

## Appropriating *Macbeth* in the Contact Zone. The Politics of Place, Space, and Liminality in David Greig's *Dunsinane*

**Abstract:** To a greater or lesser extent, the practices of rewriting and restaging a preexisting artefact imply some sort of movement, or – more technically – relocation. Remaining rooted in eleventh-century Scotland, David Greig's *Dunsinane* (2010) – commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and first performed at the Hampstead Theatre, London – cannot be defined as a *transposition diégétique* or *transdiégétisation* (its Shakespearean source is not dislocated from its original spatio-temporal frame). However, this thought-provoking sequel to *Macbeth* (1606), whose title explicitly evokes the Bard's tragedy and the location of its final action, enters what Mary Louise Pratt would define as a 'contact zone'. In this light, *Dunsinane* becomes a site for intercultural clashes between Scottishness and Englishness, while simultaneously pointing at contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. Divided into four parts corresponding to the four seasons, Greig's piece is set in the aftermath of Shakespeare's play and opens with the English forces camouflaging themselves before attacking Macbeth's castle. Focusing on the figure of the English general Siward and his young soldiers invading a hostile land, the play imagines what happens after the tyrant's deposition and Malcolm's installation. Exploring the complex idea of place/space in this revisionary appropriation of *Macbeth*, this article aims to show how a permeable, multifaceted, and protean country (un)written *sous rature* such as Scotland becomes a liminal and 'liquid' contact zone which is not only a battlefield for armies but also for cultures and ideas.

**Key words:** *Appropriation, Greig, Macbeth, place, politics, Scotland*

### Out of Place: David Greig's Sense of (Un)Belonging<sup>1</sup>

David Greig's troubled relation to the ideas of 'home' and 'belonging', and consequently to the notions of 'place' and 'space', is something inevitably problematic and complex. In a 2009 interview with Mark Fisher, Scotland's most successful playwright candidly declared: "I don't really have anywhere that I'm from".<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the Greigs came from a tiny place 50 km to the north west of Aberdeen while David was born in Edinburgh in 1969, brought up in Jos (Nigeria), where his father worked in the construction industry, and educated in an American Baptist school:

My parents made quite a big leap from a conventional working-class Scottish background to this rather glamorous expatriate environment, where people owned horses and had glitzy parties. It was a bit like something out of a novel and I loved it. We came back to Edinburgh when I was about 12 and I didn't like it at all. I would have preferred to have stayed in Africa.<sup>3</sup>

When he returned to Scotland with his family in 1980, David was a kid with no

<sup>1</sup> On this topic, see also Maria Elena Capitani, "The Sense of (Un)Belonging: David Greig's (Un?)Scottishness in *Pyrenees* and *Damascus*", *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, 10 (December 2017), 19-39.

<sup>2</sup> Mark Fisher and David Greig, "Interview: Suspect Cultures & Home Truths", in Anja Müller and Clare Wallace, eds., *Cosmotopia: Transnational Identities in David Greig's Theatre* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2011), 15.

<sup>3</sup> Cit. in Hilary Whitney, "The Arts Desk Q&A: Playwright David Greig" (The Arts Desk, 6 February 2010), <http://www.theartsdesk.com/theatre/theartsdesk-qa-playwright-david-greig?page=0,1>.

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<sup>4</sup> Initially, Greig sounded American, while now he describes his speaking as ‘RP neutral’ – so neutral that his fellow Scots often think he is a foreigner.

<sup>5</sup> Ian Brown, *Scottish Theatre: Diversity, Language, Continuity* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), 227-228.

<sup>6</sup> Fisher and Greig, “Interview”, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 15-16.

traces of accent.<sup>4</sup> In addition, in 1987 Greig moved south of the border to study English and Drama at the University of Bristol. As Ian Brown puts it, “Greig’s early life marks him as a Scot outside Scotland”.<sup>5</sup>

After completing his degree in England, however, Greig felt deep down that he had to try to embrace his roots. Thus, he stationed himself permanently in his motherland, where he currently lives, in order to become a writer, or – more specifically – a dramatist writing plays for Edinburgh’s Traverse Theatre: “It was to do with that particular audience. I knew that what I wanted to say was for those people. It was a conversation with them”.<sup>6</sup> Greig’s sudden dislocation from his birthplace, his subsequent relocation to Africa, and the forced journey back – followed by an English entr’acte before the final settlement in Scotland – generated in him a strong sense of deracination and an impossibility to accept any preconceived notion of ‘home’: “if someone asks me where I’m from, I can’t really answer the question. So that troubles my concept of home: where am I at home?”.<sup>7</sup>

