

Reworking *Macbeth*: A Study of Richard Nathan's *Scots on the Rock*

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ABSTRACT

William Shakespeare has been the outstanding writer not only of his own age but his succeeding ages as well. He continues to influence his readers through his writings with his power and charm, providing loftier patterns to their lives and more salient examples of joy, love and wisdom. There has been profusion of new versions of Shakespeare's plays for a variety of reasons. Every product is different as the artists involved interpret his work differently. They may emphasize or de-emphasize the main elements of the particular work giving a modern contour to the original play. Needless to say a playwright has to be extra conscious in order to "improve" Shakespeare. These adaptations, translations and appropriations do not reflect any lack in the immortal bard; rather they highlight the mammoth potential his works offer to his successors.

Though his widely acclaimed plays require no modification yet some of the writers have dared to experiment with them. Richard Nathan's *Scots On The Rocks* is one such example. Though reworking Shakespeare may bring out brilliant, hilariously awful or just the plain weird results, it is worth investigating how this modern adaptation-cum appropriation contributes thematically sometimes that the original/faithful versions cannot. The performance of the characters in a new way is sufficient enough to bring complete transformation. The solemn and somber mood of the play *Macbeth* has been totally changed by the adapted characters of Richard Nathan's *Scots on the Rocks* offering it a tinge of parody.

The present paper will be an attempt to analyze and estimate the handling of subject matter and manner of William Shakespeare and Richard Nathan and probe the use of carnival and its allied strategies in the latter.

Keywords: Re-working, parody, carnival, carnivalesque.

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William Shakespeare, a legendary literary figure in the history of English literature has carved a niche for himself through his unsurpassable great literary works. He was a versatile genius combining in himself so many aspects of personality as a dramatist, poet, thinker, storyteller and actor-manager. The sweep of admiration and recognition of Shakespeare's works transcend the barriers of time and space making him a permanent dweller in the imaginations of the people. All his works reaffirms our faith in the great values that defines goodness and grace. The world can be traversed along with Shakespeare with a child's sense of wonder and in the process become his co-visionaries, though this capacity to share the vision depends upon each individual's intellectual, emotional and moral capability and caliber. He gives the most comprehensive rendering of human personality through his characterization. He has retained his eminence for four centuries and undoubtedly will be remembered for four or forty centuries to come.

A writer's creativity is constituted by the two sides of human nature; one that resides inside the writer and the other that lives outside the writer i.e. in society. These two gets integrated as a ramification of experience, hidden power and affection. Out of this union, a new progeny is born in literature. Both the personal self of the writer and the human nature of the external world are intertwined in that progeny otherwise no creation can be possible. Shakespeare has been successful in combining these two forces bringing out on the canvas such beautiful stories that no western author has brought forth for us. Shakespeare speaks for those who cannot express what love, music or growing older. Marchette, in the *Introduction of Stories from Shakespeare* to her famous retelling of Shakespeare's stories, summarizes one of the reasons for Shakespeare's immeasurable fame:

William Shakespeare was the most remarkable storyteller that the world has ever known. Homer told of adventure and men at war, Sophocles and Tolstoy told of tragedies and of people in trouble. Terence and Mark Twain told comedic stories, Dickens told melodramatic ones, Plutarch told histories and Hans Christian Andersen told fairy tales. But Shakespeare told every kind of story – comedy, tragedy, history, melodrama, adventure, love stories and fairy tales – and each of them so well that they have become immortal. In all the world of storytelling he has become the greatest name. (11)

