates, “Just as every comic moment can turn grim, every somber situation can become the lead-in for a sudden turn—all the more hilarious because of its dark context.” (Williams 115-116). In the chapters to follow, we will not only explore the viability of manipulating the dark tale of

Macbeth to produce comedic effect, but we will also address the immense value in such an endeavor. For there is great power in comedy, and the adaptations of Barbara Garson, Eugène Ionesco, and Tom Stoppard prove that William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* serves as a perfect landscape for exploring such power.

CHAPTER 1

EXAMINING TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

THE TRAGEDY OF *MACBETH*

To understand the value in rendering a comedic adaptation of *Macbeth*, we must first understand the fundamentals of tragedy and how they apply to Shakespeare's play. Aristotle states in his *Poetics* that the purpose of tragedy is "effecting through pity and fear . . . the catharsis of such emotions," and he evaluates the characteristics necessary in order to provoke such a catharsis (Aristotle 50). To summarize these characteristics, a tragedy in its dramatic form must feature a protagonist (or tragic hero) of high stature who, though demonstrating a potential for greatness, is plagued by a fatal flaw. Informed by this flaw, the tragic hero commits an act that is "serious, complete, and possessing magnitude" which ultimately leads to his demise (Aristotle 50). In the end, we feel pity for the man whose tragic mistake led to his downfall and fear that we too are capable of such a mistake.

As Thane of Glamis and a Scottish general, Macbeth is certainly a man of high rank. The significance of his stature can perhaps be explained in Jonathan Bates' assessment, "the higher they climb, the harder they fall," suggesting that a man who has already achieved a fair amount of success will have more to lose should he meet his demise (Shakespeare and Bate viii). But in his book

exploring Shakespearean tragedy, A.C. Bradley delves further into Bates' explanation, supporting the assertion that the tragic hero's fall must be a substantial one and offering his own theory as to why this is the case:

The pangs of despised love and the anguish of remorse, we say, are the same in a peasant and a prince; but . . . the story of the prince . . . or the general, has a greatness and dignity of its own. His fate affects the welfare of a whole nation or empire; and when he falls suddenly from the height of earthly greatness to the dust, his fall produces a sense of contrast, of the powerlessness of man, and of the omnipotence — perhaps the caprice — of Fortune or Fate, which no tale of private life can possibly rival. (Bradley 10)

Bradley's assessment here is two-fold: First, the high ranking man's responsibility to his nation intensifies the impact of his fall; and second, his "greatness and dignity" do not protect him from catastrophe, suggesting that no one is invulnerable. And herein lies the connection to Aristotle's theory of catharsis. For, our pity is born of the recognition that in his collapse, this potentially great man has failed both himself and his nation. And our fear is a recognition that in his elevated position, if even he can meet such immense disaster, then so can we all.

The tragic hero's potential greatness is another point of focus in the fundamentals of tragedy, and we learn of Macbeth's potential before he even appears in the play. Relaying the details of a battle to King Duncan, a wounded captain describes Macbeth's bravery and success in defeating the rebel Macdonald:

CAPTAIN. The merciless Macdonald —
 Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
 The multiplying villainies of nature
 Do swarm upon him — from the Western Isles
 Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied,
 And Fortune on his damnèd quarrel smiling,
 Showed like a rebel's whore. But all's too weak,
 For brave Macbeth — well he deserves that name —
 Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel
 Which smoked with bloody execution,
 Like valour's minion carved out his passage
 Till he faced the slave,
 Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him
 Till he unseamed him from the nave to th'chops
 And fixed his head upon our battlements. (Shakespeare 1.2.11-25)

Macbeth is undoubtedly brave; for the indication that he “carved out his passage” to face the “merciless Macdonald” speaks to the sheer number of soldiers he must have vanquished in order to meet his ultimate victory. We know at once that this man does not hesitate to place himself in harm's way for the good of his king and his nation. Of course, at the same time that we learn of Macbeth's bravery, we are also offered a glimpse into his darker impulses. As the captain describes, he “unseamed” Macdonald “from the nave to th'chops,” meaning he ripped him in half beginning at his navel and ending at his jaw. Macbeth may have the potential for greatness, but a man who would tear open his opponent so violently may have the potential for ruthlessness as well. Such a dichotomy speaks to Aristotle's idea of a tragic hero who is neither supremely good nor exclusively evil. For, the good man's fall, by Aristotle's estimations, would spark our repulsion rather than our pity or fear, and the evil man's demise would be too

deserved to evoke the catharsis of either emotion. Aristotle explains, "We are left for the man whose place is between these two extremes. Such is the man who on the one hand is not pre-eminent in virtue and justice, and yet on the other hand does not fall into misfortune through vice or depravity, but falls because of some mistake . . ." (Aristotle 57). The mistake to which Aristotle refers is a result of the tragic hero's fatal flaw. There is no inherent moral corruption in this man, but rather a weakness that propels him to a single destructive act, derailing his potential and instigating his demise.

For Macbeth, it is his relentless ambition that sparks his mistake and leads him down the path to his own personal destruction. We suspect this ambition early in the play when he encounters three witches who deliver a tantalizing prophecy — Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, and thereafter, King of Scotland. The first prophecy is proven immediately to be true as Ross enters, announcing the Thane of Cawdor's death and Macbeth's acquisition of his title. Believing now the viability of the witches' claims, Macbeth ponders the second prophecy, allowing foul thoughts to creep into his consciousness:

MACBETH. This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man
 That function is smothered in surmise,
 And nothing is, but what is not. (Shakespeare 1.3.140-152)

The mere suggestion of his future kingship prompts Macbeth's contemplation of murder. Thus, we learn that despite his great potential, this is no entirely virtuous man. Of course, he does seem unnerved by his own pondering; for he states that "it shakes so my single state of man," indicating that the vile impulse to kill the king is not inherent in his nature, but is rather the result of his awakened ambition. Lady Macbeth confirms this notion as she acknowledges Macbeth's ambition but doubts his capability of committing such a treacherous act. Wanting desperately for him to make the decision to murder the benevolent King Duncan, Lady Macbeth states in a soliloquy:

LADY MACBETH. Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
 What thou art promised: yet do I fear thy nature:
 It is too full o'th'milk of human kindness
 To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
 Art not without ambition, but without
 The illness should attend it. (Shakespeare 1.5.13-18)

Citing his nature as "too full o'th'milk of human kindness," Lady Macbeth indicates that her husband may possess too much compassion to commit such a foul deed. Still, as Macbeth himself demonstrates, his ambition is looming, thereby presenting an inner conflict that for him, has the potential for catastrophe. And this conflict intensifies as the plan to kill the king is set into motion. After

Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle, the tragic hero delivers a guilt-ridden soliloquy:

MACBETH: He's here in double trust:
 First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
 Strong both against the deed: then, as his host,
 Who should against his murderer shut the door,
 Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
 So clear in his great office, that his virtues
 Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
 The deep damnation of his taking-off:
 And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
 Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin, horsed
 Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
 That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
 To prick the sides of my intent, but only
 Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
 And falls on th'other. (Shakespeare 1.7.12-28)

Macbeth is indecisive. He admits his "vaulting ambition," but he also admits that Duncan is a virtuous man, undeserving of such a cruel fate. His growing guilt is apparent as he speaks of Duncan's "double trust," unaware of the betrayal that awaits him. And this guilt continues to torment Macbeth well after the deed is committed. Such is the journey of the tragic hero, as Gerhard Kaiser confirms in *The Substance of Greek and Shakespearean Tragedy*:

When the characters in their fatal disposition fail to make the right decision, when they act wrongly, their action is clearly marked as sin, and henceforth they carry the burden of a moral guilt. This guilt usually increases in the course of the drama, for evil cannot be isolated but grows like a malignant disease, and the initial crime or sin provokes further crimes. (Kaiser 217)

Macbeth soon finds himself seeped in the consequences of his own relentless ambition; for he eventually succumbs to his fatal flaw, stabbing Duncan as he sleeps. But the treachery does not end with this single act of murder. Rather, it leads to a series of vile acts as Macbeth now charges down a path requiring the disposal of anyone who threatens his power.

Determined to protect his throne, Macbeth hires murderers to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance; for the Weyard sisters foretold that Banquo's sons would be kings, thus proving potential threats to Macbeth's power. Fleance manages to escape, but Banquo is killed, and it is at this point that we understand the persisting ramifications of Macbeth's initial mistake. For, not only has he murdered his predecessor, but he has continued to murder and now sees no way to return to a more noble path. He relays this sentiment to Lady Macbeth when he states:

MACBETH. . . . I am in blood
Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scanned.
(Shakespeare 3.5.157-161)

Macbeth expresses here that he is so deep into his treacherous deeds, his only choice is to proceed further down this path. With his one fatal decision, he unleashed a chain of events that has morally unravelled him, and it would be no less difficult now to turn back than it would be to continue his treachery. In this

moment, we realize Macbeth's full journey into tyranny. The man once paralyzed by guilt is now swift to viciously murder anyone who might threaten his throne. And this swiftness of cruel action is also a decision on Macbeth's part; for, upon hearing that Macduff has gone to England and is organizing to fight against him, he states in an aside:

MACBETH. Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits:
 The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
 Unless the deed go with it. From this moment
 The very firstlings of my heart shall be
 The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
 To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
 The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
 Seize upon Fife, give to th'edge o'th'sword
 His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
 That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool,
 This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
 (Shakespeare 4.2.157-167)

In his statement that "the very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand," Macbeth professes that he will no longer delay the actions of his evil inclinations. His fatal ambition now prompts his vow to raid Macduff's castle, seize his land, and murder his wife and children. At this point, we no longer see evidence of the great potential that once existed in Macbeth; instead, we see a cruel tyrant far down the path to his demise. And along this path, Lady Macbeth, so instrumental in the plotting of King Duncan's murder, meets her demise as well, killing herself as a result of her own guilty conscience. In Macbeth's

response upon hearing the news of her death, we understand the suffering he endures as the result of his tyrannous journey:

MACBETH. She should have died hereafter:
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
 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. Out, out, brief candle.
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare 5.5.17-28)

Here we witness a man overtaken by misery in the midst of his wife's death and his own impending fall. Macbeth's reflection that life is "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" reflects his deep despair in the rumination that life is essentially meaningless. In this moment, we may feel the pity for Macbeth that Aristotle insists must be provoked in tragedy. But the journey of the tragic hero is not yet complete, and Macbeth vows to keep fighting.

As Macduff and Malcolm (Duncan's son) raid Macbeth's castle with an army of troops, Macbeth holds onto the hope of a prophecy delivered through an apparition summoned by the three witches: ". . . none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (Shakespeare 4.1.86-87). However, fate plays a cruel trick on Macbeth as Macduff relays that he ". . . was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped," indicating that he was birthed by cesarean section and therefore not

technically “of woman born” (Shakespeare 5.7.53-54). And so, in the end, Macduff ultimately slays Macbeth, concretizing his downfall, and Malcolm takes his place as the next rightful king, delivering the final speech of the play:

MALCOLM. We shall not spend a large expense of time
 Before we reckon with your several loves
 And make us even with you. My thanes and kinsmen,
 Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland
 In such an honour named. What's more to do
 Which would be planted newly with the time,
 As calling home our exiled friends abroad
 That fled the snares of watchful tyranny,
 Producing forth the cruel ministers
 Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen,
 Who — as 'tis thought — by self and violent hands
 Took off her life: this, and what needful else
 That calls upon us, by the grace of grace
 We will perform in measure, time and place.
 So thanks to all at once and to each one,
 Whom we invite to see us crowned at Scone.
 (Shakespeare 5.7.105-120)

With this speech, Malcolm signifies the end of a tyrannical reign. He sends a fair and just message, promising that his “thanes and kinsmen” will “henceforth be earls” and vowing that he will be “calling home” any who were forced to flee in the midst of Macbeth’s treachery. Malcolm’s benevolent tone is reminiscent of his father, the former king, and although we are left to ponder the tragic events that unfolded at the hands a flawed hero, we are resolved in the knowledge that order has been restored.

