

James Tink\*

## Horrible Imaginings: Jan Kott, the Grotesque, and *Macbeth, Macbeth*

**Abstract:** Throughout Jan Kott's *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, a keyword for the combination of philosophical, aesthetic and modern qualities in Shakespearean drama is "grotesque." This term is also relevant to other influential studies of early-modern drama, notably Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque, as well as Wolfgang Kayser's psychoanalytic criticism. Yet if this tradition of the Shakespearean grotesque has problematized an idea of the human and of humanist values in literature, can this also be understood in posthuman terms? This paper proposes a reading of Kott's criticism of the grotesque to suggest where it indicates a potential interrogation of the human and posthuman in Shakespeare, especially at points where the ideas of the grotesque or absurdity indicate other ideas of causation, agency or affect, such as the "grand mechanism" It will then argue for the continuing relevance of Kott's work by examining a recent work of Shakespearean adaptation as appropriation, the 2016 novel *Macbeth, Macbeth* by Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey which attempts a provocative and transgressive retelling of *Macbeth* that imagines a 'sequel' to the play that emphasises ideas of violence and ethics. The paper argues that this creative intervention should be best understood as a continuation of Kott's idea of the grotesque in Shakespeare, but from the vantage point of the twenty-first century in which the grotesque can be understood as the modification or even disappearance of the human. Overall, it is intended to show how the reconsideration of the grotesque may elaborate questions of being and subjectivity in our contemporary moment just as Kott's study reflected his position in the Cold War.

**Keywords:** Jan Kott; grotesque; absurd; *Macbeth*; adaptation and appropriation; *Macbeth, Macbeth*; Ewan Fernie; the posthuman.

Jan Kott is one of the great modern instigators of the Shakespearean grotesque. If this fact is not always readily acknowledged, it is because of the impact of other memorable concepts in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964): the

---

\* Tohoku University, Japan. [tink.james.michael.a4@tohoku.ac.jp](mailto:tink.james.michael.a4@tohoku.ac.jp)

“Grand mechanism” of history with which the tragedies and history plays were said to explore royal politics as secular violence, the existentialist reading of *Hamlet* as Cold War dissident intellectual, and the comparison of *King Lear* to the work of Samuel Beckett. These provocative interpretations served to refashion Shakespeare from early-modern England to post-war Poland. Nevertheless, one of the recurrent critical terms of that book (in the influential English translation) is the idea that Shakespeare is our contemporary because of an aesthetics of the grotesque and the uncomfortable, rather than an ethos of decorum or the classical: “The downfall of the tragic hero is a confirmation and recognition of the absolute; whereas the downfall of the grotesque actor means mockery of the absolute and its desecration” (132). The “grotesque quality” that was said to be a “striking feature” (131) of contemporary theatre such as *Endgame* was held to be the revisioning of a Shakespearean version of the grotesque.

The impact of Kott’s work on theatrical productions in the UK and English-language productions in the second half of the twentieth century was indisputably immense (Taylor 181). This originally stemmed from the Royal Shakespeare Company’s celebrated 1963 production of the history plays by John Barton and Peter Hall, *The Wars of the Roses*, which incorporated ideas and even stage designs inspired by Kott (Jowett 101). More generally, Sukanta Chaudhuri asserts that Kott influenced global Shakespeare studies by encouraging an “inversion politics” that challenged hierarchies of gender, class and identity in the canon (105). This essay will consider a contemporary example of such inverted and experimental Shakespearean criticism: the novel *Macbeth, Macbeth* (2016) by Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey.<sup>1</sup> I will argue that this work, an erudite adaptation of *Macbeth* that provides a thoughtful reflection on the play by way of a fictional sequel, explores ideas of the posthuman in Shakespeare through a mode of the grotesque that is in fact indebted to the example of Kott. Therefore, this essay will first consider the posthuman implications of Kott’s criticism, then the idea of the Shakespearean grotesque, before a consideration of the novel in these contexts.

### **Kott and the Posthuman**

In the twenty-first century, how might Kott help us to better think about nature/culture and human/non-human in Shakespeare? The “Grand Mechanism” itself, for example, implies a destructive and uncaring machine of History that may resemble not so much a cosmic hierarchy as an idea of an impersonal

---

<sup>1</sup> Ewan Fernie and Simon Palfrey, *Macbeth, Macbeth*, Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. All rights reserved.

network: “But what is this Grand Mechanism which starts operating at the foot of the throne and to which the whole kingdom is subjected?”, Kott asks, “A mechanism whose cogs are both great lords and hired assassins; a mechanism which forces people to violence, cruelty and treason; which constantly claims new victims?” (38). As with Actor Network Theory (ANT), it imagines totality as series of connections between agents, with the implication that subjects are best understood within this circuit: “The earth moves round the sun, and the history of the Renaissance is just a grand staircase, from the top of which ever new kings fall into the abyss” (40).

