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David Greig's *Dunsinane*: the Renaissance of Tragedy? [1]

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Résumé

La pièce de David Greig *Dunsinane*, présentée comme une suite au *Macbeth* de Shakespeare, et qualifiée diversement de réponse, de remise en cause, d'appropriation, et que Greig lui-même a décrite comme « un acte de spéculation », explore le chaos qui s'ensuit après le renversement et la mort du tyran, question d'une importance cruciale qui traverse tout le canon shakespearien.Se fondant sur l'histoire de l'Écosse au XI^{e} siècle pour opérer une réévaluation de l'idéologie de l'Angleterre élisabéthaine et jacobéenne, *Dunsinane* engage un dialogue stimulant avec la pièce source d'un point de vue écossais, qui place au premier plan les rivalités et les alliances entre les clans passées sous silence par Shakespeare dans ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler sa « pièce écossaise ». Ce faisant, Greig complexifie le point de vue unilatéral de Shakespeare, et donne à voir un double point de vue : celui du pays occupé et celui des forces d'occupation. L'importance capitale donnée à Gruach, la veuve de Macbeth, l'étoffement considéable du rôle du général anglais Siward (personnage mineur chez Shakespeare),

combinés au portrait d'un Malcolm insaisissable, tout à la fois veule, fourbe et rusé, développé à partir de la déconcertante scène de la rencontre de Malcolm et de Macduff dans *Macbeth* (acte IV, sc. 3) renforcent la dimension avant tout politique de la pièce de Greig. Bien que *Dunsinane* soit fermement ancrée dans l'histoire médiévale, les représentations de la pièce devant des publics très divers de par le monde, en résonance avec des situations géo-politiques variées témoignent amplement des qualités d'universalité et d'intemporalité qui caractérisent la tragédie classique.Toutefois, un examen plus attentif à l'aune des éléments fondamentaux du genre tragique – traitement du temps, dimension métaphysique, dialogue entre le destin et la liberté de l'action humaine, nature du héros tragique, conséquences de ses décisions et de ses choix, reconnaissance finale –, conduira à se demander si, et dans quelle mesure, la pièce de Greig peut véritablement être considérée comme une renaissance de la tragédie Shakespearienne.

Mots-Clés

William Shakespeare, David Greg, Dunsinane, Macbeth, tragédie.

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Texte intégral

Introduction

David Greig's play *Dunsinane* (2010), which explores the aftermath of the death of the tyrant, has been variously labelled a sequel, an appropriation, a rejoinder, a challenge, or even, in Greig's own words, "an act of speculation" on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, [2] and its genre is similarly a vexed question. It bears characteristics of the history play with an epic dimension, and of political drama through its resonances with contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. It has also been described as "pitched between comedy and tragedy [… with] a good sprinkling of Shakespearean in-jokes", and in the Royal Shakespeare Company video presentation Greig unambiguously calls it a tragedy. [3]

There is no simple, unique, comprehensive definition of tragedy, but it can be described very broadly as an existential genre, universal and timeless in scope, whose purpose is to produce what Aristotle calls a *catharsis*, thereby giving meaning to human suffering. [4] As such, it is poles apart from Macbeth's description of life as "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V.5.25-27), [5] which would be an apt definition of absurdist theatre. Although it aims at the universal and the timeless, tragedy is firmly rooted in 5th century BCE Athens, at a specific juncture in Greek history characterised by a gradual shift from a mythical to a rational worldview, from the heroic world of Homer's epic – one in which human beings were essentially puppets, "as flies to wanton boys", in the hands of gods who "kill[ed them] for their sport" (*King Lear*, IV.1.37-38) [6] – to the universe of the *polis*, in which they acquired a degree of autonomy in their actions for which they were held accountable. These two conceptions, although incompatible, coexisted for a time, giving rise to a perception of man as a perplexing figure, at once acted upon and acting, which is at the heart of tragedy. [7] Thus, tragedy implies a belief in some form of

transcendence which lends it a metaphysical dimension, while as "the imitation of an action", according to Aristotle's definition, [8] it raises a number of questions about human agency and its relation to the divine – questions that were addressed through philosophical inquiry in the following century. As the product of a period of two overlapping contradictory conceptions of man, tragedy was a relatively short-lived phenomenon, and has remained comparatively rare in the history of literature. The next heyday of the genre was the Renaissance, another period of transition characterised by a similar shift, from a theocentric to an anthropocentric universe, and followed by the advent of scientific rationality in the 17th and 18th centuries. After World War II, the Holocaust and systematic torture by dictatorships gave rise to the theatre of the absurd, and the very possibility of tragedy as a genre has been questioned ever since. What George Steiner calls "absolute tragedy", i.e. the mere fact of existing, "the crime of being" as it applied to the Gypsy or the Jew during the Holocaust, entails "a stringent nihilism" [9] for lack of adequate words, let alone aesthetic form. "The scale of modern violence and desolation is resistant to aesthetic form", Steiner goes on, and "the sheer dimensions of the inhuman as we have in recent history enacted and experienced it, the anonymous, mechanistic functionality of modern mass-sadism and oppression, impose silence". [10] We shall therefore ask in what sense, if at all, Greig's *Dunsinane* can be considered a tragedy as defined by Aristotle in the *Poetics*, that is "an imitation of an action", relying primarily on a plot consisting of "an action that is complete, and whole, and of a certain magnitude", by which he means an action that will admit of a reversal of Fortune by the laws of causality and necessity, involving a hero struggling against superior forces, who is eventually led to recognition (*anagnorisis*) shortly before the impending catastrophe. [11] I will propose a contrastive study of Shakespeare's Macbeth and Greig's *Dunsinane* in terms of the Aristotelian definition, examining in turn such characteristic features as the role of transcendent superior forces, the conception of time involved in the tragic plot, the nature of the hero, and the resulting tension between fate and human agency, also relying on Northrop Frye's analyses in *Fools of Time*. Eventually, I will draw on contemporary political and ethical debates