Although Macbeth developed into a ruthless tyrant, he began the play with great potential, and only because of his vulnerability to one fatal flaw did he

ultimately meet his demise. In adherence to Aristotle's theory of catharsis, we pity Macbeth for his unraveled life plagued by his one tragic mistake, and we fear in ourselves the very human flaw that led to his catastrophic decision. Kaiser summarizes well the effects of the tragedy:

We can recognize ourselves, our own passions and flaws and guilt, represented in those tragic figures; we can for that reason understand them better and sympathize the more with them; and in watching their tragic fate with pity and horror, we can accept the play's lesson for ourselves. (Kaiser 220)

In the end, each of us can extract a valuable lesson — one that is meant for personal self-reflection. Learning from the tragic hero, we may contemplate our individual flaws, and in doing so, strive to not allow them as catalysts for our own misdeeds.

ELEMENTS OF COMEDY

It seems obvious to say that contrary to tragedy's desired evocation of pity and fear, comedy's primary goal is to provoke laughter. And of course, the emotional catharsis we experience with laughter is a pleasurable one. As John Weiss eloquently states in his book *Wit, Humor, and Shakespeare*, "Every laugh reddens the blood, which goes then more blithely to dissipate the fogs of a moody brain" (Weiss 12). Laughter certainly does have the power to lift our mood as it "reddens the blood," and it stands to reason that its tactics in doing so are vastly different from the methods employed in tragedy. Therefore, the

transformation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into a comedy is a task requiring a masterful manipulation of the fundamentals of each genre.

Generally speaking, in order to render a successful comedic adaptation of any tragedy, the playwright's first attention must be to preventing the audience from feeling sympathy for the characters. Philosopher Henri Bergson explains, ". . . there is an art of throwing a wet blanket upon sympathy at the very moment it might arise, the result being that the situation, though a serious one, is not taken seriously" (Bergson 138-141). Bergson's assessment speaks to the great skill involved in preventing the emotional catharsis begged by the tragic progression. In the case of the comically adapted tragedy, this prevention must begin with the rendering of the tragic hero.

As we know, a tragic hero is typically a man of high stature; but as Aristotle states, ". . . tragedy parts company with comedy, since comedy prefers to imitate persons who are worse, tragedy persons who are better, than the present generation" (Aristotle 46). While the comic playwright does not necessarily need to strip Macbeth of his titles in order to make him appear "worse . . . than the present generation," he or she does need to consider the characteristics that can be applied to the protagonist in order to remove his potential for greatness and lessen the impact of his ultimate fall. The playwright must also consider the significance of action in his or her comic play. For, in tragedy, a fatal flaw leads to the protagonist's tragic mistake, but we understand

that this action does not define his character. The opposite is true in comedy, as Bergson states “. . . action is essential in drama, but only accessory in comedy. In a comedy, we feel any other situation might equally well have been chosen for the purpose of introducing the character; he would still have been the same man though the situation were different” (Bergson 145-146). This adjustment serves to fulfill the requirement of preventing our pity for the protagonist. For, if we believe that his demise is due to his inherent nature rather than one fatal mistake that entirely shifts the course of his fate, our laughter in the face of the fallen man is far more likely.

Although eliciting laughter is the primary objective in any comedy, it would be a mistake to assume that with the pleasure of laughter comes an inherent frivolity, limiting comedy’s explorations to the more trivial aspects of life. For, while its emotional aim might differ from tragedy’s, comedy is just as capable of drawing sharp insights in its examination of the human condition. The adaptations of *Macbeth* that we will examine in the chapters to follow are each clever renderings that extend past the mere pleasure of comic aesthetics and address societal issues specific to the function of our governmental institutions. The playwrights of these adaptations do not abandon the darker themes of Shakespeare’s original tragic tale, but rather comically manipulate them to expose the failings of our systems and leaders. And so, in order to understand

their methods, it will be helpful to explore the theories and practices of comedy that most appropriately lend themselves to societal criticism.

Henri Bergson speaks extensively in *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* about the specific function of laughter in society. Insisting that its aim is to heavily ridicule its target, he refers to laughter as “a kind of social ragging” of its subject (Bergson 135). He states, “Laughter is, above all, a corrective. Being intended to humiliate, it must make a painful impression on the person against whom it is directed. By laughter, society avenges itself for the liberties taken with it. It would fail in its object if it bore the stamp of sympathy or kindness” (Bergson 197). Bergson speaks of laughter as a sort of societal retribution, purposely pointed and cruel. And his assessment that laughter is “above all, a corrective” speaks to its power. In its deliberate aim at a guilty target, laughter can serve as its own punishment for whatever offense has been committed. Sigmund Freud offers further insight in his book *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* as he speaks of jokes as an acceptable alternative to physical aggression — but an act of aggression all the same. For, he maintains that due to the societal consequences of openly expressing violent hostility, we have, in jokes, found a way to safely direct our malice. He states:

By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him — to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by laughter. We are now prepared to realize the part played by jokes in hostile aggressiveness. A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we

could not, on account of obstacles in the way, bring forward openly or consciously (Freud 103)

Like Bergson, Freud suggests a power in jokes and laughter to overcome one's enemy through sheer ridicule. And the specific tactic he offers in making our enemy appear "small, inferior, despicable, or comic" is one that is certainly employed in the adaptations of *Macbeth* that we will soon explore. For, it seems that in the quest to expose society's failed systems and leaders, accentuating their most ridiculous qualities is a highly effective tool.

Perhaps the most powerful mechanism in comedically humiliating one's enemies is the employment of satire; for its very purpose is to attack and expose those deserving of our ridicule. The targets of satire are often political, making it an ideal method for comically adapting a tragic tale that examines the consequences of unbridled ambition. And satire holds in its repertoire an array of comedic techniques which are generously employed in the adaptations of *Macbeth* that we will examine. Such techniques include : 1) exaggeration — the absurd over-magnification of situations, behaviors, or language; 2) irony — an effective method in exposing hypocrisy as one's meaning is the opposite of what is said; 3) parody — an imitation and exaggeration of a specific artistic work, style, or genre; 4) sarcasm — the use of irony in language, often expressed as a compliment masking an underlying insult.

The above techniques (though not always employed at once) are all effective tools in the attack and ridicule of a chosen target. But no matter the device, the most consistent quality of satire is that it is an act of subversion — a clever undermining of those holding the power in our society. And in this subversion, satire is always committed to affecting positive change. For, as Ruben Quintero writes in his book *A Companion to Satire: Ancient and Modern*, “. . . satirists write in winters of discontent. And they write not merely out of personal indignation, but with a sense of moral vocation and with a concern for the public interest” (Quintero 1). From this we may conclude that the comically satiric rendering of *Macbeth* can be a powerful one, especially in its concern for the betterment of society in the face of corrupt leaders. But we should not assume the satiric view is an optimistic one. In fact, there is a marked difference between the plot and conclusion of a tragedy versus that of a satire. Alvin B. Kernan explains:

If we take plot to mean, as it ordinarily does, “what happens,” or to put it in a more useful way, a series of events which constitute a change, then the most striking quality of satire is the absence of plot. We seem at the conclusion of satire to be always at very nearly the same point where we began. The scenery and the faces may have changed outwardly, but fundamentally we are looking at the same world, and the same fools . . . we met at the opening of the work. (Kernan 176-177)

Whereas a tragedy follows a distinct plot-line driven by a single action and ultimately ending with a return to order, a satire is driven by character and indicates in the end that the world it has presented to us is a world still in need of

fixing. With this assessment, we will see that each of the comedic adaptations we examine are distinctly satiric in their view.

CHAPTER 2

MACBIRD

Barbara Garson takes a daring approach in her 1967 satirical comedy *MacBird*, employing a healthy degree of comic exaggeration and irony to skewer the political figures of her day and expose the unscrupulous nature of American politics. Centered around the assassination of John F. Kennedy (who in this adaptation parallels *Macbeth*'s King Duncan as Ken O'Dunc), Garson superimposes Kennedy's presidential successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, onto the title character (MacBird) making him responsible for Ken O'Dunc's death. The piece was controversial in its time — after all, Kennedy had been killed only four years prior to the play's premiere, so the insinuation that Johnson (the president at the time) was involved in the murder was shocking to some audience members. But Garson's objective was not to suggest that Johnson had actually plotted his predecessor's assassination; in fact, she insisted that this was only a fictional mirroring of Shakespeare's original plot. Rather, in the wake of the real-life tragedy that intensified the political divide between the Johnson and Kennedy camps, Garson's aim was to prevent the narrow idealization of either side amongst Democratic voters.

To more thoroughly grasp the context of Garson's goal, it is important to also understand the basis for the political tension between the Kennedy's and

Johnson's that had been building since before the assassination ever occurred.

Tim Treanor of *DC Theatre Scene* explains:

In 1960, [John F.] Kennedy, a Senate back-bencher, outmaneuvered Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson to secure the Democratic Party's nomination to the presidency at the incredibly young age of forty-three. Against the vehement objections of his brother Bobby, he then offered Johnson the Vice-Presidential slot. Johnson, a brilliant, deeply insecure man whose accomplishments to that point had significantly outweighed Kennedy's, accepted the post but never fully accepted the reversal in their relationship. (Treanor, "Is this a dagger which I see before me?")

Garson capitalizes on this "reversal" as she imagines Johnson coveting the presidency just as Macbeth craved the kingship. But she does not limit this characterization to Johnson alone; for John F. Kennedy and his brothers were thought by some to have their own self-serving ambitions. Robbie Thornton of *Del Rey Sun* states:

John Kennedy, beloved and detested, transformed the cultural wasteland that was Washington to the magical kingdom of Camelot. With his brother Bob as Attorney General, his brother Ted as a senator from Massachusetts, it looked as if the Kennedy dynasty was destined to claim America as its own kingdom, attractive, wealthy, cultured, and groomed for politics, the Kennedy clan was unstoppable. (Thornton, "MacBird! Déjà Vu All Over Again")

Thus, replacing the benevolent King Duncan with Ken O'Dunc and his "unstoppable" brotherly "clan," well on their way to dynastic rule, Garson transforms *Macbeth* — the story of one man's tragic demise — into a comedically cutting tale reflecting the cancer of corruption in American politics.

Garson begins her play with a prologue that establishes her modernized take on Shakespeare's classic tragedy and hints at the political rivalry that will be at the center of her piece. In the stage direction that introduces this prologue, she takes her first comedic jab at our American leaders: "*Enter middle-aged man dressed in standard business attire except for a plume in his hat and a toy sword at his waist*" (Garson i). With this opening, Garson ensures that the first image we see is an ironic one. For, the "business attire" denotes a man of dignified stature while the "toy sword" suggests just the opposite. The possession of this child-like instrument immediately demeans the man's power, indicating that his otherwise noble presentation is no more than a facade. The plume in his hat serves a separate purpose, acknowledging the contemporary play's classic roots as is also indicated in the man's speech:

Can costumed kings who sweep across the stage
 With antique garb and flashing swords of old
 Be likened to our sober-suited leaders,
 Who plot in prose their laceless, graceless deeds?
 And think you that within these wooden walls
 Can be confined two warring dynasties,
 With swelling hosts of hacks, and clerks and clagues
 Whose upreared and abutting prides now rip a moth asunder? (Garson i)

In wondering if "costumed kings" can "be likened to our sober-suited leaders," the man asserts a parallel between the fictional deeds of tragic heroes and the non-fictional actions of our political leaders. He also alludes to the source of conflict in Garson's adaptation: the "two warring dynasties," the O'Dunc's and the

MacBird's. As the man indicates, it is their "abutting prides" that will be responsible for the conflict — not, as in Shakespeare's tragedy, the actions of a single ambitious man.

The first scene of Act One begins in a "*hotel corridor at [the] Democratic Convention*" where we meet Garson's modernized representation of Shakespeare's three witches: "*The 1st WITCH is dressed as a student demonstrator, beatnik stereotype. The 2nd WITCH is a Negro with the impeccable grooming and attire of a Muhammed Speaks salesman. The 3rd WITCH is an old leftist, wearing a workers cap and overalls*" (Garson 1).

