

A Modern Lens

An Analysis of Davenant's *Macbeth* Using Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton*

By Claire Arney

In 1664, director William Davenant opened his adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in the Restoration England theaters. It had been four years since the restrictive Puritan Parliament had been dethroned and the monarchy reinstated under which the public life regained "liberal circumstances in which the arts and politics could flourish," as Matthew White puts it.¹ The public was excited to enjoy the fresh, new productions of the Restoration and the ideas and magic that they offered, helping theaters quickly regain their prominence in English life. Critics today are much less enthusiastic about Restoration Shakespeare, often saying that "such performances were deformations of Shakespeare's precursor texts" and further labeling them "inferior" to the original works.² Yet, the stark changes that Davenant included in his *Macbeth* were necessary because loyal, original-to-Shakespeare productions in the latter

¹ Matthew White, "The Turbulent 17th Century: Civil War, Regicide, The Restoration And The Glorious Revolution," British Library, accessed September 17, 2023, <https://www.bl.uk/restoration-18th-century-literature/articles/the-turbulent-17th-century-civil-war-regicide-the-restoration-and-the-glorious-revolution/>.

² Claude Fretz, "Performing Restoration Shakespeare 'Then' and 'Now': A Case Study of Davenant's *Macbeth*," *Concentric* 48, no. 1 (2022): 28.

half of the 17th century were viewed as “a play of itself the worst that ever I heard in my life, and the worst acted that ever I saw,” at least in the opinion of Samuel Pepys.³ More modern day critics of Restoration Shakespeare often miss the importance of the changes themselves and what they reveal about the audience for whom Davenant crafted his production. While there may be librettos, printed scripts, and a few audience reactions that survive from the 17th century productions, the cultural and temporal disparities between the 17th century and today makes recreating and understanding Davenant’s *Macbeth* more difficult. Consequently, audience members and scholars must turn to another revolutionary show, Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*, for a guide as to what Davenant was aiming to achieve.

Hamilton shares a similar identity with Davenant’s *Macbeth*, first in the way that it was received by critics prior to their true understanding of the show. At a White House dinner, Miranda was initially met with laughter after sharing the idea for “a concept album – about the life of someone who embodies hip-hop... treasury secretary Alexander Hamilton.”⁴ Yet, once audiences were able to enjoy the entire show, they quickly were enraptured by Miranda’s masterful retelling of America’s revolution and founding using creative and magical techniques. For contemporary audiences in both the 17th and 21st centuries, bringing an old story or text to the stages is not inherently appealing; significant changes must be made in order to create something interesting and, even further, successful. Miranda and Davenant both accomplished just that

³ Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1893), Saturday 1 March 1661/62, <https://www.pepysdiary.com/diary/1662/03/>.

⁴ Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2016), 14.

with Miranda revolutionizing the traditional musical and evoking interest in America's founding and Davenant reawakening the public's desire for Shakespeare through spectacle. Thus, as audience members and scholars, we can use Lin-Manuel Miranda's *Hamilton* as a comparative lens into Davenant's *Macbeth* to better understand the way in which Davenant took something historically grounded, used various dramaturgical strategies to bring it attractively to a contemporary audience, and what this can tell us about the contemporary 17th century public.

Hamilton and *Macbeth* are notable in the way that they consciously use certain music styles to specifically appeal to audiences, capture the audience's attention, and amplify the dramatic power of their theater. Lin-Manuel Miranda chose hip-hop for his production, a genre that "has become an accepted part of mainstream US culture."⁵ This genre is anachronistic to the content of the show since America's founding is separated from rap by more than 200 years. However, he successfully employed hip hop in his musical as he was able to appeal "to audiences that do not consider themselves rap music fans while also convincing dedicated hip hop listeners of his sincere engagement with the genre," as Loren Kajikawa observes.⁶ Miranda wrote a dynamic show that brings to life a historical story through rhythm, lyrical complexity, and familiarity. As an audience member, I felt a collective visceral reaction to *Hamilton*'s music, rhythm, and energy throughout the play that quickly captured attention and made the audience emotionally vested in the stories that the music was accompanying. Reading an 800-page novel on

⁵ Loren Kajikawa, "'Young, Scrappy, and Hungry': *Hamilton*, Hip-Hop, and Race," *American Music* 36, no. 4 (2018): 468.