This also serves a dehumanising and unheroic approach to politics in Shakespeare as “tragic farce” (40) or the idea of the grotesque: “The notion of the absurd mechanism is probably the last metaphysical concept remaining in modern grotesque” (133). The grotesque in Kott can certainly have idealist connotations of the anti-tragic or what was popularised by Martin Esslin in the 1960s as the Absurd: “The grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience, That is why tragedy brings catharsis, while grotesque offers no consolation whatsoever,” Kott suggests in his essay on *King Lear* (132). Yet this grotesque also invites less humanistic possibilities, as in a later comment on the play: “There are no longer kings and subjects, fathers and children, husbands and wives. There are only huge Renaissance monsters, devouring one another like beasts of prey” (153). According to Alan Sinfield, this idea of the bestial was *the* popular reception of Kott’s work at the RSC, as in Peter Hall’s comment, ““Shakespeare always knew that man in action is basically an animal”” (162). Yet there are other forms of the non-human at play, as in this rumination on reading tragedy from the inhuman vantage of the mole (inspired by Hamlet’s “Well said, old mole” (*Ham.* 1:5:161):

A mole digs in the earth but will never come to its surface. New generations of moles are being born all the time, scatter the earth in all directions, but are themselves constantly buried by the earth. A mole has its dreams. For a long time it fancied itself the lord of creation, thinking the earth, sky and stars had been created for moles and promised them a mole-like immortality. But suddenly the mole has realized that it is just a mole, that the earth, sky and stars had not been created for it. A mole suffers, feels, and thinks, but its sufferings, feelings, and thoughts cannot alter its mole’s fate. (37)

This target here is Hegelian tragedy via Marx (Kott 36). The mole is the protagonist who discovers she or he is in fact neither the subject of history nor the inheritor of the earth. Thus, we infer, Shakespeare resisted the allure of politics of grand narratives and “great men”. And yet this may also have environmental implications: the earth and the elements are not in fact a domain under the sovereignty of the mole, who undergoes a displacement from heaven

to a more modest status as dethroned ontological subject. We might, albeit with some licence, even wonder if the mole suggests an idea of the Anthropocene, whereby the thinking subject does not in fact ultimately correlate with the outside world, as in Timothy Morton's idea of the environment as a super-massive "hyperobject" (164), or Quentin Meillassoux's "great outdoors" of the non-human universe (7). The Otherness, or indifference, of the non-human world is evoked through Kott's playful literary figure.

Kott even has something to say about the human relationship to AI and the algorithm. This is where he imagines the difference between the tragic and the grotesque in terms of free will and playing chess against a computer. If classical tragedy, he argues, idealises fate and choice as an opportunity for grandeur, then modern grotesque drama exposes the futility of individual choice against the system. "A man must play chess with an electronic computer, cannot leave or break the game, and has to lose the game" (136). This is a fable of the absurd "tragi-grotesque" (137), which is said to differ from tragedy as well as provide a debased idea of the end of history: "The Christian view of the end of the world, with the Last Judgement and its segregation of the just and unjust, is pathetic. The end of the world caused by the big bomb is spectacular but grotesque just the same"(137).

Kott writes from an earlier era of cybernetics and Mutually Assured Destruction, of the terrible, preposterous bomb at the climax of *Dr Strangelove*, in which Shakespeare was held to be both prophet and critic through his drama of a desacralized world. What was ultimately at stake in Kott's Shakespeare was the question of the future: what sort of subjectivity did Shakespeare suggest as an enduring form of human life for those living in the grotesque time of the twentieth century? This is the question that must be asked again in our century: Clare Colebrook suggests that posthuman thinking considers what sort of collective future is possible in which "the question of just 'who' we are remains open" (206). To investigate Kott, Shakespeare and the posthuman, we should look further at the meaning of the grotesque.