to discuss whether *Dunsinane* is a renaissance or a reconfiguration of tragedy, and how or whether these concepts are useful in the discussion.

As a prologue, I will provide a brief summary of *Dunsinane*. [12] The play is divided into four unequal parts named after the seasons, starting with spring. It opens as *Macbeth* ends on the death of the tyrant in a fierce battle with the English army. They have come to install Malcolm on the throne, which Siward, the English commanding officer, thought would be a straightforward affair. But he soon discovers that things are not as simple as he was led to believe, as Macbeth's widow, Gruach, is still alive and claims to be the rightful Queen. As he becomes acquainted with the intricacies of clan feuds, Siward realizes that his task will be more complex than he anticipated, but he is confident that a consensus can be achieved, which will bring peace and prosperity to a unified Scotland under the rule of Malcolm. The English army prepare to spend the summer in Scotland, and Siward has to face guerrillas in a very inhospitable land against a hostile people. Since the clan chiefs cannot reach an agreement, he proposes a marriage between Gruach and Malcolm to achieve lasting peace, a solution to which both parties agree – or so it seems, for on the night of the wedding Gruach's men storm the castle, allowing her to escape. Siward is infuriated and is determined to fetch the Queen and her son back to Dunsinane. As autumn sets in, the English army search for them across Scoland, and Siward grows increasingly fierce and ruthless. Eventually, his men capture Lulach and Siward gives the order to kill him. The English army is wintered in Dunsinane, while Siward will return Lulach's body to Gruach. When he at last finds her, the Queen is holding a baby who, she claims, is Lulach's child. She swears to torment Siward as long as she reigns, and even beyond her death, "until the end of time".

I. Transcendence

As an action involving a hero struggling against a superior force, tragedy implies a metaphysical dimension and a belief in some form of

transcendence with which humans interact, and which provides the frame of reference of the tragedy. In *Macbeth,* this supernatural dimension is embodied by the Weird Sisters, ambiguous creatures who "look not like th'inhabitants o'th' earth / And yet are on't" (I.3.41-42), whose outward appearance as women is belied by their beards, and who, although they seem "corporal" and consubstantial with the earth, itself unstable, for it "hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them" (I.3.79-80), soon melt "as breath into the wind" (I.3.82). The Weird Sisters partake of the cosmic or superhuman context against which the events of the earthly or political context are set. [13] By contrast in *Dunsinane*, witchcraft has been reduced to an English cliché about the Scots. In a scene echoing the cauldron scene in *Macbeth* (IV.1), it is derided by Gruach, who mocks the English Boy soldier's gullibility and soon confesses "I am bored with being a witch" (Summer 144). As Emily Linnemann observes, "whereas Banquo and Macbeth encounter and take note of the weather that is at once both 'foul and fair' (1.3.36), *Dunsinane*'s soldiers comment on the physical ground beneath them. The supernatural events of *Macbeth* become the actual, physical reality of *Dunsinane*." [14] This difference is the result of the frames of reference of the two plays. *Macbeth* relies on the Elizabethan world view Shakespeare has superimposed on the historical context of 11th century Scotland – more particularly the conception of the king as a sacred figure, which made the murder of a king a potent tragic theme – deliberately omitting the clan feuds which made the murder of Duncan only one in a series to shape the historical material of his sources into tragic matter. When he contemplates the murder of Duncan in the dagger soliloquy, Macbeth is fully aware that such a sacrilegious act carries with it consequences that can only lead to damnation:

> 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 (I.7.16-20)

Greig has restored the complexity of clan rivalries and the intricacies of alliances. His concern in *Dunsinane* is to explore the aftermath of the fall of the tyrant, whose death in battle is no tragedy, still less sacrilege. The logical consequence is a desacralisation of kingship. *Dunsinane* is concerned with political, not metaphysical, issues and its frame of reference is purely immanent.

Greig is also faithful to history in his reference to the whole reign of Macbeth when Gruach tells Siward after his death:

> He was a good king.
> He ruled for fifteen years.
> Before him there were kings and kings and kings but none of them could rule more than a year or so at most before he would be killed by some chief or other.
> But my king lasted fifteen years. (Spring, p. 84)

In this, Greig followed historians, who portray Macbeth as a good and capable king in their account of the first part of his reign, "gouerning the realme for the space of ten yeares in equall iustice" according to Holinshed, [15] while the Scottish historian George Buchanan explains that "to confirm the ill-gotten Kingdom to himself [he] procured the favour of the Nobles by great Gifts [… and] determined to procure the favour of the Vulgar by Justice and Equity". He restored the public peace and enacted many good and useful laws, and "so managed the government for ten years, that, if he had not obtained it by violence, he might have been accounted inferior to none of the former kings." [16] By contrast, Shakespeare compressed this lapse of time into a single action encompassing the murder, the usurpation and the inexorable fall of Macbeth, so that his fall appears to be the direct, unavoidable consequence of the sacrilegious regicide. This concentration and unity of action also partakes of the shaping of historical into tragic material, which leads us to examine the question of time.