Resembling political activist stereotypes of the time, the witches have powers that are not exclusively supernatural in nature; for they are also voters and therefore have a hand in the political fate of their leaders. And someone's fate is about to be determined:

1st WITCH. When shall we three meet again?

2nd WITCH. In riot!

3rd WITCH. Strike!

1st WITCH. Or stopping train?

2nd WITCH. When the hurly burly's done,
When the race is lost and won. (Garson 1)

Here, Garson mirrors *Macbeth's* opening scene as the First Witch poses the same question and the Second Witch replies, "When the battle's lost and won" (Shakespeare 1.2.4). But while Shakespeare's second scene then reveals details of the battle in which Macbeth defeated Macdonald, Garson's second

scene reveals Ken O'Dunc's victory over MacBird in the Democratic presidential primary election. As Robert attempts to dissuade his brother, O'Dunc (also referred to as John in the text), from choosing MacBird as his running mate, we are offered our first glimpse into the nature of the political rivalry at play as well as O'Dunc's true character:

JOHN. Like? Dislike? What foolishness is that?
 Our cause demands suppressing sentiment.
 ROBERT. But, Jack, you know it isn't merely scruples.
 He has a fat, yet hungry look. Such men are dangerous.
 JOHN. Good God, this womanly whimpering just when I need your manly
 immorality!
 ROBERT. But John — but Jack — you know it isn't that —
 JOHN. Enough is said! At least we have to ask.
 He won't accept and, even if he does,
 His name will just stand second on the ticket. (Garson 2)

In this exchange, not only do we learn that O'Dunc's move to include MacBird on his ticket is purely a political one, but we also learn that O'Dunc is not above abandoning morals in the name of his career. His sights seem set on cementing his power, and as the conversation with Robert continues, his ultimate ambitions are revealed:

JOHN. You, Bob, are still the second in succession.
 And Ted is next . . . and princes yet unborn . . .
 And for this land, the crownéd continent,
 This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
 This forceful breed of men, this mighty world,
 I see a . . . *New Frontier* beyond her seas.

 And our descendants, locking link to link,
 shall lay a lofty line of loved kings
 To serve the faithful, laying low the foe;

Guiding, guarding, governing this folk. (Garson 2)

O'Dunc asserts here that once he secures power, it will be his family's to keep (even those "yet unborn"). His brother Teddy chimes in as well, exclaiming:

TED. Gee, that's keen! (*Counting on his fingers*)
 So let's see . . . That means Jack in '60 and '64, then
 Bobby in '68 and '72, then me in . . . what would that
 make it . . . '76 and '80 and then in 1984 it could be . . . (Garson 2)

O'Dunc and his family expect to reign "link to link" (or as Teddy counts it, from 1960 and beyond), indicating that if their aspirations are fulfilled, no one outside of the O'Dunc clan will ever again rule. Their concerns are not for the good of the American people, but rather for their own political triumphs. Thus, Garson successfully disrupts Shakespeare's depiction of a benevolent king overtaken by an overly ambitious tragic hero. As we have now learned, the soon-to-be victim is just as ambitious in his own self-serving pursuits.

Once establishing that her criticism of American political figures extends past the man represented by her title character, Garson has great fun skewering an array of targets with comic exaggeration based on their real-life personas. The first victim is Teddy (representing Ted Kennedy) whom Garson portrays as a childish man incapable of exhibiting mature behavior. When we first meet Teddy, he sits "*in an arm chair at one corner . . . playing cat's cradle*" while his brothers plot their next political move; and when he finally attempts to join the conversation, he is immediately silenced by Robert who scolds, "Shut up, Teddy!

Can't you see we're busy?" (Garson 2-3). While Ted Kennedy may not have actually played cat's cradle as his brothers tended to business matters, Garson draws on the perception of him by some as "a childlike figure, alternately entitled and self-pitying" to create an exaggerated character who is obsessed with children's games and barely capable of engaging in adult conversation (Canellos, "Chappaquiddick: The Trial of Ted Kennedy"). Robert's dismissal of Teddy supports this characterization as even his own brother fails to take him seriously, and Garson continues to highlight this imbalanced relationship. For example, the third scene of Act One begins: "*KEN O'DUNC's hotel room. On stage are JOHN and ROBERT surrounded by a group of their advisors. In a chair in the corner sits Teddy playing solitaire*" (Garson 7). The scene Garson creates is one of a child who has been dragged to his parents' office and waits in boredom for them to finish their work. For John and Robert are clearly the adults, and Teddy shows no interest in their engagements. The depiction of Teddy becomes even more comical in the moments when he does speak; for example, upon seeing cows at MacBird's ranch, he exclaims, "Bobby, look! There's moo-moos on the lawn!" and later he begs Robert, "Can I head up the Navy? I love boats" (Garson 16; 52). The depiction of a United States senator as excited by "moo-moos" and coveting a naval position simply because he loves boats is both cutting and absurd. Garson exaggerates Teddy's language so severely that he resembles a toddler who has only just begun to learn words. Thus, Ted Kennedy becomes a

clear victim of Garson's satire; for she successfully portrays him as an inept, child-like senator who is nothing short of ridiculous.

Garson finds another target in Lady MacBird (representing the First Lady, "Lady Bird" Johnson) who, mirroring Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth, assists her husband in plotting the assassination of Ken O'Dunc. After the murder, Lady MacBird is tortured by guilt and overwhelmed by a lingering scent of blood in the air. Similar to Lady Macbeth who rubs her hands compulsively while crying "Out damned spot! Out, I say!" Lady MacBird cries "Out, out damned odor, out!" while forcing her daughters to follow her around with aerosol sprays (Shakespeare 5.1.33; Garson 30). She is so concerned with ridding herself of the foul smell that she nearly drives herself insane:

DAUGHTER 1. She's been this way for several days now.

DAUGHTER 2. We have to follow after her with air-wick,
 For every several steps she stops and sniffs
 And crying out, "There's blood upon this spot!"
 She makes us spray to mask the phantom smell.

DAUGHTER 1. And everywhere she goes, she carries flowers.

DAUGHTER 2. The rooms are sickly sweet with perfumed plants.

DAUGHTER 1. I think our mother's finally flipped her lid.

(Lady MacBird has been wandering around the room)

LADY MACBIRD. *(Distractedly)*

Flowers by the roadside . . .

plant these flowers . . .

Let all the land be lined with living blooms.

Yet all the petals of a summer's roses

Can never sweeten this accurséd land. (Garson 30)

In Lady MacBird's obsession with planting flowers as she strives to "sweeten this accurséd land," Garson pokes fun at "Lady Bird" Johnson's "Beautification

Campaign” as she “fought to make American cities more beautiful by planting flowers or adding park benches and by removing billboards and junkyards from the nation’s highways” (“The Beautification Campaign”). Of course, just as Garson never meant to insinuate Lyndon B. Johnson’s actual involvement in John F. Kennedy’s assassination, we can assume too that her intent in this scene is not to imply that the First Lady only planted flowers in order to cover up her own involvement in the former president’s murder. However, we might conclude that the scene does imply a fundamental failing of the “Beautification Campaign” in focusing on mere aesthetics and striving to mask the nation’s ugliness without addressing the source of it. Therefore, in her comic portrayal of Lady MacBird’s guilt-stricken meltdown, Garson succeeds in exposing the First Lady’s “Beautification Campaign” for its arguably superficial concerns.

Although Garson’s attacks are not solely focused on her title character, she is no more kind to MacBird than she is to Lady MacBird, Teddy, and Ken O’Dunc. Drawing on Lyndon B. Johnson’s Texas roots, Garson characterizes MacBird as a “larger-than-life Texas politico” embodying the stereotype of a gun-slinging American cowboy (Horowitz, “She Hopes ‘MacBird’ Flies in a New Era”). For example, the fourth scene of Act Three, as indicated by Garson’s stage directions, is reminiscent of a Hollywood western film:

MACBIRD’S hotel room. The atmosphere is something between a western saloon and an Elizabethan tavern, with a player piano providing music. MacBird’s followers are scattered around playing poker, etc.

Enter MACBIRD, jovial, swinging a daughter on each arm, amidst a lot of yahoos. (Garson 45)

In this scene, Garson paints the picture of a man we might expect to see in a saloon fight rather than leading our country. In fact, Garson depicts this very image in a later confrontation as Robert threatens, “Mark me, MacBird. Tomorrow we shall meet,” with the stage directions reading, “*High Noon music rising*” (Garson 49). This clever exaggeration of Johnson’s southern roots resulting in the threat of an old-fashioned shoot-out may be Garson’s way of depicting American politics as possessing the unruly qualities of the Wild West. But her skewering of American politics — and of Johnson himself — does not stop with this comic exaggeration; rather, Garson’s most powerful method of attack is irony, and she uses it masterfully throughout the play to expose MacBird’s glaring hypocrisy. She takes her first ironic jab at MacBird as he and his wife plot the assassination of Ken O’Dunc. Seeking to justify their murderous plan, MacBird states:

MACBIRD. Indeed the man’s a dangerous hypocrite.
 This nation needs old-fashioned honesty.
 It needs a man with moral might and will;
 It needs a man of deep sincerity. (Garson 16)

MacBird calls Ken O’Dunc a hypocrite in the midst of making his own hypocritical statement. He claims that the nation is in need of “old-fashioned honesty,” but he, himself, is preparing to commit a severely dishonest act, demonstrating his own lack of morality and sincerity — the very virtues he claims to endorse. A

similar irony is employed when MacBird attempts to manipulate the Earl of Warren in the wake of the assassination. Hoping to shield himself from any exposure of guilt, MacBird pressures the Earl into lying to the public and claiming that he is conducting an investigation of O'Dunc's murder when, in fact, he is not. The Earl hesitates, but MacBird persists, insisting that such an act would be for the good of the people:

MACBIRD. Forget your needs as I forget my own.
Private likes and dislikes must give way.
For their sake, share this load I bear alone.
Your nation is awaiting what you say. (Garson 26)

Although MacBird urges the Earl to forget about his own needs, the audience is aware that MacBird's request comes only at the consideration of his own best interest. Thus, Garson paints the picture of a man who, though claiming to work for the good of the nation, is only concerned with what serves him best. And when it comes to MacBird's calculated, power-hungry journey, Garson manages to delight the audience with one final ironic twist. In a bitter confrontation toward the play's end, Robert attempts to kill MacBird, but just as he draws his sword to slay him, MacBird drops dead from a heart attack. After his endless scheming to secure his own power, MacBird is conquered by natural causes beyond his control. His vicious deeds in the name of his own personal ambition have all been in vain. And so, Garson attaches an absurdity to MacBird's death,

successfully making him appear ridiculous and arousing our laughter at witnessing his pitiful demise.

While Garson does an impeccable job of skewering individual political figures, she has a larger target as well — American democracy itself. Of course, her attack is not aimed at the system of democracy, but rather the corruption that exists within the American political system. Perhaps the most hilarious scene reflecting Garson's disdain for such corruption occurs just before MacBird's fatal heart attack. Paralleling the prophecy received by Shakespeare's Macbeth that "none of woman born" can harm him, MacBird has received a similar assurance from the witches' cauldron" (Shakespeare 4.1.86). And so, when confronted by Robert who seeks to kill him, MacBird shows no fear:

MACBIRD. Don't blow away your breath, you two-bit punk.
 Your older brother can't protect you here.
 I have a charmed career. Now be it known
 No man with beating heart or human blood
 Can ever harm MacBird or touch his throne. (Garson 55)

As we know, the man who ultimately conquers Macbeth in Shakespeare's tragedy ". . . was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped," and therefore not technically "of woman born" (Shakespeare 5.7.53-54). Garson comically manipulates this twist to satirize the unscrupulous nature of American politics and its leaders; for, to MacBird's bold assertion, Robert replies:

ROBERT. Your charm is cursed. Prepare to hear the worst.
 At each male birth, my father in his wisdom
 Prepared his sons for their envisaged greatness.