In this very context, it must be noticed that there has been a profusion of new versions of Shakespeare's plays for a variety of reasons. Every product is different as the artists involved

interpret his work differently. They may emphasize or de-emphasize the main elements of the particular work giving a modern contour to the original play. Needless to say a playwright has to be extra conscious in order to “improve” Shakespeare. These adaptations, translations and re-appropriations do not reflect any lack in the immortal bard; rather they highlight the mammoth potential his works offer to his successors. Reworking of any text must not be confused with editing. It is done to adapt or revise; to provide an additional version or to alter for an artistic purposes. Every writer writes with an objective to rival or outdo his predecessors. For this process, two terms are widely used namely “imitatio” i.e. “imitation” and “aemulatio” i.e. “competition”. Imitation does not refer to mere copying but the creative adaptation of tradition. Today creative writings involve the reworking of previous literature as creative writers too have been enthusiastic readers at a time. There is no doubt that it always remains a risky business to compete with the great writers. Great Greek author and critic Horace has wonderfully expressed this situation: “Whoever strives to rival Pindar exposes himself to a flight as risky as that of Icarus” (qtd. in Allan 14). The best writers of ancient times are characterized by their reactions to the great works of the past in the light of the present. The post-modernist thought with ‘the death of the author’, intertextuality has overtaken allusion highlighting the interconnections between texts depending upon the intension of the author. Allusion too helps in clarifying the meaning of the work as expressed by the author. Reworking of any text touches upon the same context presenting with different flavors.

Shakespeare’s one of the greatest tragedies *Macbeth* has been considered widely as a reflection of power, ambition, deceit and murder. Shakespeare captures the best and worst of who we are exactly and he portrays so through the poetic, compelling and enduring language. In the play *Macbeth*, the chief protagonist meets his downfall due to his aspiration. His ambitious nature proves as a fatal flaw in his character that brings down his fall. Shakespeare imbibes within him the qualities of a hero and a villain. He is an enigmatic character for being a great hero as well as a ruthless murderer. The three witches exploit him on the count of his soaring ambition to become the king of Scotland. He degenerates into a monster, a serial killer yet he possesses such qualities that make him stand apart from the rest. His poetic imagination, his gentleness and generosity are some of his outstanding qualities of head and heart that marks the whole difference. Shakespeare has the capacity seeing goodness even in the wicked persons. He, like a master craftsman, has closely interwoven the events and happenings in a single thread that no part of the play produces the sense of diversion. The use of poetic language, imagery and perfect handling of supernatural power makes *Macbeth* a masterpiece.

William Shakespeare has been an outstanding writer not only of his own age but his succeeding ages well. He continued to influence his readers through his writings with his power and charm, providing loftier patterns to their lives and more salient examples of joy, love and wisdom. In the same vein of ensuing great William Shakespeare, Richard Nathan, a modern playwright has dared to write the parodied form of one of the great tragedies by Shakespeare i.e. *Macbeth*. The drama *Scots on the Rocks* by Richard Nathan has been successful to capture the attention of its readers as the serious tone of original tragedy has been given a comic effect by parodying so brilliantly that the readers/audience burst into laughter. He has successfully tried to give a hilarious makeover to the terrifying tale of aspirations and ambition.

In the 20th century, Mikhail Bakhtin has contributed to the study and appreciation of parody. The process of dialogization brings literary change where the authoritative voice is subverted through various devices. Bakhtin says:

It is our conviction that there never was a single strictly straightforward genre, no single type of direct discourse – artistic, rhetorical, philosophical, religious, ordinary everyday – that did not have its own parodying and travesty double, its own comic ironic contre-partie. What is more, these parodic doubles and laughing reflections of the direct word were, in some cases, just as sanctioned by tradition . . . as their elevated models. (53)

Bakhtin's theory of carnivalization is closely related to parody. The word 'carnival' is used to see how social interacts with literature. Bakhtin takes 'carnival' as an occasion in which political, legal and ideological authority of both church and state is inverted for a temporary period. The origin of the carnival is in Latin word 'carnem levare' meaning "to take away or remove the meat". The Encyclopedia Britannica defines 'carnival' as the "merrymaking and festivity that takes place in many Roman Catholic countries in the last days and hours of pre-lenten season" ("Carnival"). People indulge themselves in all types of festivities before the beginning of the austere and pious days of Lent. This time period is known as the carnival season which is celebrated before the beginning of the fasting and prayer day of Lent has nothing to do with the artistic forms of literature. Bakhtin defines carnival as:

In carnival everyone is an active participant, everyone communes in the carnival act. Carnival is not contemplated and, strictly speaking, not even performed; its participants *live* in it, they live by its laws as long as those laws are in effect; that is, they live a *carnivalistic life*. Because carnivalistic life is a life drawn out of its *usual rut*, it is to some extent "life turned inside out." (qtd. in Rice 122)

Bakhtin was of the opinion that carnival festival basically gives people the liberating environment for doing things of their own choice. From 'carnival', Bakhtin gave the term "carnavalesque" to give it literary flavor. Like 'carnival', carnivalesque literature breaks the oppressive thoughts or showing the reverse side of the world. It is thus celebration of disorder having the law of freedom. Similarly in literature it implies the use of language having no barrier. And this is where parody comes in existence. Dentith rightly explains, "parody is . . . one of the cultural forms that draws upon the popular energies of the carnival. . . . it is mobilized to debunk official seriousness, and to testify to the relativity of all languages, be they the dialects of authority or the jargons of guilds, castes, or priesthoods" (22-23). The theory of "carnival" by Bakhtin focuses on the value and significance of parody in literary change within a social/cultural context.

The same 'misrule' of the rules of 'carnavalesque' can be applied to the five-act play *Scots on the Rocks* by Richard Nathan which is a wonderful parody of *Macbeth*. The names and the events in this play have been introduced in a comic manner making it a slapstick comedy. The dramatist Richard Nathan's follows Shakespeare's story of a Scottish general who, according to the prophecies of three witches, will become king of Scotland. The creepy events take place when his wife encourages Macbeth to implement her plan of murdering King Duncan

and framing the plan to put allegations of murder on king's sons. The play is full of jokes and puns that sketch the outline of its plot. It is just the reversed side of original *Macbeth*. Hardly any situation arises when readers put a break over their laughter. The beautiful punches of laughter makes the readers forget all what Shakespeare has tried to convey through the tragic tone of *Macbeth*. The powerful portrayal of the witches in the original *Macbeth* differs from that of witches in present parody. They have been described as "so wither'd and so wild in their attire, that look not like th' inhabitants o' the earth" (Shakespeare *Macbeth*, 6). The witches in *Scots on the Rocks* call themselves as "weird sisters". The way they introduce themselves before Macbeth and Banquo makes us burst into laughter. These three weird witches introduce themselves as 'Witch-Witch', 'Weird Witch' and 'Spell Witch'. Macbeth gets confused after listening to their names.

MACBETH: (to Witch-Witch) I'm sorry. I didn't catch your names. You're which witch?

WITCH-WITCH: Witch-Witch.

MACBETH: That's what I'm asking!

WITCH-WITCH: That's what I'm answering!

MACBETH: You are so weird!!!

WITCH-WITCH (pointing to Weird Witch): No, she's Weird Witch. I am WITCH-WITCH.

MACBETH (to Spell Witch): Tell me your name!!!

SPELL WITCH: Spell Witch.

MACBETH: I just spelled it. Now are you going to answer my question?

(*SOTR* I.iii)

Further, the forthcoming unpleasant situations in *Scots on the Rocks* are prophesied by the songs of the three witches:

Where shall we three meet once more?
 At the beach or on the shore?
 When it's time to cause some pain!
 Then it's time to vex the Thane!

We'll pain
 The Thane!
 We'll pain!
 The Thane!

Then we'll do it all again! (*SOTR* 1.i)

The songs that the three witches sing and dance too have been parodied to suit the comedic situations. The other characters too have been presented in an exaggerated manner. It sounds ironical that the chief protagonist in this parody has been named as Mac and not complete

Macbeth. Whenever it comes to speak about Macbeth, the other characters shorten his name as they take his name very unlucky. In the beginning of the play when Duncan sees the wounded soldier and confirms about the battle with Thane of Cawdor, Malcolm does not even name Macbeth and replies, “Pop, this is the sergeant who fought in that battle with your cousin Banquo and with your other cousin!” (*SOTR* [I i]). It produces laughter whenever Duncan tries to name Macbeth; his sons put a slap on his mouth to prevent him from speaking the ‘unlucky name’:

MALCOLM: You crazeee! Don't say that!!! How many times do I have to tell you? It's unlucky to say the name of your other cousin! People who say it die! (Malcolm takes his hand off of his father's mouth).