As a result of this displacement, Greig admits that he tends to establish an intimate connection with some places, probably to come to terms with the feeling of homelessness provoked by his fractured biographical journey. As explained in the above-mentioned interview, Greig’s dramas are peopled with articulate characters constantly struggling to re-negotiate their cultural identity and position in the world, possibly an unconscious strategy that helps the dramatist explore and seek to fill a personal void:

I have a very passionate connection to certain places. I attach to them and make them home. I know what it is that makes a place home to someone because it is that which is absent in my experience. Therefore I seek out that experience. I’m very interested in community or the sense of history of a place. There are lots of speeches in my plays where someone will look at the ground and imagine its past or talk about the social structure of a home or the sense of belonging. These are all things that people in the plays may speak longingly of and it’ll be me – I always have that feeling.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, Greig might be defined as a dislocated writer who delves deeper into the stratified idea of place and constantly oscillates between roots and routes, belonging and unbelonging, microcosm and macrocosm, local and global. The fascinating idea of simultaneously dwelling in two opposite poles proves to be extremely productive from a creative point of view, having fuelled Greig’s dramatic imagery and inspired many of his pieces: “I’m not in the middle of these two extremes – I inhabit both ways of being: a powerful compulsive desire to be rooted and a powerful awareness that I’m not. It’s the tension between those two things that produce quite a lot of the material in my work”.<sup>9</sup>

This personal and artistic strain is evident in Greig’s ambivalent relationship to Scotland, a topic that, as Clare Wallace observes, he “approaches with palpable circumspection, perhaps justifiably. Looming large here are questions of national

identity, the politics of place and representation”.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, when it comes to Scotland, Greig seems to become wary and elusive. This ambiguity is well exemplified by the cautiously evasive answer he gave Caridad Svich when she asked about his Scottish allegiance in 2007: “I rarely write directly or recognizably about Scotland.... But I am always writing from Scotland: Of it? About it? Despite it? ... [My] experience of being Scottish is one of being intensely and viscerally attached to a place in which I am perceived as a stranger”.<sup>11</sup>

Greig’s problematic relation to his motherland, originating precisely from his sense of alienation, is an arena of contrasts and paradoxes, like Scotland itself. The dramatist who is reported to have affirmed he certainly hated his country.<sup>12</sup> is the same person describing himself as “a geek about Scottish culture”,<sup>13</sup> someone who has indefatigably researched Caledonian literary and cultural heritage to retrace its history and, in a sense, re-appropriate his own story: “Something in the desire to have a place I was from meant that I ought to know that sort of stuff. If you’re going to be a writer, you have to have a place where you’re from and this was the best option available to me”.<sup>14</sup>

However, it is important to bear in mind that identity is a fluid and unfixed category, which constantly rewrites itself and cannot be encapsulated in a narrow and rigid definition. If we compare Greig’s earlier statements with more recent ones, we can see how the playwright’s relation to Scotland has evolved over the past few years. For instance, in a 2012 interview, Greig argued: “The pie chart of identity does shift for me as I move through time” and unexpectedly confessed that, at that moment, he felt “quite at home in this [Scottish] culture, established within it in literary and theatrical terms”.<sup>15</sup> However, immediately after, he added that that long-awaited sense of belonging was something unusual, which started worrying him: “I notice glimmers of the feeling of wanting to run away from that, wanting to rebel against it. I mean it’s an interesting, hopefully a relatively creative tension.... There’s something important in not feeling you’ve arrived”.<sup>16</sup> Even if Greig is perfectly aware that he has officially become a member of Scotland’s theatrical establishment (his current position as Artistic Director of Edinburgh’s Royal Lyceum Theatre shows evidence of that), it is exactly the idea of ‘never arriving’, of crossing borders, and of unfinishedness that pushes a displaced writer to explore the politics and poetics of new geographical and theatrical landscapes.

Remarkably, this sense of open-endedness is entirely in keeping with Greig’s thoughts on theatre (which, for him, is an inherently political art form) and, more specifically, on what he terms ‘Rough Theatre’. In the essay closing the collection *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (2008), edited by Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders, Greig explains that he uses the word ‘rough’ to indicate something immediate, sketchy, unfinished, whose unsmooth texture is visible, something dangerous, perhaps even childish or adolescent, lacking accuracy but useful, “emotionally fragile, discombobulated, dislocated from time and place, hung over”.<sup>17</sup> For Greig, ‘Rough Theatre’ is a transformative art form intervening

<sup>10</sup> Clare Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 69.