Our first gasped cries as moist, inverted infants
 Confirmed for him our place as lords and leader.
 To free his sons from paralyzing scruples
 And temper us for roles of world authority
 Our pulpy human hearts were cut away.
 And in their place, precision apparatus
 Of steel and plastic tubing was inserted.
 The sticky, human blood was drained and then
 A tepid antiseptic brine injected.
 Although poor Teddy suffered complications,
 The operation worked on all the others,
 Thus steeling us to rule as more than men.
 And so, MacBird, that very man you fear,
 Your heartless, bloodless foe now lifts his spear. (Garson 55)

The revelation that Robert's father removed each of the O'Dunc's brothers "pulpy human hearts" in order to "free his sons from paralyzing scruples" is not only comically absurd, but also ruthlessly cutting to American political figures. For, the assertion is that the possession of a human heart is a severe detriment to the success of any political leader as it makes one vulnerable to ethical discernment. In essence, Garson suggests that the most fundamental qualification necessary for political leadership is the state of heartlessness.

Garson further punctuates the corruption of our political system in suggesting that our leaders will say anything necessary — regularly feigning sincerity and making outlandish promises — in order to retain their power. This is most evident in the juxtaposition of MacBird's first speech to the public after Ken O'Dunc's assassination to Robert's final speech following MacBird's fatal heart

attack. After successfully plotting the murder of his predecessor, MacBird addresses the nation:

MACBIRD. A tragic twist of fateful sorrow, friends,
 Made me your President that fearful day.
 And I shall be the President of all:
 Not just the rich, not just the fortunate
 Not just the folks who voted for me,
(Ominous or emphatic) but *all*. (Garson 27)

While the audience knows that MacBird, himself, is responsible for the very death that he pretends to mourn, he claims to be at the service of his country, concerned first and foremost with the good of the people rather than his own individual concerns. And after this feigned mourning, MacBird proceeds to offer an array of promises so absurd as to belie the insincerity behind them. He states:

MACBIRD. We have an opportunity to move
 Not only toward the rich society,
 But upwards towards the Smooth Society.
 My Smooth Society has room for all;
 For each, a house, a car, a family,
 A private psychoanalyst, a dog,
 And rows of gardens, neatly trimmed and hedged.
 This land will be a garden carefully pruned.
 We'll lop off any branch that looks too tall,
 That seems to grow too lofty or too fast.
 And any weed that springs up on our soil,
 To choke the plants I've neatly set in rows,
 Gets plucked up root and all, by me, MacBird —
 and this I do for you, my wholesome flowers. (Garson 28)

The picture MacBird creates of his Smooth Society is undoubtedly an absurd one; for the idea that each and every family in America would be granted its own

house, car, and dog (let alone psychoanalyst) is a comment on the lofty promises a politician will make in order to win the favor of the American people. MacBird even claims that he will single-handedly pluck up the weeds of society in order to protect his “wholesome flowers,” but with the knowledge we have of his most vicious deed, it seems he is one of those very weeds that needs plucking. But again, Garson’s attack is not singularly focused on MacBird — she seeks to expose an entire system corrupt with politicians whose personal ambitions outweigh any devotion to the American people. This becomes clear when, in the moments after MacBird’s heart attack, Robert delivers a speech that is eerily similar to MacBird’s:

ROBERT. A tragic twist of fateful sorrow, friends,
 Makes me your president this fearful day.
 And though I never sought it, history
 Assigned to me her most demanding task,
 To follow my great predecessor’s path
 In hewing out the Smooth Society.
 So, choked with grief, I pledge my own solemn word
 To lift aloft the banner of MacBird. (Garson 56)

Robert’s speech to the nation immediately following MacBird’s death begins with almost the exact same words MacBird spoke following the death of Ken O’Dunc. Both are insincere — for we know that MacBird is, in fact, responsible for Ken O’Dunc’s death and that Robert (had he not been interrupted by the chance heart attack that killed his foe) would have slain MacBird with his own sword. Robert also claims in his speech to never have sought the power that is now bestowed

upon him, but in recalling Ken O'Dunc's previous assertion that Robert would be the next of the O'Dunc's to hold the presidency, we know that this is simply untrue. Furthermore, Robert's promise to carry out the vision set forth by MacBird suggests that these two men are no different in political policy — their conflict is only about power. It is with this speech that the play concludes, capped with a procession described in Garson's final stage directions: "*ROBERT lifts aloft a fallen MacBird banner. Robert's retainers and MacBird's followers join in bearing the body in a grand procession off stage. Robert and Macbird banners wave side by side*" (Garson 56). In the end, we are left with a leader just as corruptly ambitious as the two before him. And although Robert may have achieved his own personal triumph, the image of both his and MacBird's banners flying side by side indicate that there is no significant distinction between the two political camps.

Garson's intended message rings clear in *MacBird* as she successfully skewers both the Kennedy's and the Johnson's, obliterating any instinct her audience might have to idealize either side. And her mastery of comedic technique is apparent as she adeptly employs comic exaggeration and irony to satirize the corruption of our American political system. Not only is her adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* brilliantly crafted, but it was also revolutionary in its time. Susan Berlin of *Talkin' Broadway* explains in a 2006 review of *MacBird*, ". . . before *MacBird*, satire aimed at a sitting U.S. president

was rare. This play changed society's whole outlook, to the point where some people today find the most truthful political reporting on television comedy shows” (Berlin, “MacBird!”), and Walter Kerr of *The New York Times* affirms in his 1967 review, “The very existence of *MacBird!* and the interest it has aroused indicate how badly we need satirists who do not pussy-foot, how sorely starved we are for blunt irreverence” (Kerr, “Truth, Taste and MacBird”). Perhaps ahead of her time, Garson tapped into something significant with *MacBird*, proving that ruthless comedic satire has a valuable place in American society. She spares no one in her adaptation of Shakespeare’s classic tragedy, pushing us to ponder the failings of our political leaders and systems — and she provides plenty of laughs along the way.

CHAPTER 3

MACBETH

Eugène Ionesco's 1973 *Macbeth* is a comically absurd parody of Shakespeare's tragic play addressing the tyrannical cycles that power can breed as well as society's accustomation to the conditions these cycles produce. Drawing heavily on Shakespeare's own plot and characters (and changing the names only very slightly), Ionesco creates a bizarre version of *Macbeth* that, like its original source, leaves us pondering the consequences of lustful ambition. However, unlike Shakespeare, Ionesco does not beg our pity for one man whose fatal flaw tragically leads to his demise. Instead, he provokes both our laughter and scorn in the face of all those whose misdeeds corrupt our institutions and corrode our values.

Ionesco sets his absurd tone early on with outlandish displays of war coupled with inappropriately casual attitudes toward the death and destruction it brings. For example, one of his first scenes depicts an elaborate rendering of a horrific battle taking place somewhere in the distance. We hear "*shouts*," "*screaming*," "*death rattles*," and "*the groans of the wounded*" that by Ionesco's direction "*should go on for a long time before the characters in the next scene appear*" (Ionesco 11). The depiction of such terrible conditions grows increasingly more outlandish, continuously alternating the screams with an eerie

silence and introducing the sight and sound of exaggerated, unnaturalistic thunder and lighting. At the very height of the display, Ionesco shocks our senses with the introduction of an unexpected character:

A woman disheveled and weeping, runs across the stage from left to right. The LEMONADE SELLER enters stage right.
 LEMONADE SELLER. Lemonade. Cool and refreshing. Soldiers and civilians, buy my lovely lemonade. Roll up, roll up. Who wants to wet his whistle? There's a truce on. Better make the most of it. (Ionesco 11)

Ionesco crafts this scene brilliantly, beginning with his overly-magnified presentation of war. We realize that there is a battle taking place, but the playwright is careful to place us at a safe distance from any emotions it might stir by intensifying the scene with absurdity and drawing it away from any sense of reality. This primes us for the comically inappropriate entrance of the lemonade seller whose very presence suggests that these battles are so common, they have become a casual affair. For, there is something innocent about a lemonade stand, denoting a childhood activity on a lazy Sunday afternoon. Therefore, merging the lemonade seller with the exaggerated battle scene not only creates a bizarre effect, but it speaks to how extraordinarily accustomed he has become to his violent surroundings. Ionesco punctuates this point even further with the introduction of the lemonade seller's first customers:

TWO SOLDIERS come on from left. One is carrying the other on his back.
 LEMONADE SELLER. (to the FIRST SOLDIER) Wounded?
 SOLDIER. No. Dead.
 LEMONADE SELLER. Sword?

SOLDIER. No.
 LEMONADE SELLER. Bayonet?
 SOLDIER. No.
 LEMONADE SELLER. Pistol shot?
 SOLDIER. Heart attack. (Ionesco 12)

The act of a soldier casually purchasing lemonade while carrying another dead soldier on his back is not only comically absurd, but it also indicates that death in the context of war has become all too acceptable. And the exchange between the soldier and the lemonade seller speaks again to how accustomed they have become to their circumstances — for, death by natural causes seems far less likely than death by “sword,” “bayonet,” or “pistol shot.” In fact, neither of the men seem rattled by the death in the slightest; thus Ionesco suggests their casual resignation to these conditions.

Perhaps Ionesco’s sharpest tool in his comic retelling of Shakespeare’s tragedy is his manipulation of character — and with his cleverly ridiculous distortions, he successfully manipulates the play’s meaning as well. A significant example is his portrayal of King Duncan who, in Shakespeare’s play, is a strong and benevolent leader accepted to be undeserving of his cruel fate. However, Duncan’s first appearance in Ionesco’s comedy suggests that in *Macbett*, he is quite a different sort of king:

The stage is empty for a few moments, then ridiculously lavish fanfares drown out the noise of battle. An OFFICER in Duncan’s army comes on quickly from the left and stops stage center. . . . He is carrying a sort of arm chair or portable throne. . . . LADY DUNCAN and the ARCHDUKE

come on left. . . . DUNCAN mounts the throne. The two others stand on either side of him. (Ionesco 19)

The idea that a king would assign an officer to physically tote around his throne is comical in its absurdity; but it also suggests a man more concerned with clinging to his power than to engaging in the warfare that immediately surrounds him. With this “lavish” display “amidst the noise of battle,” we sense that this king is more than comfortable tending to his ceremonial frivolities while other men fight his war. And soon this is confirmed:

OFFICER. Come on, my lord. It's all right. The battle has moved on.
We're out of range here. Not even a sniper about. Don't be afraid.
There are even people strolling about.

DUNCAN. Has Candor been defeated. If so, have they executed him?
Have they killed Glamiss as I ordered?

OFFICER. I hope so. You should have looked a bit more closely. The horizon is all red. It looks as if they're still at it, but a long way off now. We must wait till it's over. Be patient, my lord.

DUNCAN. What if Macbett and Banco have been routed?

LADY DUNCAN. You take the field yourself.

DUNCAN. If they've been beaten, where can I hide? The king of Malta is my enemy. So is the emperor of Cuba. *And* the prince of the Balearic Isles. And the kings of France and Ireland, and what's more, I've got lots of enemies at the English court. Where can I hide?