II. Time

“Being in time” Northrop Frye argues, is “the basis of the tragic vision.” [17] Indeed, as the “imitation of an action”, tragedy relies on a sequence of incidents unfolding in time and forming the plot, which Aristotle calls the “soul of tragedy”, for without it “there cannot be a tragedy”, whereas “there may be without character”, which comes in as “subsidiary to the actions” – *i.e.* characters come second insofar as they react to the events that befall them. Aristotle defines the plot as “an action that is complete and whole”, with “a beginning, a middle and an end,” *i.e.* a sequence of “artistically constructed incidents” tightly knit by causal necessity, for “it makes all the difference whether any given event is a case of *propter hoc* or *post hoc*.” [18] Causality implies a certain conception of time as teleological, and therefore linear and one-directional, in which there is no going back, “everything happens once and for all” and “every act brings unavoidable and fateful consequences.” [19]

In *Macbeth*, the murder of Duncan sets in motion a whole chain of events. No sooner has Macbeth come to the throne than, remembering the witches’ prophecy to Banquo, he realizes that “to be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus” (III.1.47-48), and that far from being “the be-all and the end-all” he hoped for (I.7.5), the initial regicide calls forth more blood. After the murder of Banquo, he is “in blood / Stepped in so far, that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (III.4.137-139) and he wades further in the blood of Macduff’s family and others until he has “supped full with horrors” (V.5.13) shortly before his own death.

In *Dunsinane*, there is no sense of a sequence of events unfolding according to the laws of causal necessity and no teleological orientation. In a scene reminiscent of the two characters tossing coins at beginning of Tom Stoppard’s *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead*, two archers firing arrows at a tapestry take bets on their chances of success with women and conclude “The events of tonight contain as many possibilities as there are stars” (Summer, p. 158). Failing an overruling superior, transcendent force governing things on earth, what dominates is a sense of randomness. The one unifying thread in *Dunsinane* is Siward’s unflinching determination and perseverance, but Siward considers his mission in complete temporal

abstraction, not as part of a broader context or sequence of events: “my job is to build a new kingdom – not to settle old grudges. So I have to clear away the past now. I have to uproot now and clear away all past claims and – that way there is a chance that we can establish a fair peace in Scotland” (Spring, p. 86). However, his ignorance of Scottish realities results in a protracted guerrilla war in which the English forces get literally bogged down and time appears to be suspended indefinitely, as if frozen in the everyday routine of occupation. [20]

Besides, the conception of time is radically different from tragic time in *Dunsinane*, where the only order is provided by the succession of the seasons. The play is structured in four parts of unequal length named after the seasons which only approximate the traditional division into acts, since there is no building up of tension, no climax and no fall. The events unfold from Spring to Winter, with a hint at the next spring, first as part of the cycle of life in Siward’s confident assertion: “We’ll set a new king in Dunsinane and then summer will come and then a harvest and by next spring it’ll be as if there never was a fight here” (Spring 68). By the winter, however, the next spring is seen as part of a cycle of death as Siward admits in his final confrontation with Gruach after he has refused to “go home […] without a settlement” (Winter, p. 268): “The war’s over for the winter but eventually spring will come and in the end we’ll have to fight again unless we find a way to end it” (Winter, p. 270). The play ends on Gruach’s curse which opens onto eternity, in an echo of Macbeth’s “to th’ crack of doom” (IV.1.132) and “last syllable of recorded time” (V.5.21), or of Faustus’s awareness that “no end is limited to damned souls!” in Hell (scene 13, 92): [21]

> For as long as I reign, I’ll torment you and when I die I’ll leave instructions in my will to every Scottish Queen that comes after me to tell her King to take up arms and torment England again and again and again until the end of time. (Winter, p. 274)

Only then does Siward capitulate and, after a long pause, renounces killing Gruach’s grandson. But even then, there is no sign that the conflict between

Malcolm and Gruach will ever end, and we are reminded of Malcolm's maxim: "a settled kingdom is a kingdom in which everyone is dead" (Summer, p. 114). Unlike Macbeth's acknowledgement of the "equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth" (V.5.43-44), Siward's capitulation is not the result of *anagnorisis* and leads neither to resolution nor *catharsis*, which makes *Dunsinane* at once more desperate than *Macbeth* and yet more ironic than tragic. This distinction between the tragic and the ironic brings us to another constituent element of tragedy to which we will now turn: the nature of the hero.