⁶ Kajikawa, "'Young, Scrappy, and Hungry,'" 468.

Hamilton's life in the 18th century may be boring, but when you infuse the story with hip-hop, rhythm, backing music, and clever lyrics, it becomes a phenomenon that has the potential to shape the future of musicals and people's enthusiasm for history.

In the same way that rap was compelling to 21st century audiences, the music of masques were just as inspiring and evocative to the audiences of the 17th century. Prior to the Civil War, Davenant had directed masques for what John Weeks Moore characterizes as the "palaces of princes, and the mansions of the nobility."⁷ A masque was "a musical drama, chiefly consisting of singing, machinery, and dancing" and "required such splendid and expensive decorations," creating a luxurious and enchanting spectacle reserved for the upper class of society.⁸ These masques were so desired by the public for their spectacle and entertainment that Davenant brought many of masque's musical elements into Restoration Shakespeare. Similar to the effect rap has on modern audiences today, the music of masques would have evoked an emotional connection between the audience and *Macbeth* through its roots in dance, parties, and lively celebration. The revel onstage would not have been limited to the actors, but would have extended to the audiences watching because of their familiarity with the music and its meaning, which in turn would have deepened their interest in and love for dramatic productions by Davenant. To heighten the music's power to create a memorable story, Davenant added an orchestra, one which, as Barbara A. Murray describes, "entertained the audience before the curtain opened"

⁷ John Weeks Moore, *Complete Encyclopedia of Music: Elementary, Technical, Historical, Biographical, Vocal, and Instrumental* (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co, 1852), 572.

⁸ Moore, *Complete Encyclopedia of Music*, 572.

and “as soloists or as full orchestra,” “accompanied songs within the play,” and “created musical effects the play may have called for” all the while serving to “heighten atmosphere.”⁹ This new music played for most of Davenant’s *Macbeth*, directly intertwining the story with sound and making it indispensable to the audience’s experience and interpretation just as Miranda did with *Hamilton*.

The next element that defines both *Hamilton* and *Macbeth* is the dependence on choreography to tell a deeper story. In *Hamilton*, the audience is awed by the near constant presence of the ensemble onstage, something that typically is only “background music” in other Broadway shows, but in *Hamilton* is “the foundation of the show.”¹⁰ The ensemble draws from various dance styles to depict war, hurricanes, legacy, duels, and emotions ranging from jealousy to love, desperation to friendship. For example, once Burr has shot Hamilton in their duel, time is slowed down to allow Hamilton to race through all his thoughts and one dancer physically portrays the bullet fired from Burr’s gun and slowly moves closer and closer towards Hamilton, signaling his imminent death and the way in which psychological time has been altered in the moment just before death. As an audience member, I can attest to the effectiveness of these movements: I was holding my breath and my body was tense because I felt and understood the stakes of this scene from the effective combination of physical and vocal elements I saw on stage. In this way, the choreography “carries the same narrative weight

⁹ Barbara A. Murray, *Restoration Shakespeare: Viewing the Voice* (New Jersey: Rosemont Publishing, 2005), 27-8.

¹⁰ Anne Searcy, “Bringing Dance Back to the Center in *Hamilton*,” *American Music* 36, no. 4 (2018): 448.

as the words and music”¹¹ and helps dictate the impression with which the audience is left.

Davenant’s use of choreography works in a similar fashion to bring the themes and story to life in a profound way. Specifically, Davenant added dance to the witches who play an important role in providing Macbeth’s main call to action. The witches appear to Macduff and Lady Macduff in the “dark” and “gloomy” Heath singing of “the worst of creatures” and “many more murders.”¹² They continue singing to the Macduffs with the famous words of “Let’s have a dance upon the Heath/We gain more life by Duncan’s death,” rejoicing the regicide that had just occurred.¹³ While singing, all of the witches dance around Macduff and his lady. Amanda Eubanks Winkler says that “it seems safe to presume that the dancers used grotesque, angular movements,”¹⁴ that matched the gestures that stereotypically “defined and expressed insanity”¹⁵ during this time. The lyrics and dance convey a dark and mysterious affair, which Macduff perceives to be “a hellish Song,”¹⁶ and help underline the message that these witches are strange and otherworldly and have the eerie power to predict Macduff’s future.