<sup>11</sup> Cit. in David Pattie, “Scotland & Anywhere: The Theatre of David Greig”, in Müller and Wallace, eds., *Cosmopolita*, 54.

<sup>12</sup> Dan Rebellato, “Introduction”, in David Greig, *Plays 1: Europe; The Architect; The Cosmonaut’s Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union* [2002] (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2009), x.

<sup>13</sup> Fisher and Greig, “Interview”, 24.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Cit. in Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, 160.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> David Greig, “Rough Theatre”, in Rebecca D’Monté and Graham Saunders, eds., *Cool Britannia? British Political Drama in the 1990s* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 214.

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in the realm of the imagination, which exposes the underneath of an imperfect structure and opens up possibilities, a theatre that cannot change the world but can offer the audience “a moment of liberated space in which to change ourselves”.<sup>18</sup> As scholars such as Clare Wallace, Verónica Rodríguez and Dilek Inan have demonstrated, and as this article will suggest, Greig’s palimpsestic play *Dunsinane* (2010), which adopts both intertextual and allegorical strategies and juxtaposes the epic with the everyday, can be read within the aesthetic frame of ‘Rough Theatre’.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>19</sup> See Clare Wallace, “Unfinished Business – Allegories of Otherness in *Dunsinane*”, in Müller and Wallace, eds., *Cosmotopia*, 196-213; Verónica Rodríguez and Dilek Inan, “Combining the Epic with the Everyday: David Greig’s *Dunsinane*”, *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*, 5.2 (June 2012), 56-78.

### ‘Travelling Tales’: Appropriating (and Displacing) ‘The Scottish Play’

The urge to repeat (in a different way) and to rewrite is an intrinsically theatrical practice. Taking into consideration the two-faced nature of the medium (dramatic and performative), in her seminal *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006) Julie Sanders states that “[t]he dramatic form encourages persistent reworking and imagining. Performance is an inherently adaptive art; each staging is a collaborative interpretation, one which often reworks a playscript to acknowledge contemporary concerns or issues”.<sup>20</sup> Theatre is also embedded into the idea of collective memory, serving as a repository of easily reachable and malleable cultural capital, as Margherita Laera notes: “theatre is the site for the recollection, re-elaboration, and contestation of readily available cultural material, and for the production of new, and newly adaptable, ideas out of established ones”.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2006), 48.

<sup>21</sup> Margherita Laera, “Introduction: Return, Rewrite, Repeat: The Theatricality of Adaptation”, in Laera, ed., *Theatre and Adaptation: Return, Rewrite, Repeat* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 45-46.

<sup>23</sup> Charles Marowitz, *Recycling Shakespeare: The Dramatic Medium* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), ix.

An adaptor of different kinds of narratives, myths, folklore, and specific authors including Ovid, Plutarch, and Holinshed, Shakespeare left us a dramatic corpus defined by Sanders as “a crucial touchstone for the scholarship of appropriation as a literary practice and form”.<sup>22</sup> Continuously re-read, re-interpreted, re-written, re-staged, re-worked or – more generally – re-made, the output of the greatest English writer has uniquely challenged and crossed cultural, artistic, geographical, historical, and generic boundaries, turning itself into a stratified, fluid, and porous transnational heritage, a treasure in transit(ion) which, “like a prism” – as Charles Marowitz suggests – “refracts many pinpoints of colour, rather than transmitting one unbroken light”.<sup>23</sup> Like a living organism transgressing its own borders and incessantly re-adapting itself to the world and the world to itself, the Bard’s extended corpus has become a privileged site for the examination of the poetics and politics of adaptation and appropriation as well as its aesthetic and ethical dimension as a literary and cultural practice.