OFFICER. It's all right, my lord. You just leave it to Macbett and Banco. They're good generals — brave, energetic, skilled strategists. They've proved their worth time and again. (Ionesco 20)

Clearly, King Duncan is afraid to fight — so much so that he is utterly preoccupied with finding a place to hide. And the officer's assertion that Macbett and Banco are “brave, energetic, skilled strategists” who have “proved their worth time and again” suggests that Duncan himself does not hold these qualities, thus

his need to shield himself from battle. Ionesco successfully makes Duncan appear ridiculous, and in doing so, he offers a sweeping statement that any leader afraid to engage in the wars he expects others to bravely fight is ridiculous as well. But Ionesco's distortions of Shakespeare's original Duncan do not end with his comical cowardice; for there is a dark side to Duncan that is revealed in his callous disregard for human life. Before Candor's execution, which Duncan has ordered, the thane delivers his last words, admitting his guilt in betraying the king, but also defending his actions. In response to the speech, Duncan states:

DUNCAN. (*quietly to LADY DUNCAN*) This is too long. Aren't you bored? I bet you're excited to see what happens next. No, no, we won't torture him. Just put him to death. Disappointed? I've got a surprise for you, dear. The entertainment will be more lavish than you thought. (*To everybody*) Justice demands that the soldiers of Candor's army be executed along with him. There aren't very many of them. 137,000 — not too many, not too few. Let's get a move on. We want to be done by dawn. (*Upstage a large red sun slowly sinks. DUNCAN claps his hands.*) Go on. Off with his head. (Ionesco 32-33)

Not only does Duncan dismiss the final words of a man about to die, but he also derives pleasure from the thought of watching him suffer. Furthermore, in describing the execution of 137,000 soldiers as "not too many, not too few" while referring to it as "entertainment," Duncan displays his tyrannical disposition. This is not the benevolent king that Shakespeare seeks to portray, but rather a power-drunk coward who will joyously murder any and all who oppose him.

A comic twist to Ionesco's detestable Duncan is Macbett's often professed unwavering loyalty to him. In contrast to Shakespeare's Macbeth who is quick to turn on his good and just king at the first intimation that he may acquire his power, Ionesco's Macbett is inexplicably faithful to (and inaccurately praising of) a weak and rancorous man:

MACBETT. (*with a broad smile*) The generosity of King Duncan is legendary. He always has the good of the people at heart.

GLAMISS. (*winking at CANDOR*) Quite right, too.

CANDOR. We're sure he does.

MACBETT. Duncan is generosity incarnate. He gives away all he possesses.

GLAMISS. (*to MACBETT*) You must have done quite well by him.

MACBETT. He's also brave.

CANDOR. Great exploits testify to his courage.

GLAMISS. It's common knowledge.

MACBETT. He's everything they say he is. Our sovereign is good, he's loyal. . . .

CANDOR. How could we not admire such a man? — A perfect man. A perfect ruler.

GLAMISS. How could we not be loyal in the face of such loyalty? How could we not be generous amidst such generosity?

MACBETT. (*almost suiting the action to the word*) I'd fight to the death against anyone who said the contrary. (Ionesco 8-9)

With this extravagant devotion to a man who embodies none of the qualities described, Ionesco upends our perception of the tragic hero. If Shakespeare portrays his protagonist as a potentially great man plagued by insatiable ambition, Ionesco depicts his subject as a misguided follower overtaken by obliviousness. There is no pity for this man — only sheer wonder at his inability to see what is right in front of him. Glamiss and Candor (who detest Duncan for

“sucking us dry”) are plainly aware that Macbett’s words are false; for, Glamiss’ wink in Candor’s direction indicates that they are simply pretending to agree with Macbett (Ionesco 4). The witches even attempt to talk sense into Macbett, but he is steadfast in his loyalty:

MACBETT. I want only one thing; to serve my sovereign.

FIRST WITCH. Who are you kidding?

MACBETT. You want to make me believe that I’m other than I am—but you won’t succeed.

FIRST WITCH. You’re useful to him, otherwise he’d have your head.

MACBETT. My life is his to dispose of.

FIRST WITCH. You’re his instrument. You saw how he got you to fight against Glamiss and Candor.

MACBETT. He was right. They were rebels.

FIRST WITCH. He took all Glamiss’ lands and half of Candor’s.

MACBETT. Everything belongs to the king. Equally the king and all he has belong to us. He is looking after it for us.

FIRST WITCH. And his flunkeys are left to carry the can.

.....
 FIRST WITCH. He demands service from others, although he doesn’t know the meaning of the word himself.

MACBETT. I didn’t come here to listen to your treasonous lies. (Ionesco 49-50)

While Shakespeare finds tragedy in Macbeth’s murderous ponderings at the witches’ first suggestion that he will have his benevolent king’s power, Ionesco extracts humor from Macbett’s blind devotion to a despicable leader despite the undeniable evidence repeatedly spelled out to him by the witches. Rather than entertain the witches’ obviously true claims, Macbett accuses them of “treasonous lies,” placing his judgment in question and perhaps even suggesting that he bears some responsibility for the tyranny of a king he so staunchly

supports. In any case, Ionesco casts Macbett in a ridiculous light, causing us to laugh at him rather than sympathize.

Of course, Macbett does eventually turn against Duncan, but the catalyst for this reversal only serves to discredit his judgment even more. For it is only after the First Witch, disguised as Lady Duncan, seduces Macbett that he is finally open to pondering Duncan's true nature. After the exhaustive amount of warnings and evidence of Duncan's poor character that Macbett has so vehemently resisted, all it takes is a woman in a "sparkling bikini" to make him consider what has been obvious all along. And more than simply convincing Macbett that Duncan is neither heroic nor just, the First Witch as the disguised Lady Duncan (taking on the task of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth who does not appear in Ionesco's version) convinces Macbett to kill the king:

MACBETT. Let me be your slave.

LADY DUNCAN. *(to MACBETT, holding out the dagger to him)* I'll be yours if you wish. Would you like that? Here is the instrument of your ambition and our rise to power. *(Seductively.)* Take it if that's what you want, if you want me. But act boldly. Hell helps those who help themselves. Look into yourself. You can feel your desire for me growing, your hidden ambition coming into the open, inflaming you. You'll take his place at my side. I'll be your mistress. You'll be my sovereign. An indelible bloodstain will mark this blade — a souvenir of your success and a spur to greater things which we shall accomplish with the same glory. *(She raises him up.)*

MACBETT. Madam, sire, or rather siren . . .

LADY DUNCAN. Still hesitating, Macbett?

LADY IN WAITING. Make up his mind for him.

LADY DUNCAN. Make up your mind.

MACBETT. Madam, I have certain scruples . . . can't we just . . .

LADY DUNCAN. . . . Pull yourself together. You were never afraid to kill when someone else was giving the orders. (Ionesco 56-57)

As the false Lady Duncan draws Macbett's "hidden ambition" into his consciousness, Ionesco highlights the man's moral impotence while also questioning our own values of right versus wrong. The Lady in Waiting's instruction to Lady Duncan to "make up his mind for him" suggests his weakness of will and severe susceptibility to manipulation. And Lady Duncan's assertion that Macbett was "never afraid to kill when someone else was giving the orders" not only accentuates his lack of principled volition, but also challenges the idea that killing men in battle at the direction of one's leader is somehow less ruthless than killing in the interest of personal ambition. Ionesco suggests that whether for king and country or merely for oneself, murder is always an ugly act. Moreover, the playwright punctuates the growing absurdity of Macbett's poor judgment, as he hints at his new intentions to Banco. Macbett confides:

MACBETT. She's unhappily married. Duncan is a brute. He maltreats her. It's very trying. She's very delicate, you know. And he's peevish and broody. Lady Duncan is like a child — she likes to sport and amuse herself, play tennis, make love. Of course, it's none of my business really. (Ionesco 65)

Ionesco depicts Macbett as Lady Duncan's puppy-lovestruck defender. However, much like his previous defenses of Duncan, Macbett's estimations of the seductress are wrong. The woman disguised as Lady Duncan has already revealed her vicious nature and intent. Macbett suggests that she is "like a

child,” only interested in amusing herself; but from her assertion to Macbett that the dagger she offers him will be marked with “an indelible bloodstain” signifying their “glory,” we know that this is no “delicate” woman. Once again, Macbett’s assessment is ridiculously inaccurate, and we delight with disbelief at his utter naivety.

Once the plan to kill Duncan is enacted, Ionesco takes care in reminding us that the king is no innocent victim. In a farcical scene packed with comic repetition, Macbett, Lady Duncan, and Banco join forces in not only murdering the king, but also reminding us that he too is a murderer:

DUNCAN. Murderers!

BANCO. *(to DUNCAN)* Murderer!

MACBETT. *(to DUNCAN)* Murderer!

DUNCAN dodges BANCO and comes face to face with MACBETT. He tries to go out left but his escape is cut off by LADY DUNCAN, who holds out her arms to stop him. She has a dagger in hand.

LADY DUNCAN. *(to DUNCAN)* Murderer!

DUNCAN. *(to LADY DUNCAN)* Murderess! *(He runs left, meets MACBETT.)*

MACBETT. Murderer!

DUNCAN. Murderer! *(He runs right. BANCO cuts him off.)*

BANCO. *(to DUNCAN)* Murderer!

DUNCAN. *(to BANCO)* Murderer! (Ionesco 76)

The exclamation “Murderer!” from both the king and the assailants is not only comically preposterous in its excessive repetition, but it also sparks us to judge that no character here is deserving of our sympathy. They have all committed (or are committing) foul acts deserving of punishment, and so we can laugh

unabashedly at the extravagant murder scene before us. Ionesco even punctuates the comedy with a parodic nod to Shakespeare's villainess, Lady Macbeth, who in awaiting Macbeth's return from his vicious deed, confesses, "Had [Duncan] not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (Shakespeare 2.2.13-14). While Shakespeare provides Macbeth's accomplice with at least a glimmer of humanity, indicating her reverence for her father as the reason she could not commit the murder herself, Ionesco deliberately strips his murderers of any perceived compassion:

DUNCAN. Murderers!

He rolls on the ground. BANCO strikes the first blow, shouting.

BANCO. Murderer!

MACBETT. *(stabbing him a second time)* Murderer!

LADY DUNCAN. *(stabbing him a third time)* Murderer!

The three of them get up and stand over him.

DUNCAN. Murderers! *(Quieter.)* Murderers! *(Feebly.)* Murderers!

The three conspirators draw apart. LADY DUNCAN stays by the body, looking down.

LADY DUNCAN. He was my husband, after all. Now that he's dead, he looks just like my father. I couldn't stand my father. (Ionesco 77)

Ionesco brilliantly manipulates our perception of his villainess by not only involving her in the physical killing, but also providing her satisfaction in the resemblance of the dead king to her father. It is comical as a parodic punchline but also telling in its removal of remorse — for in this removal, Ionesco succeeds again in eliminating any instinct of ours to feel pity. He also makes a broader statement about the attackers by assigning them the exact same lines and actions. Banco, Macbett, and Lady Duncan each stab the king while once again

shouting “Murderer!” leaving us to ponder if there is any distinguishable difference between the characters with respect to their vicious deeds and unprincipled ambitions. Even the king’s final breath as he too repeats “Murderers! . . . Murderers! . . . Murderers!” suggests a cycle of tyranny in motion. For it seems in the world Ionesco depicts that the fall of a murderer lies only in the emergence of a new one.

The tyrannical cycle Ionesco depicts is evident in his juxtaposition of Glamiss and Candor to Macbeth and Banco. By contrast to Shakespeare’s play in which Thane of Glamis is Macbeth’s title from the beginning and Cawdor is only mentioned, the two thanes appear as separate tangible characters in Ionesco’s play, creating a parallel to Macbeth and Banco as they journey toward their betrayal of Duncan. Glamiss and Candor open the play airing their grievances about the king:

GLAMISS. Listen, Candor.

CANDOR. Listen, Glamiss.

GLAMISS. This can’t go on.

CANDOR. This can’t go on.

GLAMISS and CANDOR are angry. Their anger and derision become more and more emphatic. One can hardly make out what they’re saying. The text serves only as a basis for their mountain anger.

GLAMISS. (*derisively*) Our sovereign . . .

CANDOR. (*ditto*) Duncan. The beloved Archduke Duncan.

GLAMISS. Yes, beloved. Well beloved.

CANDOR. Too well beloved.

GLAMISS. Down with Duncan.

CANDOR. Down with Duncan.

GLAMISS. He hunts on my land.

CANDOR. For the benefit of the State.

GLAMISS. So he says . . .