III. The Hero

"What makes tragedy tragic, and not simply ironic," Frye argues, "is the presence in it of a counter-movement of being that we call the heroic, a capacity for action or passion, for doing or suffering, which is above ordinary human experience". [22] Indeed, the whole of Act V in *Macbeth* provides powerful illustrations of this heroic counter-movement through a counterpoint between scenes showing Macbeth's final, desperate upsurge, and scenes in which the English forces comment on the tyrant's isolation: "Those he commands move only in command, / Nothing in love" (V.2.19-20), as he has been deserted by "Both more and less [who] have given him the revolt, / And none serve with him but constrainèd things, / Whose hearts are absent too" (5.4.12-14). In the face of such odds, Macbeth remains his heroic self, "Valour's minion" (I.2.19) and "Bellona's bridegroom" (I.2.54), determined to "fight, till from [his] bones [his] flesh be hacked" (V.3.31) even as he expresses his weariness at the news that Birnam wood (is) coming to Dunsinane:

> There is nor flying hence, nor tarrying here.
> I 'gin to be aweary of the sun
> And wish th'estate o'th' world were now undone.
> Ring the alarum bell, blow wind, come wrack,
> At least we'll die with harness on our back. (V.5.48-52)

Macbeth fights heroically to the last: “Why should I play the Roman fool, and die / On mine own sword? Whiles I live, the gashes / Do better upon them” (V.7.31-33), even after Macduff’s revelation that he was “from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripped” (V.7.45-46) and in defiance of the prophecy, Macbeth “will not yield … [but] try the last” (V.7.57, 62).

There is no such heroic “counter-movement of being” in Siward, nor among any of the protagonists in *Dunsinane*: Macbeth dies an unheroic, cowardly death “with a spear in his back” – a reversal of the death of Seyward’s son in *Macbeth*, who “had his hurts before […], on the front” and died as “God’s soldier” (V.7.76-77). What heroism there is in *Dunsinane* lies in the resistance of ordinary people, in the form of what Frye calls “a capacity for suffering above ordinary human experience,” as in the men who are burnt alive for their refusal to reveal which one among the boys captured is Lulach, the Queen’s son (Autumn, p. 194-196), or in the kamikaze hen girl who frees Scottish prisoners by killing English soldiers, and then kills herself (Autumn, p. 242).

Indeed, the very title, *Dunsinane*, a toponym rather than the more usual name of the eponymous hero, announces a tragedy of the people and of the country. Place takes precedence over character, as characters merge with the place and the landscape is anthropomorphized. The play opens on the English soldiers making themselves into a forest, “dig[ging their] hands into the bog water” and “smear[ing their] faces with black mud”, as if to appropriate the land through these two emblematic elements of the Scottish landscape; appropriation is further suggested by Siward’s mention of “a forest of English yew” (Spring 42-46). Later on, appropriation turns to destruction, as Siward sets fire to the forest in which Scots lords found refuge to drive them out into the barren hills (Spring 68), where “nothing lives […] but snow” (Autumn, p. 188), turning Scotland into a wasteland, which Gruach compares to a woman “You invaded my country. […] / You took it. / Laid waste my land. / Burned. / Raped” (Summer, p. 164). Perhaps even more gripping is Macduff’s elegiac evocation of peacetime:

> There wasn't always war here, Siward.
> Once there were harvests and markets and courts and monasteries. When I was young you could look down a glen and know the names of everything in it. The names came from colours or the trees that stood there or whose house it was that lived there. Red hill, birch grove, Alistair's house. But when war comes it doesn't just destroy things like harvests and monasteries – it destroys the names of things as well. It shadows the landscape like a hawk and whatever name it sees it swoops down and claws it away. Red hill is made the hill of slaughter. Birch grove is made the grove of sorrow and Alistair's house is made the place where Ally's house once was. (Autumn, p. 244)

Throughout the play, Scotland remains a "wild untameable Scottish landscape", [23] at once a place to conquer and not worth fighting for. Egham, the English Lieutenant, describes it as unfit for humans (Summer, p. 98) and the Boy soldier even compares it to Hell (Autumn, p. 186). Siward struggles against both the hostility of the place and the reluctance of his own troops who "wonder why [they]'re here" (Summer, p. 132). "Greig had this image of a soldier (Siward) standing on the edge of a very Scottish landscape, a bog. And the emotional feeling is that he has to conquer this land somehow but it's a bog." [24]

At first, there is no readily identifiable hero, but rather three main characters: the two contestants to the throne – Malcolm and Gruach – and the English General Siward, who are gradually delineated in their idiosyncrasies. Building on Malcolm's self-disparaging portrait in *Macbeth* in the scene of his encounter with Macduff in England (IV.3), Greig portrays Malcolm as an elusive schemer, at once spineless and deceitful, "fiendishly slippery in his mastery of Scotland's internal politics"; [25] "a Scotland hating, greedy, vengeful man" who "would have liked to have stayed in England" where he was raised (Summer, p. 114, 118), and "who is willing to take bribes and slaughter enemies and friends alike". [26] A man whom Gruach describes as "too weak and corrupt to hold his own land himself" (Spring, p. 86), who "wallows in his own venality" (Autumn, p. 224), in whom the appearance of being weak has become conflated with actual

weakness, and who gets enmeshed in his own sophistic argument that "the best way to maintain the appearance of something being true is for it to actually be true" – an argument which Siward dismisses as "all words" (Autumn, p. 226), concluding "You are not a king, Malcolm […] Kings rule" (Autumn, p. 230).