## The Grotesque

Bruce Clarke claims that the "posthuman per se is a mythopoetic production" (141) that begins whenever the presentation of the human is disrupted; as he states, "the posthuman event does not issue directly in a discourse but in an aesthetic production, an image or narrative that may then become the theme of a discourse that can start to make that call" (142). This notion of an aesthetic refiguration of the human resembles an aesthetic of the grotesque. Among the many definitions of the term, Phillip Thomson's remains apposite: the grotesque is "*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*" (37; italics in

original), That is to say the grotesque is the undoing or suspension of an assumed idea of the proper in representation and that this irresolution is itself productive; as Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund suggest, “a grotesque body that is incomplete or deformed forces us to question what it means to be human” and that this experience of dislocation “acknowledges the possibilities of an open structure in which there can be no certainty, no exclusive or permanent state of something which does not already contain within it something else”(3). Indeed, the origin of the term “grotesque” in renaissance Italian criticism of *la grottesca* was a description of the non-human figures and obscurely decorative ornamentation found on newly excavated Roman paintings (Thomson 13). From the sixteenth century onwards, the grotesque was a recognition of whenever the representation of the human or animal form was assumed to have somehow broken down, with discombobulating effects. Montaigne, for one, reflected on the grotesque in the opening to his essay “De l’amitié”, referring to the “crotresques et corps monstreux” (qtd. in Clayborough 3) of ornamental painting as a metaphor for his own writing: what John Florio translated as the “antique works and monstrous bodies, patched and muddled up together of diverse members without any certain or well-ordered form” (Greenblatt and Platt 40). The word’s English usage postdates Shakespeare, emerging in the 1640s (Clayborough 2); Ben Jonson, for example, comments in *Discoveries* of artists “painting chimeras, by the vulgar unaptly called grotesque,” (552), which reiterates how discussion of the grotesque effect involves an idea of the chimerical or monstrous as imaginative activity.

In the renaissance literature, therefore, the term generally refers to the representation of the body (Rhodes 68). A history of the grotesque is a way of imagining alternatives to the human, either as disagreeably monstrous, or revealing greater creativity and difference. Infamously, Hegel in his 1820s lectures on aesthetics denounced as grotesque the failure of the earliest era of symbolic art in world history to adequately picture the idea of intellectual freedom as an image (83). The figurative art of Asia was therefore dismissed as inferior to European classicism (Harpham 183). In contrast, in his preface to the play *Cromwell* (1827), Victor Hugo described the grotesque as a positive form of realism and variety in modern literature (Fuller 128-29). Yet arguably the most influential modern discourse of the grotesque in renaissance literary studies is that of Mikhail Bakhtin. In *Rabelais and His World* (first English translation 1968), the representation of the scatological body was held to be evidence of an entire pre-modern culture of “grotesque realism” (25-26). The medieval human body was imagined as the contest of a dignified upper stratum versus a common lower stratum, and from this dichotomy the human form at its neediest and leakiest was in fact said to symbolically partake in an entire cosmic scheme of life and renewal (21-25). The grotesque was thus associated with rituals of carnival –feasting, excess, laughter, purging –as a social phenomenon of the

body, whereby pre-modern, agrarian society was said to imagine its own cycle of life, death and renewal. (324). Shakespeare was a bystander in this study, but it became influential in author studies in the same period as the reception of Kott's grotesque, as Kott later acknowledged (*The Bottom Translation* 132-33). The reception of Bakhtin's model of the carnivalesque complemented existing studies of festivity and ritual in Shakespeare by C.L. Barber, Northrop Frye, and Francis Cornford (Stott 25-32), but also inspired more socio-economic and materialist accounts of early-modern theatre than the broader life-principle in Bakhtin's own work (Bristol 6-7): it remains an influential notion of the grotesque as a form that is part of the folkloric.

However, Bakhtin's was not the only poetics of the grotesque; other critics developed formalist approaches that complicated the idea of the human. In the work of Wolfgang Kayser, drawing on the artistic legacy of German Romanticism, the grotesque reflects both a structural principle in works and a response by a viewer (180). The irresolution of the grotesque is an experience of estrangement from the familiar, which is said to provoke feelings of "suddenness and surprise" (184) that "is primarily the expression of our failure to orient ourselves in the physical universe" (185). This is said to be symptomatic of the irruption of the unconscious *Es* into the security of the familiar, a psychological effect that Kayser provocatively calls the "demonic." Thus, the grotesque is ultimately defined as the attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world (188). This is a negative definition of the grotesque as something momentarily uncomfortable and uncomic and was thus criticized by Bakhtin as a modern misreading of the medieval, affirmative grotesque (Bakhtin 48). Yet it also reinforces the idea of the grotesque as a process, event or affect that disrupts existing categories of the human world. This is developed in the work of Geoffrey Harpham who defines the grotesque as the "paralysis of language" (6) which confounds the reader. The grotesque is a "non-thing" (4) that is never fixed but "always a process or progression" (14) and so occurs as the interruption of the same: "Grotesque figures seem to be singular events, appearing in the world by virtue of an illegitimate act of creation" (5). Without fully endorsing the demonic mode of Kayser, Harpham explores the consequences of the grotesque as a process of world-making that creates the uncanny impression of "a remote sense that in some other system than the one in which we normally operate some system that is primal, prior, or 'lower', the incongruous elements may be normative, meaningful, even sacred" (69). Harpham's idea of representation contiguous to a larger, stranger system may even anticipate ideas of the "weird" in literature (Fisher 10).