Although it is not easy to draw a clear-cut distinction between the notions of ‘adaptation’ and ‘appropriation’, a clarification is necessary at this point. In a recently emerged field such as Adaptation (and Appropriation) Studies, which is constantly enriched by contacts with various other academic disciplines (including Literary Studies, Theatre Studies, Film Studies, Cultural Studies, Translation Studies, Reception Studies), terminology tends to be highly slippery and unstable. As the title of her volume suggests, Sanders tries to distinguish between these two

categories: adaptation “constitutes a more sustained engagement with a single text or source than the more glancing act of allusion or quotation, even citation, allows”, while appropriation “carries out the same sustained engagement as adaptation but frequently adopts a posture of critique, even assault”.<sup>24</sup> Drawing on Bakhtin’s belief that communication is always dialogic (“The word is born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word that is already in an object”<sup>25</sup>), the Shakespeare scholar Christy Desmet argues that the more radical practice of appropriation, which always carries political overtones, should not be defined as an imperialistic act of literary usurpation at the expense of the source (in our case, the Bard), but as a two-way relationship between the appropriator and the appropriated:

It is possible to see appropriation differently. The term itself signifies, at least historically, both theft and donation, giving and taking. Appropriation therefore may be seen as a dialogical phenomenon – not simply a conversation or collaboration between appropriating and source texts, but an exchange that involves both sharing and contested ownership.<sup>26</sup>

In this light, borrowing Kwame Anthony Appiah’s terminology, Shakespearean narratives might be described as “travelling tales” whose transnational and transhistorical appropriations encourage a stimulating “cosmopolitan conversation”<sup>27</sup> across cultures. In this article, I will opt for the term ‘appropriation’, since it has the advantage of stressing the creative (and frequently subversive) potential of Greig’s play, while I will avoid ‘adaptation’, which emphasises the derivative quality of the rewritten product, a palimpsestic artefact that should never be considered a pale copy of the original.

To a greater or lesser extent, the practices of appropriating a preexisting tale from a different angle and restaging it imply some sort of movement, which could be defined – more technically – as relocation. If relocation usually refers to the transposition of what Gérard Genette terms *hypotext*<sup>28</sup> (the original text), the idea of a ‘transfer movement’ can also be applied to the figure of the source dramatist (who is metaphorically brought by the appropriator to the spectators) and to the receiving audience (invited to cross spatial and cultural borders). However, remaining rooted in eleventh-century Scotland, Greig’s 2010 thought-provoking sequel to *Macbeth* (1606) cannot be described as a *transposition diégétique* (*diegetic transposition*) or *transdiégétisation* (*transdiegetization*) (“an action can be transposed from one period to another, or from one location to another, or both”<sup>29</sup>). Rather than dislocating the source from its original spatio-temporal frame, Greig’s appropriation of the Bard’s narrative indeed “relies heavily on its geographical and contextual framework – and on its specific standing in Scotland”,<sup>30</sup> as Julia Boll has underlined.

*Dunsinane* was commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company and premiered in February 2010 at the Hampstead Theatre, London, under the

<sup>24</sup> Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation*, 4.

<sup>25</sup> Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel”, in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* [1975], trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin and London: U. of Texas P., 1981), 279.

<sup>26</sup> Christy Desmet, “Recognizing Shakespeare, Rethinking Fidelity: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Appropriation”, in Alexa Huang and Elizabeth Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 42.

<sup>27</sup> Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton U. P., 2005), 267.

<sup>28</sup> See Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982), 11-12.

<sup>29</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: Literature in the Second Degree*, trans. by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1997), 296. The French original reads: “une action peut être transposée d’une diégèse dans une autre, par exemple d’une époque à une autre, ou d’un lieu à un autre, ou les deux à la fois” (Genette, *Palimpsestes*, 343).

<sup>30</sup> Julia Boll, *The New War Plays: From Kane to Harris* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 137.

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direction of Roxana Silbert. This opening production was followed by a second one by the National Theatre of Scotland, first staged in association with the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, in May 2011. The play is set in the aftermath of Shakespeare's shortest and darkest tragedy and opens with the English troops camouflaging themselves before attacking the unnamed tyrant's (Macbeth) castle. Focusing on the character of the English General Siward and his young soldiers occupying an inhospitable place such as Scotland to bring peace and to secure England's northern border, Greig's re-visionary drama imagines what happens after the king's deposition and Malcolm's installation to the throne.