Greig gives prominence to Gruach, Macbeth's widow, and to Siward, the English General, who are pitted against one another, and not until well into the play does Siward gradually emerge as the "proper hero", in Greig's own words [27] – an unlikely, somewhat paradoxical hero in a play which aims at restoring the Scottish point of view. Except that "*Dunsinane* is only qualifiedly structured around a Scottish point of view". [28] As the action unfolds, "Greig complexifies Shakespeare's one-sided point of view, aiming instead at a double point of view: that of the occupied as well as of the occupiers", and the play gradually takes on "a disconcerting bifocal quality", alternating "the perspectives of both the invaders (who, of course, consider themselves liberators) and the occupied population". [29] "Greig encourages the audience to shift allegiances constantly" [30] to such a point that *Dunsinane* becomes "a play about English people… it's about an English garrison trying to survive in hostile territory" [31], and Siward's plight makes him a tragic figure.

Yet, even then, he hardly qualifies as a hero insofar as there is nothing exceptional about him. At the beginning of the Winter section, the Boy soldier notes his transformation: "Not a soldier now Siward […] More like a beggar – A monk" (Winter, p. 260). By then, Gruach has become the true heroine, but not a tragic heroine; she is not crushed, and the open end suggests that she will eventually come up victorious. The Boy soldier's description supports Frye's distinction between the ironic and the tragic: "Irony does not need an exceptional central figure: as a rule, the dingier the hero the sharper the irony, when irony alone is aimed at. It is the admixture of heroism that gives tragedy its characteristic splendor and exhilaration." [32] There is no heroism in Siward, and nothing hubristic about him either, quite the opposite: "I was sent here to restore peace and I am trying to do that job as *reasonably* as I can" (Summer, p. 140, emphasis

mine). Greig explains: “In the classical sense, in which the characters have a tragic flaw, Siward's flaw is his desire to do good. If he didn't have such a strong desire to do good, he probably would cause a lot less trouble.” [33]

This lack of heroism makes a crucial difference with Macbeth, whose fall from good fortune to bad results from his valour and his ambition – an ambivalent quality, which is both what makes him a man “above the common level” [34] and the moral flaw that leads to his downfall. What makes *Macbeth* a tragedy is the tension between on the one hand his almost superhuman valour as “Bellona’s bridegroom” (I.2.54) and his elevated ideal of serving his king and country, and on the other hand his ambition and inability to resist temptation ensuing in a tormented conscience. Unlike Richard III, to whom he is often compared, Macbeth is no downright villain, and Shakespeare has set himself the extraordinary challenge of creating a character who retains sufficient greatness for him to remain a tragic hero with whose sufferings the audience can still sympathise in spite of his bloody course. *Macbeth* is closer to Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* than to *Richard III* and can best be characterised as a tragedy of damnation, which brings us back to the transcendent dimension and the articulation of fate with human action and judgement.

VI. The tension between fate and human agency

“In tragedy,” Frye observes, “the heroic is within the human context […] it is limited and finite”. Being “above the normal limits of experience” it suggests “something infinite imprisoned in the finite”. [35] Tragedy is characterised by a tension between the human condition (limited) and human aspirations (unlimited), between fate and a refusal to submit to it. This tension materialises in the tragic crisis, a word etymologically related to judgement. In *Macbeth*, this crucial point occurs at the end of I.7 when Lady Macbeth prevails over her husband’s scruples and he resolves to

murder Duncan to hasten the fulfilment of the prophecy, thereby *co-operating with* evil forces and triggering a whole chain of murders, as he realises that "to be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus" (III.1.47) and that this first murder cannot be "the be-all and the end-all" he wished for (I.7.5). From then on he starts *acting against* the prophecy that Banquo shall beget a line of kings that will "stretch out to th' crack of doom" (IV.1.132). Macbeth acts in full awareness that "in these cases / We still have judgement here, that we but teach / Bloody instructions, which being taught, return / To plague th'inventor" (I.7.7-10), which sounds like an anticipation of his fall. It is followed after the "deed" by an intimation of his damnation "For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind, / For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered […] and mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man" (III.1.63-64, 67-68).

There is no such turning point in *Dunsinane*, or rather it is not made explicit; it can only be inferred, as it occurs in the ellipsis between the end of Summer and the beginning of Autumn and is therefore not related to judgement. There is no soliloquy in which Siward debates his course of action. He is a man of a few words, and what few words he utters are straight to the point. Although we do not have access to his conscience, there is no sign that it is torn. He does not have any doubts that he is following the right path, except fleetingly, when he ponders "Maybe Malcolm is right. Maybe I should go home", but he immediately pulls himself together "What would it feel like to desert my own army?" (Autumn, p. 244). He cannot imagine defeat for, as the Boy soldier puts it "we always win. We win because if we don't win – we lose – and if we lose then what?" (Autumn, p. 188). After Gruach's escape from the wedding ceremony, which ruins all his efforts at establishing peace in Scotland, Siward ceases to act "reasonably" and, in an abrupt transition from pacifier to scourge, is driven to increasing savagery to the point of "los[ing his] mind" despite Malcolm's warning (Autumn, p. 228). His action becomes completely erratic, at once irrational, excessive, and counter-productive, as when he kills Glen Lyon (a harmless coward) and then Lulach – thereby "giv[ing] him eternal life", as Malcolm prophesies (Autumn, p. 218, 254).