Kott's criticism therefore contributed to this longer legacy of the grotesque. In modern Shakespeare criticism, an antecedent was G. Wilson Knight's influential essay "Lear and the Comedy of the Grotesque" (1930), which claimed that the combination of royal tragedy with scenes of desperate

comedy in *King Lear* produced a grotesque quality of leading “the tightrope of our pity over the depths of bathos and absurdity” (184-58). Other critical approaches to a Shakespearean grotesque have studied the representation of physical bodies, with Sir John Falstaff as arguably the most famous grotesque body of appetite, as well as an implied presence in Bakhtin’s study of festive excess (Farnham 50; Bakhtin 275). More problematically, Richard III has also been traditionally interpreted as a markedly grotesque figure of inward villainy and deformed outward show (Edwards and Grauland 52), although this representation of disability as a synecdoche for political corruption surely requires a more sensitive critique (Houston Wood 135). The grotesque has also provided a means to question the distinction of human and non-human: Caliban, for example, has been frequently presented in theatre and criticism as a grotesque hybrid (Edwards and Grauland 49-50; Farnham 154), which, according to Marjorie Garber, also sustains *The Tempest’s* inquiry into what a “man” is (7). Moreover, one of the provocations of Kott was to suggest that the romance and intimacy of Titania and Bottom in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (4:1) was not so much a charming fantasy as a monstrous nightmare, “closer to the fearful visions of Bosch and to the grotesque of the surrealists” (*Shakespeare Our Contemporary* 229). In this instance, the grotesque provides something like a taboo image of physical life, and thus another suggestion of the posthuman.

One further development in Shakespeare and the posthuman has been the study of ideas of presence and event around the themes of ghosts and spectrality, especially following Jacques Derrida’s commentary on *Hamlet* in *Spectres of Marx*. In this work, Shakespeare was read by Derrida (via Marx) to explore a notion of the spectre or ghost as provisional and multiple alternative to the absolute Hegelian world spirit. The future and past are apprehended in the present in the form of the ghost as *l’arrivant* (Derrida 122). Could not Hamlet’s complaint, “The time is out of joint; O cursed spite /That ever I was born to set it right!” (1:5:186-7) also be another idea of the grotesque? It is an unresolved clash of incompatibles twisted “out of joint”, a paradox and paralysis of thought, a breach of the comfortable by the unknowable, and an event that requires a response. That the grotesque might involve an apprehension of the future as difference or alteration of the human returns us again to themes of temporality and the sense of the contemporary that concerned Kott. This will now be explored through the example of the novel *Macbeth, Macbeth*.

### ***Macbeth and Macbeth, Macbeth***

*Macbeth* is a play of the grotesque and the posthuman in which the protagonist steps outside the bonds of loyal kinship and encounters an increasingly frightening, uncertain and deadly state of existence. Although the drama’s most

visible grotesques are arguably the androgynous weird sisters who “should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (*Mac.* 1:3:45-47) (and perhaps the Hecate scenes in 4.1 tend to a more comic grotesque), the sense of alarm is conveyed largely through suggestions of sight and sound, of Macbeth’s “horrible imaginings” whereby “nothing is, but what is not” (1:3:40; 43) until the entire country “cannot/ Be called our mother but our grave,” and “where violent sorrow/ Seems a modern ecstasy” (4:3:165-66; 169-70). According to Kott, these were signs of the Grand Mechanism understood as nightmare: “There is only one theme in *Macbeth*: murder. History has been reduced to its simplest form, to one image and one division: those who kill and are killed” (87). Intriguingly, he also identifies a non-human presence: “In this tragedy there are only two great parts, but the third *dramatis persona* is the world...Macbeth’s world is tight, and there is no escape. Even nature in it is nightmarishly impenetrable and close, consisting of mud and phantoms” (89). The tragedy of *Macbeth* is said to be a manifest image of an entire world.