However, one will notice that the music accompanying the song and dancing starkly contrasts these dark messages. Matthew Locke’s composition for these lyrics is a jig; notably in

¹¹ Searcy, “Bringing Dance Back,” 448.

¹² Christopher Spencer, ed. *Five Restoration Adaptations of Shakespeare* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 64.

¹³ Spencer, *Five Restoration Adaptations*, 65.

¹⁴ Amanda Eubanks Winkler, “Dance in Restoration Shakespeare,” in *The Shakespeare and Dance Project*, eds. Linda McJannet and Emily Winerock, November 1, 2022, <https://shakespeareanddance.com/articles/dance-in-restoration-shakespeare>.

¹⁵ Natsu Hattori, “The Pleasure of Your Bedlam,” *History of Psychiatry* 6, no. 23 (Sept. 1995): 284.

¹⁶ Spencer, *Five Restoration Adaptations*, 65.

a major key, it is playful, upbeat, and fun, reminiscent of a dancing song at a pub. This music lends an incongruity to the scene, one that would have highlighted the ambiguous nature of witches while puzzling and further delighting the audience. This is also telling of the audience's expectations: they wanted to be entertained and so Davenant needed to produce a whirlwind of a spectacle. This draws a direct parallel to the way in which Miranda's characters move while singing and use the full limits of the space; there is more happening onstage which serves to further capture the audience and entertain them. Recognizing the importance of this, Davenant "added in the second act a new Hecate scene of his own which doubled the amount of singing and dancing,"¹⁷ and therefore, the entertainment and fun. This continues to suggest that the idea of spectacle and entertainment was incredibly important to the 17th century public reeling from the strictness of the Puritan ruling party. Furthermore, Davenant placed special emphasis on "the final dance" which occurs "after the action of the play is done" as it provided "an optimum location for the large para-dramatic musical entertainments" which the public loved as they were reminiscent of grand, courtly masques and thoroughly captivating.¹⁸

Another facet that contributed to *Hamilton's* success was the way in which the show engages in an active dialogue with its audience members through the use of references to current events and popular culture in America. Miranda references various music genres to directly appeal to the audience by including famous lyrical structures from the Notorious B.I.G.

¹⁷ Robert E. Moore, "The Music to *Macbeth*," *The Music Quarterly* 47, no. 1 (1961): 25.

¹⁸ Curtis A. Price, *Music in the Restoration Theatre: With a Catalogue of Instrumental Music in the Plays 1665-1713* (Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1979), 40.t5.

and referencing musicals such as *South Pacific*, *Mamma Mia*, and *The Pirates of Penzance*,¹⁹ which demonstrates the depth of Miranda's understanding of popular media and, further, the variety of audience members that he was able to successfully attract. Additionally, by choosing rap to tell the story of white men in a historically white theatrical space, Miranda speaks to the importance of diversity in America and that it defines the people and country. This dialogue within the performance connects the audience members to each other as Americans and to the diverse actors on stage. When the audience understands these references in a show, they feel further connected to the work because they are able to make the connection to the reference itself and the place it already holds in their lives.

With this in mind, we can better understand the use and importance of popular references within Davenant's *Macbeth*. The Restoration period was situated in a liberating time for the people of England after the Puritan rule, so Davenant capitalized on this connection with the audience. For example, the introduction of female actresses in the late 17th century helped Davenant develop a livened Shakespeare show with a "reinvigorated sense of bawdy humor" and "replete with sexual innuendo" that "showcase[d] the erotic appeal of women."²⁰ With these sexual comments, Davenant nodded to the new addition of women onstage and appealed to the newly liberated public. Furthermore, Claude Fretz observes that the rhythms of the jig from the witch scene "allude to a longstanding connection between witchcraft and sexual profligacy," which emphasized the sexual liberty and comedy

¹⁹ Miranda and McCarter, *Hamilton: The Revolution*, 27.