Siward's misguided action does not originate in some careful deliberation; it is rather the consequence of his delusion that installing Malcolm on the Scottish throne would be a swift, straightforward affair, which in turn results from a series of "mistaken understandings" (Spring, p. 76). His overconfidence verges on arrogance as he plans to "invite [the clan chiefs] to a Parliament" – a very English approach, totally at odds with Scottish culture, as it turns out – in order to "find a consensus […] and then […] crown [Malcolm] king. Unchallenged" (Spring, p. 94). Siward is full of such certitudes framed in final, definitive assertions which are all subject to immediate qualification by Macduff, as when he believes "We are the winning side" and Macduff cautions "For now" (Spring, p. 82) or when, after McAlpin's declaration that "there can be no peace in Scotland as long as the Queen remains in Dunsinane", Siward concludes:

> SIWARD: It's unequivocal.
> MACDUFF: It all depends on the definition of the words.
> SIWARD: Which words?
> MACDUFF: 'Peace,' 'Queen,' 'remain' and 'Dunsinane.' (Summer, p. 174)

Siward sees everything through the prism of soldierly "clarity" (Autumn, p. 222), and his insistence on "literalness" (Spring, p. 76) and "incessant definition" (Autumn, p. 222) in a language Gruach describes as "a woodworker's tool […] to capture the world in words" (Summer, p. 162), renders him ill-equipped to grasp the subtleties of the "delicate filigree" made up of complex "alliances", "networks of obligation", "narrowly balanced feuds" and constantly shifting "patterns of loyalty" between the Scottish clans (Autumn, p. 222) in a country whose language is as impenetrable as the forest, and as slippery and unstable as the landscape. A country which is "all made of water", in which "nothing is solid", where you must "always be careful where you put your feet" (Summer, p. 98), and where you must also be "very, very careful about the way [you] hear and understand words" (Spring, p. 76). To the end, Siward clings to the conviction that after Lulach's death, "the Moray claim is over" and that "Malcolm is the unchallenged king", but Gruach brings up "a challenge": Lulach's son (Winter, p. 270) – who, she insists, is the legitimate heir.

The prospect of never ending war reminds us of Egham's observation that "[the Scots] like fighting […] they're fighting us partly because we're stopping them from fighting each other" (Autumn, p. 198), and makes us wonder whether Siward's mission to install Malcolm who would then "make a new situation where everybody works together in pursuit of the kingdom's common interest" – which Macduff warned "would take a very long time" (Spring, p. 82) – was ever possible at all. Our doubts are further reinforced in view of Malcolm's scepticism regarding peace, which he considers to be "a rare and beautiful moment" rather than "a natural state" (Autumn, p. 256), and of his conviction that "a settled kingdom is a kingdom in which everyone is dead" (Summer, p. 114).

Retrospectively one might consider *Dunsinane* as a tale of missed opportunities, which would restore the linear quality of time characteristic of tragedy. We could wonder what would have happened if Siward had followed Macduff's advice to "kill the Queen" (Spring, p. 84), but in view of Gruach's later assertion that "Scotland will find another queen" (Winter, p. 272), it is doubtful that this would have put an end to the Moray claim. Accepting Gruach's marriage offer (Summer, p. 152) might have been a way of establishing peace in Scotland, but it was incompatible with Siward's loyalty to his own country. Neither could he "learn the steps" of the "dance of leaving" to which Gruach invited him (Summer, p. 166), nor accept that "winning isn't a fact", but "a decision we take". He must leave this war to Malcolm and Macduff, as Egham suggests (Autumn, p. 198), and go home without a settlement (Winter, p. 268).

V. *Dunsinane*: Renaissance or Reconfiguration of Tragedy?

Siward finds himself trapped in an impossible situation in which he can neither leave nor remain, since what unity the rival clans might achieve can only be achieved against the foreign occupier. For all his good intentions,

Siward cannot escape the paradox that the peace-keeping force makes the situation even more chaotic. In Greig's words, "he genuinely is a good man who is trying to do the right thing. It's just that every single action he takes in pursuit of the right thing leads to more and more bloodshed." [36] Mervyn Frost's use of the term "tragedy" to refer to "a special relationship between an act undertaken for ethical reasons and its negative/painful consequences" is particularly apt to describe Siward's plight as "a case in which tragedy is *inherent in circumstances in which people make the right choices*, ethically speaking, but in doing so bring about 'negative consequences'". [37]

Siward's predicament is based on flawed premises, as his aim and duty are to secure the northern border of England: "It's in England's interest to have peace in Scotland" (Spring, p. 86). Here Teson's distinction between intention and motive proves useful. The motive behind Siward's mission to install Malcolm on the throne is not disinterested. Yet it does not mean his intention to restore peace in Scotland is not genuine. "This distinction is crucial, for if we fail to make it, governments can never have altruistic motives" [38] – and indeed, Greig himself confessed to being "slightly uneasy about the extent to which his play becomes 'a warning against altruism', and against the good intentions embodied in the English general, Siward." [39] Intention, not motive, Teson argues, is relevant to characterizing the action and evaluating it morally. Equally important, however, are two indicators of legitimacy: the first one is "whether the intervener used means consistent and proportionate with the humanitarian purpose". [40] On this point, Siward's action in the second part of the play is clearly deficient, as Egham points out "Do we have to be quite so ruthless in the pursuit of peace?" (Autumn, p. 196). The second crucial factor is whether the people welcome the foreign power. [41] The play shows it is not the case, as the Scottish people are clearly hostile to what they perceive as foreign occupation. So, according to Greig, the play's ultimate question is:

> "'is it possible to impose peace on someone else's behalf?' You can't make other people sort – they have to sort themselves out and the play is asking

> the question: 'is there a point at which the process of intervening, in fact, leads you – is it possible that in trying to create peace you end up creating more war?'" [42]

It is important to recognize that Siward's task is almost impossible in that it "involves a choice between two radically incompatible but equally undesirable outcomes" – a situation in which "to act is, necessarily, to do wrong", which Chris Brown argues is "the essence of the tragic vision". And yet, although "some problems have no answer that does not involve genuinely tragic choices, it is equally true that sometimes we must act even though we know the result will be, one way or another, morally unsatisfactory". [43] Indeed, as Siward maintains "Everything I did I did because I thought it was for the best" (Winter, p. 268), Gruach taunts him: "Oh, how in love you are with your good intentions" (Winter, p. 274). The answer that both Brown and Frost would give is one of modesty, "an awareness of tragedy which ought to cause us […] to be aware of our limitations and to be suspicious of grand narratives of salvation which pretend that there are no tragic choices to be made"; [44] or as James Mayall puts it, "a necessary antidote to the hubris of progressive thought and the constant liberal temptation to avoid accepting responsibility for well-intended actions that go wrong". [45]

When at last Siward gives Lulach's son back to his mother, Gruach's last words strike a bitter, ironic note: "You're a good man, Siward. / It would have been better if you weren't. / There would have been much less blood" (Winter, p. 278). However, there is no sign that Siward's capitulation will put an end to the war, and it provides no resolution in the tragic sense of the term, insofar as tragedy normally ends with the death of the heroic protagonist(s), and "the survivors forming a secondary, or social contract, a relation among more ordinary men which will achieve enough working justice and equity to minimize further tragedy. It usually expresses some limiting or falling away of perspective after the great heroic voices have been silenced" [46] – a feeling encapsulated in the last lines of *King Lear*: "we that are young / Shall never see so much, nor live so long" (V.3.301-302). Contrary to *Macbeth*, which ends on the prospect of a reunited

kingdom under Malcolm's rule in V.7 – an ending Greig found unsatisfactory – *Dunsinane* remains open-ended: the hero does not die, and there is no final catastrophe, only the prospect of a new spring and of endless war. The challenge here is that of cultivating an "ethical scepticism without giving way to nihilism". [47]

Conclusion

Siward's plight recalls that of Hamlet, whose task – to revenge his father without "taint[ing] his mind, nor let [his] soul contrive / Against his mother aught" (I.5.85-86) – is almost impossible. Likewise, Siward's capitulation calls up memories of *Hamlet* – also the tragedy of a man with good intentions which ends in a bloodbath – in the hero's submission to fate: "The readiness is all" (V.2.169). But unlike Hamlet, Siward experiences no *anagnorisis*, and fate in *Dunsinane* is no longer the "divinity that shapes our ends" (V.2.10) but some immanent, undefined geopolitical context beyond the scope of human control or even understanding. "The time is out of joint", but it is in no individual's power to "set it right" (*Hamlet* I.5.189-190), and the play produces no *catharsis*. There is no tragic hero in *Dunsinane*, only a tragic figure who is not heroic and a heroine who is not tragic. Rather than the tragedy of a hero or heroine, tragedy in *Dunsinane* is reconfigured, as its title implies, as the tragedy of a place and of a people who can only suffer in resistance but are deprived of any genuine agency. There is also no linear time leading to a catastrophe, but an open end and a perpetual cycle – something Shakespeare resists in *Macbeth*, and which recent productions and adaptations have introduced in the figure of Fleance returning at the end (RSC 2018 production), or with Donalbain's visit to the witches (Polanski's 1971 film adaptation) – two characters who disappear in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

In *Dunsinane*, the audience is left with a sense of powerlessness, and some ten years after the play's first production Gruach's curse on Siward resonates as a warning to all colonizers. At the same time, in the light of the

latest events in Afghanistan, the play can be perceived as the tragedy of a place and of a people – no matter "where the place" (*Macbeth* I.1.6), as Greig explains: "When I began plotting *Dunsinane*, I was thinking about Britain's involvement in Iraq and of Tony Blair as a figurehead, a man who is truly in pursuit of good but whose pursuit leads him into darker territory. When the play went to London, the story was Afghanistan. When the play was touring Scotland, the story was the referendum – it was all about Scotland and England. And when the play went to Russia, the story was the Ukraine." [48] Although *Dunsinane*'s universal scope would seem to lend it a tragic dimension, it does not easily fit into the genre of tragedy, of which it presents a reconfiguration rather than a renaissance, an ironic everyday, ordinary variation, somewhere between tragedy and absurd: "Like the mutable and disconcerting Scottish landscape, Greig's play is not what it seems". [49]

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Notes

[1] I wish to thank the anonymous reviewers for their valuable suggestions for improvement on an earlier version of this paper.