In this world, humans are in contact with the nonhuman supernatural. Protagonists are captivated by fantastic suggestions from elsewhere: Macbeth “seems rapt withal” (1:3:57) at the first summons of the witches, while Lady Macbeth also claims that dark thoughts “have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in an instant” (1:5:56-57). Kiernan Ryan argues that in their rush to realize the future in the present, the Macbeths are condemned to a fatal fantasy of proleptic thinking, in which they believe the future can be forced to come true (53). Whereas Hamlet feels compelled to wait and repair a broken present, Macbeth decides to take a leap “upon the bank and shoal of time” and “jump the life to come” (1:7:6-7). Ewan Fernie has explored the non-human potential of this leap of faith as the sign of the “Demonic” in literature. In *Macbeth*, regicide is “at once a killing and thrilling thing” (*The Demonic* 64) that draws Macbeth from conformist subjectivity to a more intense sense of existence whereby he is “so very much in love with life as to refuse its equation with mere being” (68) which is why he chooses destruction. The demonic seems to stand here for both intensity as a form of affect as well as a radical evil that is labour of the negative. The posthuman ramifications of this have been identified elsewhere by Bruce Clark as the historical deconstruction of the human image into inhuman parts of the “bestial, the daemonic, or the divine” (141). This trinity is also the borderland region of *Macbeth*.

Fernie has developed this demonic reading of the play in the experimental novel, co-written with Simon Palfrey, *Macbeth, Macbeth*. This work is notable as an example of what Julie Sanders calls an appropriation rather than an adaptation (37), in that the fiction is both a critical reflection on and an imaginative sequel to Shakespeare’s drama. Whereas other novelizations of Shakespeare have modernized the plays into modes of realism, this is outlandish



and fantastic: “Visceral, florid, grotesque,” according to the back-cover blurb. Although the authors nowhere acknowledge him, the novel is arguably a test case of how Kott’s grotesque is an influence on contemporary Shakespeare studies, and testament to its posthuman implications. Edwards and Graulund claim that “grotesque forms complicate, but also complement, theories of the ‘non-human’ and the ‘post-human’” (87) and so the novel explores ideas of life from *Macbeth*. In so doing, it is also evidence of Bruce Clark’s suggestion, mentioned above, that the posthuman emerges in an aesthetic production that challenges received ideas (142).

Kott claimed that “the grotesque is a criticism of the absolute in the name of frail human experience” (132). *Macbeth, Macbeth* imagines a sequel to the play that explores the endurance of experience in the face of power after victory. Macduff had declared “the time is free” (*Mac.* 5:8:55) and let Malcolm take the throne: in the novel, Malcolm proves infantile and useless, and Macduff is the embittered, sanctimonious and increasingly despotic new face of authority in Scotland. Ross abandons hope in the new order, traumatised by the fate of Macbeth (in this case, his father) and has become a wretched vagrant among the poor named Sod. The Porter lives in Dunsinane castle with his three sons, Fyn, Grim and Lu, which in the novel’s main innovation becomes a reimagining of Dostoevsky’s *The Karamazov Brothers* when they conspire to murder their father out of competition for the attentions of a young woman, Grunoch or Gru (allegedly the name of the historical Macbeth’s mother (Ferne & Palfrey viii) but also an echo of Grushenka, the equivalent female character in the scenario of Dostoevsky’s novel). Over the course of the novel, the memory of Macbeth’s first murder of Duncan is the nightmare from which characters cannot awaken, as “the dead haunt the living... Nothing and no one is safely dead” (281), which is repeated in the eventual parricide of the Porter. Eventually, the memory of Macbeth becomes the rallying point for an uprising against Macduff by the youngest brother, Lu. The early-modern regicide plot is thus conflated with nineteenth-century bourgeois tragedy to explore a common fascination with murder as a violation of ethics and an act of terrifying, morally grotesque self-assertion. If this combination of texts seems unlikely, a precedent can actually be found in Wilson Knight’s offhand comment that “Lear is analogous to Tchegov [*sic*] where Macbeth is analogous to Dostoevsky [*sic*]” (175).