CANDOR. He *is* the State. (Ionesco 4)

Although “one can hardly make out what they’re saying” due to their “mounting anger,” Glamiss’ and Candor’s repetitive speech pattern is comical and effective in portraying a certain lack of distinction between these two characters. With their mirroring phrases, Ionesco presents Glamiss and Candor as almost identical — a similar technique to the one employed in Duncan’s murder scene. Although the two thanes are soon defeated in battle by Macbett and Banco, in reflecting on their disgruntled grumblings, we can assume that Glamiss and Candor were on their way to emerging as the king’s murderers; their failure to do so is likely a result of their early downfalls. In the above exchange, Glamiss and Candor are clearly furious with Duncan as they feel that he has been taking advantage of them. But their assertions that he is “well beloved” suggest that their realization of his self-serving nature may have developed over time. As we know, Macbett begins the play with unwavering loyalty to Duncan and constantly sings his praises; perhaps Glamiss and Candor once sung Duncan’s praises as well — that, is, until they became aware of his true character. They continue:

CANDOR. Why should we owe him? It’s he who owes us.

GLAMISS. More than he can pay.

CANDOR. Not to mention the rest.

GLAMISS. Down with Duncan.

CANDOR. Down with Duncan.

GLAMISS. He’s no better than we are. (Ionesco 5)

Now that Glamiss and Candor have recognized Duncan's duplicitous ways, they feel that he "owes" them "more than he can pay." Evidently, they are planning his overthrow, as is soon confirmed when Glamiss proclaims, "We'll reign in his stead" to which Candor adds, "We'll take his place" (Ionesco 6). But perhaps more significant is Glamiss' assertion that Duncan is "no better than we are." For if this is true, then the reverse must also be true — Glamiss and Candor are no better than him. Their quest to overthrow the king serves only their own self-interests; for neither of them would be any better of a leader than Duncan.

When we first meet Macbett and Banco, we might assume that they are reflections of what Glamiss and Candor used to be — loyal to King Duncan for whom they bravely fight, and unquestioning of his concern for the good of the people. And just as Glamiss and Candor exhibit a repetitive, mirroring speech pattern, Ionesco employs this same device with Macbett and Banco, though pushing it to a grander extreme. For example, Macbett's first soliloquy begins:

MACBETT enters upstage. He is exhausted. He sits down on a milestone. In his hand is a naked sword. He looks at it.

MACBETT. The blade of my sword is all red with blood. I've killed dozens and dozens of them with my bare hands. (Ionesco 14)

What follows is Macbett's almost two-page account of his day in battle, reflecting on the millions of people he has murdered in the name of his king, and concluding with:

MACBETT. It's been quite a pleasant day, really. Feeling quite bucked.
(He shouts to his orderly, stage right.) Go and clean my sword in
 the river and bring me something to drink.
The ORDERLY enters and goes out with the sword. (Ionesco 16)

Just moments later, Banco enters in almost identical fashion:

MACBETT goes off upstage. MACBETT and BANCO resemble each other. Same costume, same beard. BANCO enters right. He is exhausted. He sits down on a boundary stone. In his hand is a naked sword. He looks at it.
 BANCO. The blade of my sword is all red with blood. I've killed dozens and dozens of them with my own hand. (Ionesco 16-17)

After mirroring Macbett's entrance and actions, Banco then proceeds to deliver nearly the exact same soliloquy that Macbett spoke immediately prior, concluding with:

BANCO. It's been quite a pleasant day, really. Feeling quite bucked.
(He shouts to his orderly, stage right.) Go and clean my sword in
 the river and bring me something to drink.
The ORDERLY enters and goes out with the sword. (Ionesco 18)

It is a comically bold choice to costume Macbett and Banco in identical clothing and facial hair, then to assign them both the same lengthy reflections on their day of battle. This technique creates quite a contrast to Shakespeare's tragic hero, seemingly unique in his individual virtues and failings. After all, to have Macbett's long-winded, contemplative soliloquy repeated back almost verbatim by an entirely different character serves to devalue his words and effectively commonize him. Thus Ionesco suggests that his protagonist is not unique in the

slightest, but is rather a product of the system and circumstances that surround him.

Ionesco further employs the technique of repetition to highlight the journey of Macbett and Banco down Glamiss' and Candor's same disgruntled path. When Macbett and Banco finally speak of Duncan's misdeeds, their conversation closely mirrors the thanes' exchange in the opening scene of the play:

MACBETT. . . . he's given me the estates — but he's reserved the right to hunt on my lands. Apparently it's for "state expenses."

BANCO. So he says . . .

MACBETT. He *is* the state.

.....
MACBETT. He owes us everything.

BANCO. More than he can pay.

MACBETT. Not to mention the rest. (Ionesco 67-68)

Macbett and Banco not only mirror the thanes' dialogue, but also their evolution into betrayal. For, as they ponder the injustices they have suffered at the hands of King Duncan, they come to Glamiss' and Candor's same conclusion:

MACBETT. We must drive him out.

BANCO. Lock, stock and barrel. Down with Duncan.

MACBETT. Down with Duncan!

BANCO. We must overthrow him. (Ionesco 69)

With the plotting progression of Macbett's and Banco's dialogue and its resemblance to Glamiss' and Candor's exchange, Ionesco takes a major event from Shakespeare's tragedy and makes it appear routine. Macbett and Banco are not unique in their plot to overthrow the king; for we witnessed such conspiring in the very beginning moments of the play. Thus, the playwright once

again suggests a cycle in motion — one that propels once loyal men to overthrow tyrants, and eventually, to become the tyrants themselves.

The cycle continues as Macol, Duncan's son, arrives at Macbett's castle to murder him and take the throne. Here, Ionesco incorporates a brilliant moment of parody, imitating Macbeth's exchange with Macduff who, to the tragic hero's dismay, reveals that he was not technically "of woman born" (Shakespeare 5.7.50). In Ionesco's adaptation, Macbett receives the same prophecy that "no man of woman born can harm him," but it is Macol who shocks him with the secret of his birth:

MACBETT. . . . It's no good. You can't hurt me. No man of woman born can harm Macbett.

MACOL. They've pulled the wool over your eyes. They were putting you on.

LADY DUNCAN. (*to MACBETT*) Macol isn't my son. Duncan adopted him. Banco was his father, his mother was a gazelle that a witch transformed into a woman. After bringing Macol into the world, she changed back into a gazelle again. I left the court secretly before he was born so that no one would know that I wasn't pregnant. Everyone took him for my son and Duncan's. He wanted an heir, you see. (Ionesco 99-100)

Lady Duncan's account of her son's birth is so comically absurd that it may even cause us to laugh at Shakespeare's expense. For, the plot twist is necessary in allowing the protagonist to meet his ultimate demise, but Ionesco's incorporation of a far-fetched story revealing that Macol was birthed by a gazelle is so ridiculous in its claim, it playfully pokes fun at Shakespeare's own tactical device (even if far less absurd). Following this exchange, Macol successfully murders

Macbeth, taking his place on the throne, and in his closing speech, Ionesco delivers his own final ruminations on the cycle of tyranny.

MACOL. Now I have power, I shall
 pour the sweetest milk of concord into Hell,
 Uproar the universal peace, confound
 All unity on earth.
 First I'll make this Archduky a kingdom—
 And me the king. An empire—and me the
 emperor. Super-highness, super-king,
 super-majesty, emperor of emperors. (Ionesco 105)

With this conclusion, we are left exactly where we began — under the authority of a brutal tyrant concerned only with his own power. Another rotation of the cycle has occurred; for, once one tyrant has been defeated, another one takes his place. By Ionesco's assertion, it is the mere proximity to power that seems to inspire corruption and tyranny. For, as Glamiss describes Duncan at the very beginning, he is "a tyrant, a usurper, a despot, a dictator, a miscreant, and ogre, an ass, a goose — and worse. The proof is, he's in power" (Ionesco 10). And so, we are left not with the portrait of one man whose fatal mistake tragically instigated his demise. Rather, in true satirical form, Ionesco accentuates the magnitude of corruption, extending it to all those who touch power and illuminating its seemingly unending cycle.

Ultimately, *Macbeth* delivers both in comedy and in message. With absurd exaggerations, playful parody, and clever manipulations of Shakespeare's characters, Ionesco skewers all those who, in their lust for power, merge to

create a cyclical system of tyranny. Addressing this cycle, the playwright himself reflects, “Where is good violence? Where bad violence? . . . Violence goes forever beyond the necessity of violence, since, once it has asserted itself, it turns out to be more violent than the violence it has overthrown” (qtd. in Kern, “Macbeth on the Modern Stage”). Thus, Ionesco challenges the idea that violence is ever acceptable, even if to meet seemingly noble ends — for, its very act immediately renders its cause corrupt. As Thomas Quinn Curtiss of *The New York Times* concludes, “Amid the rubble of the famous play, Ionesco airs his own concepts, speculating warningly on the tendency of liberators to turn into tyrants, dictators and assassins themselves” (Curtiss, “Ionesco Upends ‘Macbeth’ Story”). In his warning, Ionesco prompts us to consider the corrupt cycles we have accepted in our own institutions and perhaps even begs us to demand better.

CHAPTER 4

CAHOOT'S MACBETH

Tom Stoppard attacks artistic censorship in his 1979 subversive comedy *Cahoot's Macbeth*. This one-act adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was inspired by Czechoslovakian playwright Pavel Kohout who, upon being banned from working in his own country's public theaters, staged a series of underground plays that were performed in people's living-rooms. His first such play was a condensed version of *Macbeth*, and Stoppard mirrors this production in his own adaptation as he depicts a similar living-room performance that is interrupted by a state inspector seeking to shut down the production. A master of word play, Stoppard explores the power of language in resisting oppressive authoritarian regimes, packing his adaptation full of witty sarcasm and meta-theatrical awareness. But *Cahoot's Macbeth* is not intended as a stand-alone piece; in fact, it is preceded by another one-act of Stoppard's (*Dogg's Hamlet*) that provides significant context for the play's climax. For this reason, it is imperative to explore *Dogg's Hamlet*, at least in part, before examining *Cahoot's Macbeth* for its comedic qualities and executed themes.

Dogg's Hamlet is a playful comedy following three high school students as they prepare for a production of *Hamlet*. The play opens in the school's gymnasium, and as the students verbally communicate with each other, we

realize they are speaking a language we do not understand — Dogg. For the play's readers, Stoppard provides plenty of translation, stating in the stage directions: "*Translation from 'Dogg' language into English is given in square brackets where it seems necessary*" (Stoppard15). But audiences are left to learn the language as the play progresses, and their first lesson is in the testing of a microphone:

ABEL. (*Into the microphone.*) Breakfast, breakfast . . . sun — dock — frog . . . [*Testing, testing . . . one — two — three . . .] (*He realizes the microphone is dead. He tries the switch a couple of times and then speaks again in to the microphone.*) Sun — dock — frog — pan — slack . . . [*One — two — three — four — five . . .] (*The microphone is still dead. ABEL calls to someone offstage.*)
 Haddock priest! [*The mike is dead!] (*Pause. BAKER enters from the same direction. He is also a schoolboy similarly dressed.*)
 BAKER. Eh? [*Eh?]
 ABEL. Haddock priest.
 BAKER. Haddock?
 ABEL. Priest. (*BAKER goes to the microphone . . .*)
 BAKER. Sun — dock — frog — (*The mike is dead. BAKER swears.*)
 Bicycles! (Stoppard 15)

Though the language is at first difficult to grasp, Stoppard brilliantly introduces it with recognizable action allowing audiences to catch on quickly. It is clear what the students are doing physically, and since the verbal testing of a microphone is typically communicated with a familiar intonation — "Testing, testing . . . one — two — three . . ." — it is reasonable to assume that most audience members can at least decode Abel's first line, "Breakfast, breakfast . . . sun — dock — frog . . ." Stoppard also plays with ironic meanings in Dogg language as we see

with his use of the word “bicycles” to represent an ambiguous swear word. Since “bicycles” is an entirely innocuous word, assigning it a darker meaning as Baker screams it out of frustration makes for a delightfully comic moment.

The irony of Stoppard’s language becomes even more playful with the entrance of Dogg, the school’s headmaster. The students speak to him respectfully — at least, in Dogg language they do; but the English definitions of the words they use tell a different story:

ABEL. (*Respectfully to DOGG.*) Cretinous, git? [**What time is it sir?]*

DOGG. (*Turning round.*) Eh?