[2] Clare Wallace, “Taking on ‘the Scottish play’: David Greig’s *Dunsinane*”: “In an interview for the BBC, Greig describes *Dunsinane* as an act of speculation”, in Shakespeare Theatre Company, *Guide to the Season's Plays 2014-2015*, p. 20, URL.

[3] Julie Carpenter, quoted by Veronica Rodriguez and Dilek Inan, “Combining the Epic with the Everyday: David Greig’s *Dunsinane*”, *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, 5.2. (2012), p. 69; Royal Shakespeare Company, “David Greig talks about *Dunsinane*” (2011), URL.

[4] Aristotle, *Poetics*, transl. S.H. Butcher, London, Macmillan, 1922, chap. 6.

[5] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Nicholas Brooke, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990.

[6] All references to other Shakespeare plays are to William Shakespeare, *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works* (Second Edition), Stanley Wells, Gary Taylor, John Jowett, and William Montgomery, eds., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.

[7] On this question, see Jean-Pierre Vernant and Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Mythe et Tragédie en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, François Maspero, 1981.

[8] Aristotle, *op.cit.*, chap. 6.

[9] George Steiner, “Absolute tragedy”, *Journal of Literature & Theology*, 4.2 (1990), p. 147.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 151.

[11] Aristotle, *op.cit.* chap. 6, 7, 9, 11.

[12] David Greig, *Dunsinane* [2010], édition bilingue, trad. Pascale Drouet, intr. William C. Carroll, Toulouse, Presses Universitaires du Midi, Nouvelles Scènes (Anglais), 2016.

[13] See Michael P. Zuckert, "'Something Wicked This Way Comes': Machiavelli, *Macbeth*, and the Conquest of Fortuna", *The Review of Politics*, 78.4 (Fall 2016), p. 589-607.

[14] Emily Linnemann, "'A Mistaken Understanding': *Dunsinane* and New Writing at the RSC", *Borrowers and Lenders, The Journal of Shakespeare and Appropriation*, vol. 5, n° 1 (2010), p. 1-15, quotation p. 11-12.

[15] Raphael Holinshed, *The Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, London, 1587, vol. 5, p. 172.

[16] George Buchanan, *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* [1582], trans. T. Page, *The History of Scotland*, London, 1690, Book 7, p. 211.

[17] Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[18] Aristotle, *op. cit.*, chap. 6, 7, and 10.

[19] Northrop Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[20] See Veronica Rodriguez and Dilek Inan, "Combining the Epic with the Everyday: David Greig's *Dunsinane*", *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, 5.2. (2012), p. 56-78, p. 57.

[21] Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, eds. Roma Gill and Ros King, London, Methuen Drama, 1989.

[22] Northrop Frye, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

[23] Emily Linnemann, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

[24] Maria Elena Capitani, “Appropriating *Macbeth* in the Contact Zone. The Politics of Place, Space, and Liminality in David Greig’s *Dunsinane*”, *Anglistica AION*, 20.2 (2016), p. 17-29, p. 28.

[25] Mark Fisher, “*Dunsinane* – review”, *The Guardian*, 19 May 2011.

[26] Emily Linnemann, *op. cit.*, p. 9

[27] Royal Shakespeare Company, “David Greig talks about *Dunsinane*” (2011), URL.

[28] Ariel Watson, “Birnam Wood. Scotland, Nationalism, and Theatres of War”, *Theatre History Studies*, 33 (2014), p. 226-249, quotation p. 236.

[29] Mark Brown, “An Interview with the Playwright” (URL) and Emily Linnemann, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[30] Emily Linnemann, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

[31] Mark Brown, *op. cit.*, n. p.; see also Joyce McMillan, for *Scotsman Arts*, URL.

[32] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1947, p. 210.

[33] Sarah Hemming, “The aftermath of *Macbeth*”, *The Financial Times* (Feb 5, 2010).

[34] Aristotle, *op. cit.*, chap. 15.

[35] Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

[36] Mark Brown, *op. cit.*, n. p.

[37] Mervyn Frost, “Recovering the tragic dimension of international relations: tragedy, ethics and international relations”, in Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow (eds.), *Tragedy and International Relations*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012, p. 21-43, quotations p. 27, 29.

[38] Fernando R. Teson, “Ending Tyranny in Iraq”, *Ethics and International Affairs*, 19.2 (2005), p. 4-6.

[39] Joyce McMillan, *op. cit.*, n. p.

[40] Fernando R. Teson, *op. cit.*, p. 7, 2, 8.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 15

[42] “David Greig talks about *Dunsinane*” (2011), Royal Shakespeare Company, URL, 8:00.

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[44] *Ibid.*, p. 11.

[45] James Mayall, “Tragedy, Progress and The International Order”, in Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow, *op. cit.*, p. 44-52, quotation p. 45

[46] Northrop Frye, *Fools of Time*, *op. cit.*, p. 5-6.

[47] Kamila Stullerova, “Tragic Vision and Vigilant Realism: Progressivism without an Ideal”, in Toni Erskine and Richard Ned Lebow, *op. cit.*, p. 112-126, quotation p. 124.

[48] Chris Jones, “In *Dunsinane*, David Greig offers a timely play – set in 11th century”, *Los Angeles Times*, March 27, 2015, URL.

[49] Emily Linnemann, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

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