Starting from where Shakespeare left off four hundred years before him, Greig re-appropriates the tragedy universally known as 'The Scottish Play'. In an interview for the BBC, the dramatist admits that "to some degree for Scottish writers, it's always felt a little bit cheeky that unquestionably the greatest Scottish play was written by the great English playwright", and hints at the (postcolonial) idea of writing back to the English canon and to Shakespeare's take on Scottish history: "there is a slight sense of answering back a little bit. Playing with some of those concepts and characters, and claiming just a little bit of history from another point of view".<sup>31</sup> In line with this, during an interview with Hilary Whitney, Greig deconstructs the Bard's widely received narrative on the figure of Macbeth as a ruthless tyrant:

<sup>31</sup> Cit. in Nigel Wrench, "Writing Macbeth after Shakespeare" (BBC News, 10 February 2010), [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/arts\\_and\\_culture/8508803.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/arts_and_culture/8508803.stm).

there's also something that most Scots know about the real King Macbeth, which is that he probably wasn't a tyrant, he was probably quite a good king. He ruled for about 15 years at a time in Scottish history when the turnover in kings was something like one in every six months, so he must have been doing something right. He also embarked on what, at that time, was an epic six-month journey to Rome; if you had been an unpopular tyrant that would have been insane – you'd have lost your kingdom. So he must have been very confident that his kingdom would be there when he got back. So the cheeky bit of me thought, 'What if the stories of Macbeth being a tyrant turned out to be propaganda, a bit like the weapons of mass destruction?'<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> In Whitney, "The Arts Desk Q&A".

Thus, towards the end of the first act, Greig provides the contemporary audience with his (anti-Shakespearean) counter-discourse on the real King Macbeth through the praising words of the tyrant's widow, Gruach. This fictional female figure is an extremely fascinating character who serves as Lady Macbeth's strong and scheming counterpart. Indeed, in *Dunsinane*, Scotland's queen is still alive and Lulach, her teenage son from her first marriage as well as the heir to the throne according to the House of Moray, has escaped during the English assault on the castle:

GRUACH He was a good king.  
He ruled for fifteen years.  
Before him there were kings and kings and kings but not one of them could



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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.

My king was strong.

SIWARD Your king murdered your first husband.

GRUACH Yes.

SIWARD You don't seem to mind.

GRUACH I asked him to do it.

SIWARD Did he always do the things you asked?

GRUACH Mostly.

SIWARD WHERE IS YOUR SON?

GRUACH I DON'T KNOW.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>33</sup> David Greig, *Dunsinane* (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 32-33.

The central characters of Siward and Lady Gruach represent England's imperialistic drive masked as peacekeeping mission and Scotland's fierce defence of its own history, territory, and tradition, respectively. Even if – on a personal level – these two figures are attracted by each other, they epitomise two irreconcilable political and cultural poles that will compete throughout the play. In this light, it might be argued that *Dunsinane* enters one of Mary Louise Pratt's liminal and uncomfortable 'contact zones', that is to say those "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today".<sup>34</sup> Therefore, Greig's follow-up to *Macbeth* (as well as Scotland's hostile territory) becomes a multilayered site for tense encounters between two enemy countries and two antagonistic identities, Englishness and Scottishness. At the same time, the play points at contemporary conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, opening up a wider field of interpretation and fostering a broader debate. As Trish Reid observes, "*Dunsinane* looks both inward, towards Scotland's past, and outward to comment on twenty-first-century global politics", thus "embod[y]ing the tension between national and international concerns".<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 7.

<sup>35</sup> Trish Reid, *Theatre & Scotland* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 65-66.

In an interview given during the rehearsal process, Greig himself declared that the play grew out of the zeitgeist:

About five years ago, I think, I had noticed that there was a lot of productions of *Macbeth* around the place and I could sort of see why there were productions of *Macbeth* because at that time we had just, I say we, Britain and America, had just invaded ... Iraq and occupied Iraq and so it seemed to me there's an element of looking at the military and looking at the idea of the overthrow of the tyrant.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> "Royal Shakespeare Company: David Greig talks about *Dunsinane*" (Royal Shakespeare Company – YouTube channel, 31 January 2011), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZsAyy-KuRzQ>.

Despite the strong relationship between this drama and its sociopolitical context, Greig deliberately avoids including explicit references to current events. Therefore, *Dunsinane* should not be regarded as a purely polemical work about the disastrous consequences of the Western invasion of the Middle East in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Rather than dislocating *Macbeth* from its original

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frame, Greig effectively displaces the military and (post)colonial discourses which permeate his sequel, creating a stratified and highly resonant contemporary piece in which the power dynamics of eleventh century Scotland and today's international politics are closely linked and fruitfully interwoven. As Boll makes clear, Greig adopts a subtly indirect approach to the Iraq question, drawing interesting parallels between the political pattern of Scotland (where, as Macduff explains, "[t]here are many clans and families but there are two parties that sit at the heart of everything ... Alba in the west and Moray in the north")<sup>37</sup> and that of Eastern societies:

<sup>37</sup> Greig, *Dunsinane*, 30.