ABEL. Cretinous pit-faced, git? [**Have you got the time please, sir?]*

(*Dogg takes a watch out of his waistcoat pocket and examines it.*)

DOGG. Trog poxy. [*Half-past three.*]

ABEL. Cube, git. [*Thank you, sir.*] (Stoppard 16)

The replacement of such benign language with words that we understand in English to be insults introduces a clever comedic effect. For although the students purposely use polite language in communicating with their headmaster (never failing to call him “sir”), we laugh at our own perceived meanings of the words and the fact that in our language, the students are repeatedly addressing an authority figure as a “cretinous git.” Stoppard heightens this effect with the entrance of Easy, a delivery man arriving with wood to build the school play’s set pieces. Easy does not speak or understand Dogg — he only speaks English, like Stoppard’s intended audience. And so, there is great fun in witnessing Easy’s attempt at communication with the Dogg-speaking students, and especially Dogg

himself. In contrast to the students who speak respectfully to their headmaster despite the insulting English translations, Easy attempts to be polite with Dogg but instead fails miserably:

DOGG. Useless! [Afternoon!]

BOYS. Useless, git! [Afternoon, sir!]

EASY. Afternoon, squire. [This means in Dogg, *Get stuffed, you bastard.] (*DOGG grabs EASY by the lapels in a threatening manner.*)

DOGG. Marzipan clocks! [Watch it!] (Stoppard 21)

With this exchange, we delight in the understanding that Easy's attempt at a pleasantry is, in fact, a cutting insult. In a comical moment of misunderstanding, Easy has obliviously called Dogg a bastard and told him to "get stuffed." But this misunderstanding is also a demonstration of the power of language. Due to his ignorance of the Dogg language, Easy is nearly assaulted — no doubt he would have chosen his words differently had he understood their meaning to the man he addressed. This language barrier takes a bit of Easy's power and leaves him vulnerable; the only way for him to protect himself (or at least to save himself from further frustration and embarrassment) is for him to learn the language — and so he does. By the end of *Dogg's Hamlet*, Easy (and perhaps some of the audience) has successfully learned to communicate in Dogg. And as the play ends, he addresses the audience, "Cube" (meaning "Thanks"), before exiting the stage.

While the language of Dogg plays a significant role in *Cahoot's Macbeth*, it is not immediately introduced in this second one-act play. Rather, the play begins just as Shakespeare's *Macbeth* does, with three witches amidst a storm of thunder and lightning (and in Stoppard's version, specified to be "in minimal light") conferring:

FIRST WITCH. When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

SECOND WITCH. When the hurly-burly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

THIRD WITCH. That will be ere the set of sun.

FIRST WITCH. Where the place?

SECOND WITCH. Upon the heath.

THIRD WITCH. There to meet Macbeth. (Stoppard 49)

Stoppard has directly lifted Shakespeare's first lines of *Macbeth*, and what follows is his own condensed version, immediately skipping to what in Shakespeare's play would be Act One, Scene Three with Macbeth and Banquo encountering the witches who reveal their prophecies. As soon as the witches vanish, Stoppard's stage directions instruct: "*Lights up to reveal living room*" (Stoppard 50). It is at this point that we enter into the meta-theatrical world that Stoppard has set forth; for in his replication of Pavel Kohout's living-room production of *Macbeth*, we now understand that we are watching a play within a play. And throughout *Cahoot's Macbeth*, Stoppard continues to cleverly manipulate Shakespeare's tragedy in a way that merges its action with the events of his own adaptation. For example, in Stoppard's condensed version of

Macbeth, the tragic hero and his wife are plotting the murder of King Duncan just as he arrives with Banquo and Ross. Stoppard skillfully times this entrance with a significant entrance of his own original characters:

MACBETH. Duncan comes here tonight.
 LADY MACBETH. And when goes hence?
 MACBETH. Tomorrow as he purposes.
 LADY MACBETH. O never
 Shall sun that morrow see! Look like the innocent flower,
 But be the serpent undr't.
 (Voices heard off-stage)
 He that's coming
 Must be provided for —
 MACBETH. We will speak further. *(He goes to the door stage R. DUNCAN is approaching, accompanied by Banquo and Ross. Among Duncan's retinue are two uniformed POLICEMEN who have chosen this moment to enter the flat. The performance ignores them as they coolly examine the room and its occupants.)*
 (Stoppard 52)

The entrance of the two policemen is expertly placed. For although these officers exist within Stoppard's play and not in Shakespeare's, their arrival just as Macbeth and his wife are plotting a vicious murder serves to heighten the tension within the original tragic play. As the living room *Macbeth* continues, the tragic hero executes his plan to kill King Duncan, and upon reconvening with Lady Macbeth, he is disturbed by a persistent knocking. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, this knocking marks the entrance of a Porter who wonders, "Who's there, i'th' name of Beelzebub" and eventually opens the gate for MacDuff (Shakespeare 2.3.3). But in Stoppard's adaptation, it is an Inspector who has been knocking so relentlessly:

MACBETH. Whence is that knocking?

(Sharp rapping.)

How is't with me when every noise appals me?

LADY MACBETH. My hands are of your color; but I shame

To wear a heart so white.

Retire we to our chamber.

MACBETH. Wake Duncan with thy knocking! *(Sharp rapping.)*

I would thou couldst! (They leave. The knocking off-stage continues. A door, off-stage, opens and closes. The door into the room opens and the INSPECTOR enters an empty room. He seems surprised to find himself where he is. He affects a sarcastic politeness.)

INSPECTOR. Oh — I'm sorry — is this the National Theatre? *(A woman, the HOSTESS, approaches through the audience.)*

HOSTESS. No. *(Stoppard 55)*

The Inspector's entrance not only reflects another well-timed manipulation of Shakespeare's original text, but it also serves to halt the action of the living room production (if only temporarily). As we now delve into Stoppard's own separate plot, we become aware of an impending threat to the play's participants and their artistic freedom.

The Inspector's motivations are dubious when he first enters the scene. He wanders about the room claiming ignorance as to where exactly he is, but as he has already been described as affecting a "sarcastic politeness," it is unclear whether or not this ignorance is genuine:

INSPECTOR. . . . Wait a minute — I could have made a mistake . . . is it the National Academy of Dramatic Art, or as we say down Mexico way, NADA? . . . No? I'm utterly nonplussed. I must have got my wires crossed somewhere. *(He is wandering around the room, looking at the walls and ceiling.)* Testing, testing — one, two, three . . . *(To the ceiling. In other words the room is bugged for sound.)* Is it the home of the Bohemian Light Opera?

(Stoppard 55)

As we deduce that the living-room production is under surveillance, the Inspector's true intentions become clear. The fact that the room is already "bugged for sound" indicates that the production is in the process of being evaluated by authorities, and therefore, the Inspector must have a clear idea of where he is. With his "polite sarcasm," he asks the Hostess if this is "The National Theatre," "The National Academy of Dramatic Art," or "the home of the Bohemian Light Opera," knowing full well that he is standing in a living room. Thus, the Inspector degrades the production from the moment he questions the Hostess; under the facade of politeness, he aims to insult by calling attention to the fact these artists are not performing in a well-established theater. He even takes a jab at the audience as he questions the Hostess for allowing a crowd of performers and audience members into her home:

INSPECTOR. You live here?

HOSTESS. Yes.

INSPECTOR. Don't you find it rather inconvenient, having a lot of preening exhibitionists projecting their voices around the place? — and that's just the audience. I mean, who wants to be packed out night after night by a crowd of fashionable bronchitics saying 'I don't think it's as good as his last one,' and expecting to use your lavatory at will? (Stoppard 55-56)

Mixed with the masterful sarcasm that Stoppard has established as part of the Inspector's sharp humor, the playwright now ventures deeper into meta-theatrical technique. With the Inspector's acknowledgement of the audience, spectators

become aware of their dual role as audience both to Stoppard's play and to the underground living-room production of *Macbeth*. Furthermore, by directly insulting these spectators, the Inspector involves them in the looming conflict, making them willing participants in a production that seems to be in questionable favor with the law. And in the midst of the Inspector's insults, Stoppard even inserts a bit of self-deprecating humor as the Inspector imagines the audience musing, "I don't think it's as good as his last one." It may be reasonable to assume that there are those in the audience who engaged in this very conversation about Stoppard (or at least some version of it) between the intermissions of *Dogg's Hamlet* and *Cahoot's Macbeth*. Stoppard playfully calls attention to these conversations, acknowledging himself as yet another target of the Inspector's biting wit.

On a bit of a roll now, the Inspector finds his next target in the Hostess whom he continues to needle after insulting the audience:

INSPECTOR. . . . I don't know why you put up with it. You've got your rights. (*Nosing around he picks up a tea-cosy to reveal a telephone.*) You've even got a telephone. I can see you're not at the bottom of the social heap. What do you do?

HOSTESS. I'm an artist.

INSPECTOR. (*Cheerfully.*) Well it's not the first time I've been wrong. (Stoppard 56)

If there were any doubt as to the Inspector's disdain for artists, Stoppard comically makes it clear with this witty jab. While the Inspector's assertion that artists are "at the bottom of the social heap" is not a direct one, it is aggressive in

its result. For, the insult is seemingly subtle, but the Inspector uses it to establish his dominance, assigning the Hostess to a lower status than himself. He swiftly does the same to Landovsky, the renowned (yet banned from public theater) actor who plays Macbeth in the living room production:

INSPECTOR. Who are you, pig-face?

MACBETH. Landovsky.

INSPECTOR. The actor?

MACBETH. The floor-cleaner in a boiler factory.

INSPECTOR. That's him. I'm a great admirer of yours, you know. I've followed your career for years.

MACBETH. I haven't worked for years.

INSPECTOR. What are you talking about? — I saw you last season — my wife was with me . . .

MACBETH. It couldn't have been me.

INSPECTOR. It was you — you looked great — sounded great — where were you last year?

MACBETH. I was selling papers in —

INSPECTOR. (*Triumphantly.*) — the newspaper kiosk at the tram terminus, and you were wonderful! I said to my wife, that's Landovsky — the actor — isn't he great?! What a character! Wonderful voice! "Getcha paper!" — up from here (*He thumps his chest.*) — no strain, every syllable given its value . . . Well, well, well, so now you're sweeping floors, eh?" (Stoppard 56-57)

The above exchange is at first deceiving. Proclaiming that he is a "great admirer" of Landovsky's, we may be led to believe that in this case, the Inspector is, in fact, paying a compliment. But as soon as the Inspector "triumphantly" reveals that the newspaper kiosk is where he saw Landovsky last season, we realize that each compliment to precede this insult is a calculated set-up. Once the aim to insult is revealed, the Inspector abandons all subtlety. In imitating Landovsky shouting "Getcha paper!" as if he had been playing the role of a lifetime, the

Inspector degrades the actor and mocks his career suggesting that selling newspapers at a tram terminus is the greatest success he will ever achieve.