KING DUNCAN: They die just because they say Mac—
 Just in time, Malcolm slaps the hand back.

MALCOLM: Stop that! If you weren't my father, I'd give you such a hit! (*SOTR* 1.i).

Later, Duncan's fumbling while calling Thane of Cawdor as Thane of Chawdor and Thane of Glamis as Thane of Clams also makes us laugh.

There are three major parodic forms i.e. parody which is directed at texts or author's style, genre directed parody and parody which is directed at discourse. Postmodern parody is primarily the discourse parody. In other words, discourse is the main target of postmodern parodies. In *Scots on the Rocks*, the character's dialogues are funny as well as ironical. The speeches of witches', Macbeth, Duncan and many other characters are spoof at the use of selective words of Shakespeare. The disguise of Lady Macbeth as a manly woman with mustache is the subverted presentation of real character in *Macbeth*:

MACBETH: You're not my wife! My wife isn't a man!
 LADY MACBETH: Oh that! That's nothing to worry about. I just said, “Spirits that tend on mortal thoughts unsex me here,” and I was turned into a man. But I'm sure it's only temporary. It's nothing to worry about. (*SOTR* 1.4)

Like Lady Macbeth in original *Macbeth*, here in this parody too, she repents over her misdeed and turns into reflective mood: “LADY MACBETH: The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now? Will these hands never be clean?” (*SOTR* 5.i) Further, in the same laughing mode, the ghost of Banquo does not try to take revenge upon Macbeth for his murder but demands for “haggis” (a dish) in feast scene:

MACBETH: What do you want from me????
 BANQUO'S GHOST: I want my haggis!

MACBETH: Here! Here! Take your haggis and go!
 (The Ghost takes the bowl of haggis and exits, licking his lips with anticipation.)
 (*SOTR* 3.iv)

In the same vein, the hired murderers too exchange funny negotiations. The funny fight among Ross, Malcolm and Macduff too makes us laugh. The patriotic tone of Ma

MALCOLM If I were King, what would you do for me?
 MACDUFF: Whatever you wanted!

MALCOLM: Would you get me toys? (*SOTR* 5.iii)

This only makes us laugh rather than to make us feel sympathetic towards the poor plight of Malcolm whose kingly father has been murdered or Macduff whose son has been killed. In the last battle scene too, we cannot stop ourselves from laughing when a mock battle goes on between Macbeth and Macduff. From the beginning to the end, the characters in *SOTR* avoid naming Macbeth. It is considered an ill-omen to name him as whosoever name gets died. In the last battle scene, Macbeth provokes Macduff to call him out as he himself knows the reason. The dialogues between them are very funny:

MACDUFF You lay on, Mac-Bozo!

MACDUFF Lay on, Mac-big-butt!

MACDUFF Lay on, Beth!

MACBETH Ha! You said it!

MACDUFF: Said what?

MACBETH: You said my name!

MACDUFF: No I didn't!

MACBETH: You did too! I heard you!

MACDUFF I just said "Beth."

MACBETH No, you said my whole name!

MACDUFF: You are such a liar!

MACBETH: You said it!!! I heard you say "Macbeth!" (*SOTR* 5.viii)

Now, Macbeth starts sobbing when he realizes that his doom is near. In the end, Macduff kills Macbeth and the head of the dead Macbeth is taken away by the soldier in a bag. All soldiers hail Malcolm as the king of Scotland. The tragic tone in the end is once again given the tinge of laughter when the king Malcolm demands for the toys as promised by Macduff: "MALCOLM: Thanks to all at once and to each one, whom we invite to see us crowned at Scone. Now bring lots of toys" (*STOR* 5.viii). Thus, the performance of the characters in a new way is sufficient enough to bring complete transformation. The solemn and somber mood of the play *Macbeth* has been totally changed by the adapted characters of Nathan's *Scots on the Rocks*. To conclude, it can be safely said that *Scots on the Rocks* is a wonderful parody of Macbeth changing the tragic tone into comic one.

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