*Dunsinane* is an example of how to engage with the Iraq war without using testimony, without situating the play in Iraq, or even in the correct century – in short, how to write about Iraq without writing about Iraq.... While the place is clearly Scotland, it is doubling for Iraq, demonstrated by the similar parameters of the operation – bringing peace, but also securing economic interests – and by the political set-up of the invaded country, which, crudely said, mirrors that of the Shia-Sunni split in present-day Iraq.... This fictional Scotland, like the actual one, is an old kingdom, perceived as 'barbarian' by its fictional and historical enemies and displaying a palimpsestic culture both in the play and in the present age. There is again a parallel to be drawn between the obliterated Celtic-Scottish past and that of Ancient Mesopotamia and Greater Persia, where the occupying forces were supposed to help settle in a new government that will shift the power structures in the country and ensure safety for Fortress West at its south-eastern fringe. In Greig's play, it is the northern border of the hegemonic power that needs securing against the barbarians: a minor variation in geopolitics.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Boll, *The New War Plays*, 138.

In Greig's powerful palimpsest, a present-day transnational conflict in the Middle East, like a new layer of writing, has been superimposed on the (partly erased and re-imagined) fictional past dramatised by Shakespeare in *Macbeth*. Far from being a mere backdrop, Scotland proves to be a 'rough', extreme, liminal, and multifaceted place (and space) in which antagonistic forces "clash and grapple with each other", as Pratt would put it, "in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination".<sup>39</sup>

#### "Here We Are Rock, Bog, Forest and Loch": Scotland as a Liminal Place

*Dunsinane* focuses on the ideas of place and space from its very beginning. Opening the play with an epigraph borrowed from the fifth act of *Macbeth* – "What wood is this before us?"<sup>39</sup> – Greig immediately acknowledges his debt to the Bard and, through this initial reference to the Wood of Birnam, highlights the importance of place in the source text as well as in its contemporary sequel. Moreover, the title of Greig's follow-up not only pays homage to his literary father by indicating the location of the final action of the tragedy, but even more relevantly, as Wallace observes, "is noteworthy in the way it alters the focus of the source text, directing us away from Shakespeare's tyrant to the site of his demise, suggesting the precedence of place over personage".<sup>40</sup>

<sup>39</sup> William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London and New York: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), 284.

<sup>40</sup> Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, 92.



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The rhythm of the play, which is divided into four parts corresponding to the four seasons (from spring to winter), is determined throughout by the cycle of nature: “SIWARD: 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”.<sup>41</sup> The action starts in spring: the English army prepares for battle at the break of dawn, while it rains. The young soldiers coming from the south are not ready to face the insidious, weird, and inhospitable land which lays ahead of them, as this monologue by the unnamed Boy Soldier shows:

<sup>41</sup> Greig, *Dunsinane*, 24.

We boarded our ships at the Thames mouth.  
There were two thousand of us and also  
Some horses for the knights to ride and animals  
For us to slaughter on the way.

We stood on the Essex shore a mess of shingle,  
Some of us new and eager for a fight and others  
Not so sure but all of us both knowing and not knowing  
What lay ahead of us.

Scotland.

Scotland. Where we would install a king.<sup>42</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 9.

The inexperienced Boy Soldier appears both excited and hesitant about the upcoming war and the mysterious land they are going to invade. When the English fleet lands in Fife, he is immediately struck by the savage nature of Scotland, which seems “a wild place compared to Kent”.<sup>43</sup> Rodríguez and Inan observe that the Boy’s four opening monologues, framing each act and throwing light on the daily side of experience, constitute a powerful technique adopted by Greig in order to “intertwine epic characteristics and everyday preoccupations”.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the descriptions provided by the young soldier are not merely objective reports but emotionally charged personal accounts of war life combining reason and feeling.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>44</sup> Rodríguez and Inan, “Combining the Epic with the Everyday”, 68.

Despite their adverse reaction to the harsh landscape and the difficult situation in which they find themselves, the English troops are supposed to obey orders, even when the Sergeant commands his men to imagine a forest and disguise themselves as Birnam Wood:

SERGEANT You –  
— Sir?  
SERGEANT Be a tree.  
— Yes, Sir.  
SERGEANT You and you and you – make yourself undergrowth –  
—Yes, Sir.  
SERGEANT Come on!  
You’re supposed to be a forest!  
You – make the noise of a bird –  
...  
Close your eyes –

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Conjure up a wood – walk in it – look about you –

...