The narrative technique of the novel is to intersperse modern-idiom, third person narration with citations from Shakespeare, mostly in the form of subtitles for chapters (e.g. “Told by an Idiot”, “Light Thickens” etc.). This intertextuality can seem the “clash of incompatibles” in a work of the grotesque, particularly so in the scenes that are anachronistic. In the chapter “The Sticking Place”, the son Fyn is indeed screwing his courage as he plans his father’s murder:

Fyn started towards the stairs but was arrested by a book lying open on the table, one of Grim's he could tell by the furious underlining. He flicked a page or two and found a passage boxed avidly in ink:

*The being of Spirit is a bone.*

Fyn laughed out loud. The being of spirit is a what? His brother really was a sad maniac. He laughed again mirthlessly and flicked another page

*The true being of a man is his deed; in this the individual is actual.* (160)

The book is presumably Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Macbeth's "deed without a name" is associated with Hegel's process of negation and self-actualization, closer to the mindset of Dostoevsky's agonized protagonists, and an exercise in ethics. That "[t]he individual is what the deed is" (160) is realised by Grim's eventual murder of their father: "He had leapt beyond the ethical. He had done it not for marriage, but for the absolute" (220). This is in keeping with Fernie's comments in *The Demonic* that *Macbeth* should be read as a study of allure of radical negativity in literature: "Duncan's murder acts as a ritualistic induction into a new existential or spiritual state, which is at one a state of death but equally and more troublingly a more vivid life. To that extent, Macbeth's original act does have the quality of the absolute he wishes for it" (61).

Like Kott, the novel explores the Hegelian notion of history, the future and the absolute, in which ideas of progress or reason have devastating effects. Indeed, it could be understood as the conflict between Macduff and Sod / Ross. Macduff personifies History as progress, being a modernizing dictator who forces Scotland to mass-produce white bread (recalling Dostoevsky's story of the Grand Inquisitor and the despot who gave the people their daily bread so as to enforce human happiness (Dostoevsky 309-31): "Don't you see?", Macduff boasts, "This is the promised end, the end of struggle, the end of history, my chronicle the very last. Everyone is happy!" (102). Like the Grand Mechanism, it promises an automated or even post-historical existence. Sod, however, personifies the ongoing labour of the negative as he abjures his previous identity: "Ross was a death dealer... he could live better as Sod. Sod at least knew he was lost, and broken, and begging for unlikely repair" (68). His new name is also a suggestion of him burrowing underground like Hamlet's mole: "He looked at a mole hole and pretended a great surge of wistfulness at the blind misanthropic buried in the soil [...] Time to burrow" (49-50). To this extent, the novel rehearses a dialectic between the Enlightened state of Macduff and the wretched of the earth by Sod, Gru, and the brothers, which is also a dispute about the dialectic of the spirit: is it understood as the triumph of the state or in the power of transgressive revolt?

Furthermore, the novel is also a study of the spectral and ghostly haunting of human identity. At one level, this is a matter of narrative style: the text's citation of Shakespeare's words suggests a sense of what Julian Wolfreys

calls the haunting of literature by the *revenance* of other texts as a trace of writing (163). One example is the chapter “Secret man of blood” where Fyn asks Lulach about the memory of Macbeth: “Do you know the secret’st man of blood?”

‘Blood?’

“He treads in our blood, he wades in it, Lu. Have you not felt him?”

Fyn was leaning forward, hugging himself.

“Have you not felt the pull upon the heart, as the secret man, very secret, wades in the corridors of your veins? It is a heavy thing, Lulach?” (150)

This is a re-citation both of Macbeth’s claim that “Augures and understood relations / Have by maggot pies and choughs and rooks brought forth / The secret’st man of blood (3.4.122-24) and “I am in blood / Stepped so far, that, I should wade no more” (3.4.136-7). The novel thus creates the experience of being haunted by Macbeth. For Fyn, this captivation also challenged his sense of being human, as he tells his brother:

“But of course, Lu-boo! Who else? I tell you, once your insides are scorched away, and you realize you really are just a vessel, a nothing, a vehicle—it is a wonderful thing, quite wonderful. The world is like a –like a mime—a mime, without feeling, almost disembodied—it is beautiful. No angelic, the word is angelic.” (151)