²⁰ Amanda Eubanks Winkler and Richard Schoch, *Shakespeare in the Theatre: Sir William Davenant and the Duke's Company* (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2021), 101.

the audience cherished.²¹ Finally, the sexual references may have also been an allusion to the personality of the king at the time, King Charles II, as he “was known for his many love affairs (most famously with the actress Nell Gwynne)” and “gained something of a reputation for scandal owing to his rakish and at times extravagant lifestyle,”²² turning the monarchy into a popular celebrity within and beyond the theater.

Another prominent reference within *Macbeth* is that of madness which Davenant highlights in the witch scenes. In the second half of the 17th century, England was struggling to fund its insane asylums and began to open their doors to visitors with the goal of attracting charitable donations after their visits. In reality, the insane became “considered one of the chief amusements of Tudor and Stuart London, well-frequented by native Londoners as well as by provincial sightseers,” and turned into a tourist attraction.²³ The public developed an interest “almost to obsession, in madness and mad people” to the point where “visitors expected inmates to show signs of stereotypical madness” when they would go to the asylums.²⁴ Davenant understood the fascination with “society’s most strange,”²⁵ and included madness in his directorial vision for the witches in terms of music, dancing, and a greater emphasis on their dark and twisted lyrics. If *Hamilton*’s references highlight the widespread familiarity with hip hop and American music and the importance of American diversity,

²¹ Fretz, “Performing Restoration Shakespeare ‘Then’ and ‘Now,’” 121-122.

²² White, “The Turbulent 17th Century.”

²³ Hattori, “The Pleasure of Your Bedlam,” 287.

²⁴ Hattori, “The Pleasure of Your Bedlam,” 283.

²⁵ Folger Theatre, “Bedlam and the ‘Theatre of Madness,’” *Folger Shakespeare Library*, <https://www.folger.edu/blogs/folger-spotlight/bedlam-and-the-theatre-of-madness/>.

Davenant's references in *Macbeth* are an ode to the liberal attitudes and lascivious mirth that flourished during the Restoration period of England.

While the shows are very similar with respect to the attractive techniques used, they differ in the larger impact and implications of the shows, either explicit or implicit, which are further indicative of the world they were writing for. *Miranda*, by making it a hip-hop musical and casting the white men from the revolution as diverse people of color, chose to discuss racial and immigration issues in America as well as what it means to be American. It argues that America is defined by the fact that it is made up of people of all races and backgrounds and further argues that America would not be the same without its diversity, slavery, or immigration by including these ideas within a show about the origin of our country. That being said, during moments of tense ideological and political debates during the 2016 election and beyond, *Hamilton* reinvigorated the public's sense of American pride and, ultimately, *Hamilton* served to unite people under one common American story with pride. With this in mind, we can see that the theater of the 17th century had a similar, powerful effect. While Davenant's *Macbeth* took a less serious place in society as it was primarily an entertaining, sarcastic spectacle that helped to enliven spirits in the wake of the Puritan government, it similarly brought people together to celebrate, have fun, and unite under a common discontent.

Through the lens of *Hamilton* and its powerful qualities, the importance and effectiveness of Davenant's adaptation of *Macbeth* are revealed. Davenant wrote for a specific audience and popularized the idea of popular spectacle in theater, changing the expectations of theater henceforth. The way Davenant modified *Macbeth* acts as a fingerprint of the zeitgeist

of the era and its people which is something hard to encapsulate in totality otherwise. Because of this, Davenant's adaptation cannot be taken for granted. In addition, it helped to further the legacy and impact of Shakespeare by successfully popularizing the bard's works in a time where public tastes were dramatically against original Shakespeare. If it were not for Davenant's dramaturgical and musical creativity, it is safe to assume that Shakespeare would not be as vital to our society almost 500 years later. This begs the question then: if Davenant's production repopularized Shakespeare and theater in general, will *Hamilton* serve a similar purpose in helping future generations understand and connect to the founding of America? It is reasonable to presume that this will be the case as each "version" of theater is a powerful tool for representing humans at a specific moment in time: a tool that can capture who people were and influence the coming generations.

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