The forest's made of trees and in between the trees the darkness. It's not the something of it that fools the eyes but the nothing in between. All of you – get on your knees, dig your hands into the bog water – smear your faces with black mud – we'll make a forest of you yet! – come on!<sup>45</sup>

<sup>45</sup>Greig, *Dunsinane*, 10-11.

This physical fusion between the English army and the impenetrable Wood of Birnam is highly evocative and revealing about the cardinal importance that the notion of place assumes in this play (and, more generally, in Greig's entire output). If, in this scene, the boys turn themselves into a forest, shortly after, when Siward first meets Gruach, the body of the General becomes his motherland:

SIWARD ... I am Siward.

I am England.

Do you speak English?

GRUACH Yes.

SIWARD What is your name?

GRUACH Gruach.

SIWARD Gruach.

Gruach, what work do you do here in Dunsinane?

GRUACH Work?

SIWARD What is your place here?

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 27.

GRUACH MY PLACE HERE IS QUEEN.<sup>46</sup>

Moreover, we should note a final repetition of the word 'place' in this short duologue, implying a parallel identification between the tyrant's widow and her position in the castle. Even if, technically, Gruach can no longer be considered a queen since her husband has been killed during the English attack, as Siward later points out, "she is still a woman – and this is still her house and we're her guests in it".<sup>47</sup> As a female human being, in the gendered hierarchy of things, Gruach belongs to a more private kind of space, the domestic territory, in which she continues to occupy a dominant position. The convergence between people and place(s) is a recurring element in *Dunsinane*. At the end of the first act, for instance, several bodies of dead soldiers are brought into the castle yard and laid out in rows, being referred to exclusively by the name of their place of origin:

— Leicester.

Leicester.

Dunno.

Essex.

Cumbria.

Newcastle.

York.

York.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 35.

York.<sup>48</sup>

Shortly after, Siward highlights the close correspondence between the recently installed king Malcolm and the country he rules: "When I say you – I mean Scotland. You are Scotland".<sup>49</sup> For Rodríguez and Inan, the frequent use of

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 38.

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metonymies (the title of the play perfectly exemplifies this technique) is an effective strategy through which Greig displays “epic versions of national identity”.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>50</sup> Rodríguez and Inan, “Combining the Epic with the Everyday”, 63.

However, with all its nuances and contradictions, Scotland is an unstable signifier, a fluid and fragmented place doomed to ambivalence, which stubbornly resists definition and closure. Even Malcolm, the king of this paradoxical country, confesses that he is not able to grasp its true essence:

It's quite ridiculous isn't it? I'm King of this country and even I don't understand it. Sometimes I think you could be born in this country. Live in it all your life. Study it. Travel the length and breadth of it. And still – if someone asked you – to describe it – all you'd be able to say about it without fear of contradiction is – ‘It's cold’.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Greig, *Dunsinane*, 29.

Constantly compared to England by the invading army, the bitterly cold country governed by Malcolm defies any received idea of ‘normality’ and revels in queerness. The Boy Soldier states that Scotland is a territory existing exclusively ‘in relation’ (as England’s dark and wild counterpart), a peripheral and slippery space where everything looks ambiguously uncertain: “And we began to wonder what sort of country this is / Where everything that in England was normal – / Summer, land, beer, a house, a bed – for example – / In Scotland – that thing would turn out to be made of water – / This is what you learn here – nothing is solid”.<sup>52</sup> In other words, when you find yourself in this alien land of “rock, bog, forest and loch”,<sup>53</sup> it is wise to “be careful where you put your feet”.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 40.

Another element of difference and miscomprehension between the English colonisers and local people is inevitably the linguistic aspect. Although the play is performed in English, Greig points out that the Scottish characters speak Gaelic and includes their words in square brackets. It should also be noted that the educated Scots are bilingual, while the English suffer from monolingualism. This incapacity to understand the indigenous language of the enemy, Wallace writes, “places them at a disadvantage in their chosen role as mediators and arbiters of justice”.<sup>55</sup> After sleeping together and becoming more and more intimate, Siward wakes up next to Gruach and feels uncomfortable within her domestic microcosm, where women speak exclusively Gaelic while preparing food: “I don’t like to be in the presence of people talking secretly”.<sup>56</sup> Gruach invites the General to learn her language, but Siward finds it utterly incomprehensible:

<sup>55</sup> Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, 94.