Presumably, this also alludes to the disembodied “walking shadow” and “poor player” of Macbeth’s late speech (5:5:24); here it suggests a state of intensity and feeling posthuman. In fact, throughout the novel the physical presence and identity of people and animals is confused in the narrative or misrecognized by characters: Macduff appears to see a woman’s gaze in the eyes of a dog; Grim sees a three headed ghost and cries “Never shake thy gory locks at me!” (218), yet it turns out to be his brother carrying two babies. In these incidents, the grotesque image is a momentary failure to establish boundaries between the human and non-human, such that the encounter becomes a moment of decision about the Other, the sense of Derrida’s encounter with the spectre as *l’arrivant*. If this reworks the epistemological uncertainty of the play, the novel also extends agency to animals: a crow has a choric function in the novel, flying over Scotland (3-4): the subtitles identify this as Macbeth’s sentence “Light Thickens / And the crow makes wing to the rooky wood” (*Mac*. 3:2:50-51). All of these suggest an idea of the posthuman as such a state of “otherness” that is in proximity to the human. The strange imaginings of the play have inspired the novel to create its own image of a world on the threshold of strangeness. It could even be understood as grotesque in Kayser’s sense of the momentary invocation of the repressed (or “demonic”) trace of *Es* or “it” within the text (185): Macbeth

is the experience of the uncanny that the text evokes. The very title *Macbeth, Macbeth* can imply a repetition of *Macbeth* (as in the sequel) and an address to Macbeth that is like a conjuration of his ghost, just as the characters undertake.

By the end of the novel, uncertainty about the grotesque body and the spectral provides a reflection on the future and the posthuman. At one point, a decidedly Bakhtinian form of carnivalesque grotesque is suggested whereby the Scottish peasants follow Lulach to form a “kitchen army” (236): “‘For you are Lordlings, not beasts for grazing on bread! Exceed yourselves!’ ‘Hurrah!’ cried the mob as one” (240). Sod participates as a comic grotesque, “like a cockerel, his head jerking one way and the next, his upraised arms saluting the rebel army” (238). This moment of a festivity, however, is truncated when they are annihilated by Macduff. The carnivalesque, it seems, is not a sufficient life principle and no match for violence. Sod kills the King and is killed by Macduff, thereby repeating Macbeth’s fate. The landscape becomes “another Golgotha” (*Mac.* 1:2:40) of grotesque devastation: “As far as the eye could see were bodies, half-covered by the snow. The nearest was twenty feet way, a woman with an arrow in her back, and a posy in her hair. Next to her was a dog, its head severed, and next to its child that seemed entire but dead” (262).

An even more terrible grotesque is represented by Lulach’s eventual death, which is a parody of the Crucifixion. He first subsumes himself into Macbeth by wearing the dead man’s skull as a grisly helmet, “his burning eyes encased in the brainpan of Macbeth” (258). Lulach’s loss of a human shape symbolizes his becoming something aberrant, hybrid, and post-human so that when Macduff meets him, he does not see a human: “Macduff touched the monster and was horrified by the soft clammy tissue of its shoulder. Its breasts were white and round, with barely the memory of a nipple, and its breath was wheezing” (259). Macduff wins again and leaves Lulach crucified, but his eventual death is ridiculous: he is killed when a stray crow flies into his eye socket: “Two black feathers were flapping across Macbeth’s skull. A very black bird had its beak stuck in its eyehole. Its wings were flapping to escape and its talons were scratching Lulach’s throat” (274). This is absurd, and a grotesque human/animal chimera, but also in keeping with Kott’s idea of the grotesque as clownish. The entire novel, in fact, has an affinity with Kott’s Shakespeare, but in which the absurdity of characters goes beyond the human.

## Conclusion

*Macbeth, Macbeth* is a provocation and challenge to good taste: it is also evidence of how Kott’s form of a Shakespearean grotesque continues to be seen in creative practice of disturbing audience expectations. This informs the posthuman implications of the novel: if *Macbeth* dramatizes an intensity that

goes to the limits of what is safely human, then this fictional sequel imagines a sort of Macbeth-effect that transforms characters through abject and transformed states of being. At the close of the novel, it is suggested that Lulach represents a commitment to intense life: "He had lived! It was far more than nothing!" (278). This affirmation of some form of life against the triumph Grand Mechanism in the world (personified in the victorious but unhappy Macduff) complements Kott's Shakespeare both at the level of affect (it is just as discomforting) and content by imagining existence as a form of the grotesque. Perhaps it also implies some Nietzschean idea of eternal recurrence whereby the tragedy of Macbeth is perpetually repeated as a form of intense experience. If so, this might also suggest, whatever the Hegelian tone of the novel, a notion of the future that surpasses any dialectical goal or completion but is instead an affirmation of repetition: Clare Colebrook has proposed this idea of recurrence as the properly posthuman thought of the future as open and beyond human calculation. (206). The overall significance of this is that both Kott, writing during the Cold War, and this novel of our century are using Shakespeare to imagine the potential forms of life and states of being that may survive the anxious sense of the present: what comes after the grotesque?

