

Macbeth: *The State of Play*. Ann Thompson, ed.

The Arden Shakespeare State of Play. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2014. xii + 294 pp. \$24.95.

This edited collection that launches The State of Play series began life as a Shakespeare Association of America conference seminar in Seattle in 2011. Despite its variety, absent from the volume is any consistent attempt to evaluate the critical foundations upon which a number of the individual essays depend, and the claim of the editor, Ann Thompson, that the past forty years have “galvanized” approaches to the play is unsubstantiated. Indeed, since the early twentieth century *Macbeth* has been a touchstone of critical practice and its curiously shifting language has attracted considerable, sustained, and theoretically informed attention.

The collection is divided into four sections. In part 1, “The Text and Its Status,” A. B. Dawson’s assured account of the bibliographical inconsistencies and illogicalities in the text as we have it is followed by Brett Gamboa’s essay that investigates why “productions of *Macbeth* routinely fall short of expectations” (32). Gamboa argues that an “aesthetics of disappointment” is built into the play’s “structure” (36), resulting in “a tragedy of inefficacy and impotence” (38), and encouraging an unspecified audience to experience vicariously the protagonist’s quasi-Freudian frustration: “*Macbeth* fails to climax because it prevents the protagonist from taking part in one” (37). Part 2, “History and Topicality,” consists of three essays, one by Dermot Cavanagh, another by Debapriya Sarkar (“To crown my thoughts with acts’: Prophecy and Prescription in *Macbeth*”), and Kevin Quarmby’s superficially presentist essay (“Lady Macbeth, First Ladies and the Arab Spring: The Performance of Power on the Twenty-First Century Stage”). Of the three, only Cavanagh fully grasps the genesis of his critical approach. The pattern is repeated in part 3, “Critical Approaches and Close Reading,” which contains three essays, two of which (Darlene Farrabee’s “A walking shadow’: Perception and Disorientation in *Macbeth*” and Geraldo de Souza’s “Cookery and Witchcraft in *Macbeth*”) build variously on themes, criticism, and a feminist-inspired emphasis on metaphors of domesticity. The third essay (Jonathan Hope and Michael Whitmore’s “The Language of *Macbeth*”) is an aridly formalist “quantitative” account of the play’s language that depends upon “word frequency analysis” (188), “type-token counting” (190–91), and “log-likelihood frequency” (194). Hope and Whitmore offer “a statistical test” (194) that does nothing more than support established “subjective” accounts of the play’s commitment to “indefiniteness” (203), pressing “subjective” Stephen Booth into service as an adjunct to a linguistic gradgrindery that will make students of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* thankful that Holofernes and Sir Nathaniel did not have access to a computer.

Part 4, “Adaptation and Afterlife,” consists of solid essays by Sandra Clark and Ramona Wray, to which a third essay, Philippa Sheppard’s “Raising the Violence while Lowering the Stakes: Geoffrey Wright’s Screen Adaptation of *Macbeth*,” is added. Clark’s essay whets the appetite for her forthcoming Arden 3 edition of *Macbeth*, and Wray’s is

a careful and considered, politically astute close reading of a particular adaptation that offers an illuminating account of the relation between *Macbeth* and a modern BBC TV rewrite. Philippa Sheppard could have learned from Wray's method, since her essay does not move beyond an expression of outrage at the "pornographic" violence (237) of Geoffrey Wright's film adaptation. Having invoked a stricture against the pitfalls of evaluating an adaptation against an original text, Sheppard proceeds to do just that, and the result is a seminar paper that, regrettably, fails to graduate successfully to the status of a book chapter.

The volume as a whole bears some of the unfortunate hallmarks of the genre of the seminar paper. Further extended discussion and detailed editorial intervention might have minimized this, but only Dawson, Clark, Cavanagh, and Wray rise above the seminar format, though they politely acknowledge its value. While the objective of the series is laudable, this volume does little to inaugurate an iconic future for *Macbeth*. Some of the blemishes are the fault of the genre, but more stringent editing and a more thoroughly directive introduction might have done something to eliminate them.

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