<sup>56</sup> Greig, *Dunsinane*, 76.

SIWARD Your language is hard to learn.  
GRUACH We like it that way.  
SIWARD Why?  
GRUACH Your English is a woodworker's tool.  
Siward.  
Hello, goodbye, that tree is green,  
Simple matters.  
A soldier's language sent out to capture the world in words.  
Always trying to describe.  
Throw words at the tree and eventually you'll force me to see the tree just as you see it.  
We long since gave up believing in descriptions.  
Our language is the forest.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

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A magnetic and extraordinarily clever woman endowed with supernatural powers, Gruach provides us with a fascinating description of the essence of both languages. Intriguingly, the powerful image of the wood comes back. For the dethroned queen, English is one of the basic tools of a woodworker, a “denotative”<sup>58</sup> language – as Wallace has rightly termed it – which can only formulate simple concepts. As an idiom revolving around the idea of literal meaning, English is the language of the invader, a language which colonises the world through concrete words. By contrast, Gaelic seems a dark and dense forest of signs, a connotative language in which words are laden with emotional and imaginative echoes, a space – like Scotland itself – inhabited by a myriad of secondary meanings.

<sup>58</sup> Wallace, *The Theatre of David Greig*, 94.

## Conclusion

When asked about the genesis of *Dunsinane* in 2010, Greig confessed that the play had been in his head for six or seven years. Although the main question for him was “What happened to Macbeth?”, the character he was most drawn to from an emotional point of view was Siward, a good and honest man who naively thought it was possible to impose peace on a wild land, too cryptic, tribal, changeable, internally fragmented and territorially distinctive to be understood by the pragmatism of the English. Interestingly, the vivid mental image that pushed Greig to write the play was that of Siward standing on the edge of a typically Scottish bog:

I had this image of a soldier 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. His desire is to do good, to be a good commander, but he knows he's about to step into this big horrible morass.... You don't necessarily see the image of the soldier standing on the edge of the bog, but it's there throughout the whole play.<sup>59</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Cit. in Whitney, “The Arts Desk Q&A”.

Greig's description of the bog image gives us a sense of the impact of a highly symbolic and shifting landscape on his re-visionary sequel to “The Scottish Play”, in which the setting becomes a character and characters merge with place. Scotland, David Pattie reminds us, “is both a world of bone, flesh, bog, and metal, and a world of seemings and appearances: the people who live there have come to understand that this apparent contradiction is in practice no contradiction at all”.<sup>60</sup> An absent presence looming large over Greig's entire output, this permeable, prismatic, and protean country (un)written *sous rature* becomes a liminal and liquid contact zone which is not only a battlefield for armies but also for cultures and ideas. In this theatrical space of infinite possibilities, Greig affirms, “the fabric of ‘reality’ will tear and we can experience transcendence”<sup>61</sup> – that moment of

<sup>60</sup> David Pattie, “Dissolving into Scotland: National Identity in *Dunsinane* and *The Strange Undoing of Prudencia Hart*”, *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 26.1 (March 2016), 25.

<sup>61</sup> Greig, “Rough Theatre”, 220.

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transcendence which, for him, is “the political foundation of Rough Theatre”.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

The stratified inspiration behind Greig’s (re)writing – (hyper)textual, visual, and emotional – shows how a multilayered play such as *Dunsinane* originates from different sign systems. Crossing various kinds of borders and blending traditional roots with new routes, Greig’s appropriation of *Macbeth* does not trace its texture back to a single matrix. Rather, it is a palimpsestic artefact in flux and in transit, which, in Douglas Lanier’s words, “has no single or central root and no vertical structure. Instead, like the underground root system of rhizomatic plants, it has a horizontal, decentered multiplicity of subterranean roots that cross each other, bifurcating and recombining, breaking off and restarting”.<sup>63</sup> As an effective and affective product of ‘Rough Theatre’, *Dunsinane* exposes the “joins and bolts”<sup>64</sup> as well as the intricacies and interstices of its fascinating rhizomatic structure.

<sup>63</sup> Douglas Lanier, “Shakespearean Rhizomatics: Adaptation, Ethics, Value”, in Huang and Rivlin, eds., *Shakespeare and the Ethics of Appropriation*, 28.

<sup>64</sup> Greig, “Rough Theatre”, 213.