This sense of uncertainty in the novel is decidedly grotesque in a more formal sense, it being the clash of apparent incompatibles of sources and references to make a new work; we might call this a type of *catechesis*, or words put into the incorrect combinations for effect. This figure also illustrates the anachronism whereby medieval Scotland, Tsarist Russia and the contemporary combine in the narrative. Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that anachronism is the method by which grand narratives of History (such as Hegel's) are exposed to the Other and especially the alternate temporalities and futures that are subsumed within the global order, so we see "a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present with itself" (109): as Macbeth says, "nothing is but what is not" (1:3:44). The grotesque is the mode with which Shakespeare is imaginatively reassembled to complicate any historical context, to become "Our Contemporary" when contemporaneity is itself understood as a plural and open condition that is at odds with itself. To imagine Shakespeare as "Our Posthuman" is to think of the body out of shape and the time out of joint.

### WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Helene Iswolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Bristol, Michael D. *Carnival and Theater: Plebeian Culture and the Structure of Authority in Renaissance England*. New York: Methuen, 1985.

- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.
- Chaudhuri, Sukanta, ed. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. By William Shakespeare. Arden Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700002102>.
- Clarke, Bruce. "The Nonhuman." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*. Eds. Bruce Clarke & Manuela Rossini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 141-52.
- Clayborough, Arthur. *The Grotesque in English Literature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965.
- Colebrook, Clare. "Futures." *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and the Posthuman*. Eds. Bruce Clarke & Manuela Rossini. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 196-208.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Specters of Marx: The State of Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*. (1994) Trans. Peggy Kamuf. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *The Karamazov Brothers*. Trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Edwards, Justin D & Runa Graulund. *Grotesque*. London: Routledge, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203383438>.
- Esslin, Martin. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. New York: Anchor, 1969.
- Farnham, Willard. *The Shakespearean Grotesque: Its Genesis and Transformations*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1971.
- Fernie, Ewan. *The Demonic: Literature and Experience*. London: Routledge, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203082300>.
- Fernie, Ewan & Simon Palfrey. *Macbeth, Macbeth*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Fisher, Mark. *The Weird and the Eerie*. London: Repeater, 2016.
- Fuller, David. *Shakespeare and the Romantics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021.
- Garner, Marjorie. *Shakespeare and Modern Culture*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2008.
- Greenblatt, Stephen and Peter G. Platt, eds. *Shakespeare's Montaigne: The Florio Translations of The Essays*. New York: New York Review Books, 2014.
- Harpham, Geoffrey Galt. *On the Grotesque: Strategies of Contradiction in Art and Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. Translated by Bernard Bosanquet. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993.
- Houston Wood, David. "New Directions: 'Some tardy cripple': Timing Disability in *Richard III*." *Richard III: A Critical Reader*. Ed. Annaliese Connolly. London: Bloomsbury, 2013. 129-54.
- Jonson, Ben. "Discoveries." *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*. Ed. David Bevington et.al. Vol. 7. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. 481-596.
- Jowett, John, ed. *The Tragedy of Richard III*. By William Shakespeare. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Kayser, Wolfgang. *The Grotesque in Art and Literature*. (1957) Trans. Ulrich Weisstein. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1963.
- Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. (1964) Trans. Boreslaw Taborski. New York: Norton, 1974.

- Kott, Jan. *The Bottom Translation: Marlowe and Shakespeare and the Carnival Tradition*. Trans. Daniela Miedzzyrzecka & Lillian Vallee. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1987.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. London: Bloomsbury, 2008.
- Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2753906700003636>.
- Rhodes, Neil. *The Elizabethan Grotesque*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980.
- Ryan, Kiernan. *Shakespeare's Universality: Here's Fine Revolution*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315737942>.
- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Eds. Ann Thompson & Neil Taylor. Arden Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Eds. Sandra Clark & Pamela Mason. Arden Third Series. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Sinfield, Alan. "Royal Shakespeare: theatre and the making of ideology." *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*. Eds. Jonathan Dollimore & Alan Sinfield. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985. 158-81.
- Stott, Andrew. *Comedy*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203795897>.
- Taylor, Michael. *Shakespeare Criticism in the Twentieth Century*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Thomson, Philip. *The Grotesque*. London: Methuen, 1972.
- Wilson Knight, G. *The Wheel of Fire: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sombre Tragedies*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930.
- Wolfreys, Julian. *Derrida: A Guide to the Perplexed*. London: Continuum, 2007.