The Inspector's generous use of sarcasm throughout the play is no doubt comical, but it is also his way of asserting authority over the artists; for, his polite degradation is a sly way of letting them know that he is in charge. But there are moments when the Inspector struggles to maintain his polite facade, and it is in these moments when his truest intentions are revealed. For example, when the artists are uncooperative with the Inspector's directions, his sarcastic jabs are transformed into aggressive threats:

HOSTESS. I'm afraid the performance is not open to the public. (*Enter 'ROSS', 'BANQUO', 'MALCOLM', but not acting.*)

INSPECTOR. I should hope not indeed. That would be acting without authority — acting without authority! — you'd never believe I make it up as I go along . . . Right! — sorry to have interrupted. (*He sits down. Pause.*) Any time you're ready. (*The HOSTESS retires. The ACTORS remain standing on the stage, uncooperative, taking their lead from 'MACBETH.'* *The INSPECTOR leaves his seat and approaches 'MACBETH.'*)

INSPECTOR. (*To 'MACBETH.'*) Now listen, you stupid bastard, you'd better get rid of the idea that there's a special *Macbeth* which you do when I'm not around, and some other *Macbeth* for when I *am* around which isn't worth doing. You've only got one *Macbeth*. Because I'm giving this party and there ain't no other. It's what we call a one-party system. I'm the cream in your coffee, the sugar in your tank, and the breeze blowing down your neck. So let's have a little of the old trouper spirit, because if I walk out of this show I take it with me. (Stoppard 58-59)

Angered by the artists' rebellion against his authority, the Inspector threatens to shut down their production. But his warning to Landovsky that he must "get rid of

the idea that there's a special Macbeth which you do when I'm not around" is an indication that the Inspector, himself, feels threatened. If the artists are free to perform as they wish when the Inspector is not around, then he has lost his power over them. Therefore, his interest in their work is not in the quality of the art, but rather in the degree of their deference. The Inspector even indicates a specific aversion to Shakespeare, citing his chief's suspicion of the playwright's potentially subversive nature:

INSPECTOR. I'm really glad I caught you before you closed. If I can make just one tiny criticism . . . Shakespeare — or the Old Bill, as we call him in the force — is not a popular choice with my chief, owing to his popularity with the public, or, as we call it in the force, the filth. The fact is, when you get a universal and timeless writer like Shakespeare, there's a strong feeling that he could be spitting in the eyes of the beholder when he should be keeping his mind on Verona — hanging around the 'gents'. You know what I mean? Unwittingly, of course. He didn't know he was doing it, at least you couldn't prove he did, which is what makes the chief so prejudiced against him. The chief says he'd rather you stood up and said, 'There is no freedom in this country', then there's nothing underhand and we all no where we stand. (Stoppard 63)

From the Inspector's account, we learn that the chief's primary concern with Shakespeare is of some underlying message being communicated without his awareness. He fears being undermined, and rather than risking any threat to his power, he would rather strip others of the power that exists in freedom. It is for this reason that the living-room production of *Macbeth* is in danger of being closed; but Landovsky makes a final plea:

MACBETH. We obey the law and we ask no more of you.

INSPECTOR. The law? I've got the Penal Code tattooed on my whistle, Landovsky, and there's a lot about you in it. Section 98, subversion — anyone acting out of hostility to the state . . . Section 100, incitement — anyone acting out of hostility to the state . . . I could nick you just for acting — and the sentence is double for an organized group, which I can make stick on Robinson Crusoe and his man any day of the week. So don't tell me about the laws.

MACBETH. We're protected by the Constitution . . .

INSPECTOR. Dear God, and we call you intellectuals. Personally I can't read that stuff. Nobody talks like that so it's not reasonable to expect them to live like it. The way I see it, life is lived off the record. It's altogether too human for the written word
(Stoppard 64)

The Inspector now threatens the artists with jail time if any of them dare show “hostility to the state” through “subversion,” “incitement,” or any other means. And when Landovsky insists that he and his colleagues are “protected by the Constitution,” the Inspector dismisses him and demeans the Constitution itself. But before the Inspector leaves, warning, “I expect this place will be back to normal in five minutes,” Landovsky issues a warning of his own: “Your system could do with a few antibodies. If you're afraid to risk the infection of an uncontrolled idea, the first time a new one gets in, it'll run through your system like a rogue bacillus” (Stoppard 66). In Landovsky's warning, the central message of Stoppard's play is clear: artistic freedom is essential to a well-functioning society. An authoritarian regime insistent on limiting its nation's liberties actually makes itself more vulnerable; for it invites rebellion in the face of oppression.

Even under the threat of incarceration, the artists continue their performance of *Macbeth* until they are interrupted once again — this time by Easy, the delivery man from *Dogg's Hamlet*. His entrance causes much confusion amongst the artists, not only because they do not know who he is, but also because he is speaking Dogg. At this point, Stoppard cleverly references a previous scene in *Dogg's Hamlet* in which Easy inadvertently insults the headmaster; for the Inspector reenters and has a similar exchange with Easy:

EASY. Useless, git . . . [*Afternoon, sir . . .]

INSPECTOR. Who are you, pig-face? (*INSPECTOR grabs him. EASY yelps and looks at his watch.*)

EASY. Poxy queen! [*Twenty past ouch.] Marzipan clocks! [*Watch it!]

INSPECTOR. What?

(Stoppard 77)

This exchange is perhaps even more satisfying now that Easy's inadvertent insult is aimed at the Inspector. Although we know that Easy's intention is only to greet the Inspector with a pleasantry, we can still enjoy that the man who has been degrading the artists with his smug sarcasm is being addressed as a "useless git." Furthermore, although Easy's aim may not be to insult the Inspector, we might surmise that Stoppard's aim is exactly that; for it is his own act of subversion. Through the clever use of his invented language, he slyly labels those who seek to censor artists as useless gits. And Stoppard has even more fun subverting the Inspector (as well as the authoritarians he represents) with the entrance of Cahoot — the well-known writer responsible for the condensed

version of *Macbeth* performed in this living-room play. Cahoot greets Easy and begins to communicate with him in Dogg (a language he apparently already knows), only confusing the Inspector further:

CAHOOT. Upside cakeshops? [*Have you brought the blocks?]
 EASY. Slab. [*Yes.]
 CAHOOT. Almost Leamington Spa? [*From Leamington Spa?]
 EASY. Slab, git. Even artichoke. [*Yes, sir. I've got a lorry.]
 CAHOOT. Cube. [*Thanks.] (He signs the clipboard.)
 EASY. Cube, git. [*Thank you, sir.]
 INSPECTOR. Just a minute. What the hell are you talking about?
 CAHOOT. Afternoon, squire!
 INSPECTOR. Afternoon. Who's your friend? (Stoppard 77-78)

We know that the Inspector fears subversion and is especially wary of artistic representations he does not understand. And so, there is great pleasure in witnessing the writer, Cahoot, speak fluently in a language that the Inspector cannot comprehend. It is even more satisfying to know that Cahoot has covertly hurled an insult at the Inspector; for in Dogg, “Afternoon, squire!” translates to “Get stuffed, you bastard!” The Inspector’s worst fear has been realized, and he is completely oblivious to it. The master of sarcasm — the man who has so persistently insulted these artists through a thin veil of politeness — has had the tables turned on him.

But Stoppard does not limit the subversive use of Dogg to stealthy insults of the Inspector; for, the artists employ the language on a much larger scale to resist the assault on their artistic freedom. Soon after Easy’s arrival, all of the performers learn Dogg (or rather, “catch” Dogg — as Cahoot tells the Inspector,

“You don’t learn it, you catch it”), and they use it both comically and effectively in preventing the Inspector’s ability to have them arrested (Stoppard 78).

Continuing their performance of *Macbeth*, the actors translate Shakespeare’s language into Dogg, and since the Inspector cannot understand a word of it, he has no idea how to articulate their offense:

INSPECTOR. (*Into ‘phone: pause.*) How the hell do I know? But if it’s not free expression, I don’t know what is! (*Hangs up.*)

LADY MACBETH. (*Dry-washing her hands.*) Ash-loving pell-mell on. Fairly buses gone Arabia nettle-rash old icicles nun. Oh oh oh . . .
[*Here’s the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand . . .] (*She exits.*)

INSPECTOR. (*To EASY.*) She’s making it up as she goes along. You must think I’m — (*But EASY is glowing with the light of recognition.*)
EASY. . . . Ah . . . *Macbeth!* (Stoppard 80)

The Inspector’s operation is being thwarted as he cannot precisely prove that the artists are violating any laws, so again, his worst fear is realized. And the moment is comically punctuated as Easy reveals his perfect comprehension of the performance, excitedly proclaiming, “Ah . . . *Macbeth!*” We gain a great deal of satisfaction in the knowledge that the Inspector is the only person in this living room who does not understand the language or the play itself, and thus, his power has effectively been subverted. Of course, he still struggles to regain control, even in the final moments of the play as the artists defiantly use the wooden blocks Easy delivered to build a stage platform and steps. Stoppard cleverly coordinates this moment with *Macbeth*’s preparation for his final battle:

MACBETH. Fetlocked his trade-offs cried terrain!

Pram Birnam cakehops bolsters Dunsinane!
 [*I will not be afraid of death and bane
 Till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane!] *(The back of the lorry
 opens, revealing MALCOLM and OTHERS within, unloading the
 blocks etc. INSPECTOR sees this — speaks into the walkie-talkie.)*
 INSPECTOR. Get the chief. Get the chief! *(One or two — ROSS,
 LENNOX — are to get off the lorry to form a human chain for the
 blocks and slabs etc. to pass from MACDUFF in the lorry to EASY
 building the steps.)*

.....
 INSPECTOR. *(Into 'phone.)* Yes, chief! I think everything's more or less
 under control chief . . . *(This is a lie. The steps are building,
 MACBETH is continuing his soliloquy, in Dogg)* (Stoppard
 80-81)

Although spoken in Dogg, Macbeth's proclamation in the living-room play that he
 "will not be afraid of death and bane till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane"
 juxtaposed with the artists' unloading of the wooden blocks suggests that
 perhaps the Inspector will, in fact, be defeated. For he panics in this moment,
 and though he later attempts to pretend that "everything's more or less under
 control," every new step that is built represents a challenge to his authority.
 Stoppard does not provide us with a resolution beyond this point — just the
 image of the Inspector and his officers attempting to build a wall between the
 artists and the audience as the performers climb their steps higher and higher. In
 this ending, we are left with the idea that the struggle for artistic freedom is a
 battle still being fought, and although the Inspector (unlike Macbeth) never quite
 meets his demise, we have come to understand him as authoritarian tyrant
 whose power must be overthrown.

Stoppard's one-act comedy reflecting the injustice of censorship is the ultimate act of subversion. He provides us with a character smug in his sarcasm and seemingly powerful in his authority over the freedom of artists; but just as we believe there is no hope, the playwright performs a sleight-of-hand, catching the Inspector off guard and subverting his power in a way that he can neither comprehend nor combat. With this display of sly undermining to promote artistic liberty, Stoppard advocates for a society where artists are valued and language is used freely. *The Guardian's* Tim Adams praises Stoppard, "He has been a great champion of free expression, not only in his efforts to publicize and argue against the censorship and oppression of writers in the former Czechoslovakia and Russia and elsewhere, but also in his work" (Adams, "The Observer, Writer and Fighter"). And in this work, *Cahoot's Macbeth*, Stoppard not only praises the determination of Pavel Kohout to fight censorship in Czechoslovakia through the staging of his living-room plays, but he also conveys why Kohout's determination was so important. As stated in *Theatermania*, "Stoppard knows that language and liberty are intertwined: when language is perverted, corrupted or forcibly repressed, so is liberty" ("Dogg's Hamlet, Cahoot's Macbeth by Tom Stoppard"). And so, with *Cahoot's Macbeth*, Stoppard urges us to fight for our liberties and to always find power in language.

CONCLUSION

We have now examined three adaptations of *Macbeth*, separate in their methods but all providing meaningful societal commentaries through the employment of comedic techniques. Barbara Garson uses irony and exaggeration to expose the political leaders of her day for their hypocrisies and false promises; Eugène Ionesco employs parodic manipulations of character to attack those whose lustful ambitions and corrupt actions promote an endless cycle of tyranny; and Tom Stoppard both displays and promotes the power of language in subverting authoritarian regimes that seek to suppress our liberties. For each of these plays, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* proves the perfect original source. Already exploring themes of relentless ambition and tyranny, the play provides a generous landscape on which to cultivate contemporary narratives exposing the corruptions of our own leaders and institutions. And though the task of comedically adapting a classic tragedy is no simple endeavor, Garson, Ionesco, and Stoppard perform their comic manipulations masterfully. As Robert I. Williams states, "It takes no comic to see the ridiculous. It takes the artist, however, to perceive absurdity and embody its comic/serious duality in a work" (Williams 114). Not only have these playwrights achieved the embodiment of this "comic/serious duality," they have also demonstrated the true value of comedy in delivering powerful messages to society.

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