



Michał Lachman\* 

## Staging Dystopian Communities: Reimagining Shakespeare in Selected English Plays

**Abstract:** Among the countless afterlives of William Shakespeare's playwriting there is a strong presence of his visions of state and political powers. In universal, philosophical ways Shakespeare was addressing issues concerning the state power, social organization, hierarchy, and rank in what inevitably were the origins of modern, capitalistic societies. Therefore, many of his powerful images resonate today in the works of contemporary writers who intend to compose stories of utopian or dystopian character which diagnose the condition of modern society. This article aims to present three plays by post-war English dramatists (Edward Bond's *Bingo*, Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie*, and David Greig's *Dunsinane*) which reuse Shakespearian themes, motifs, or characters to build politically contentious and subversive plots within a narrower context of their specific cultures, societies, and historical periods. It is assumed that the Shakespearean legacy the writers engage with is not merely a dramatic text, but a complex cultural structure of accumulated narratives, interpretations, and myths which contemporary dramatists rewrite and recycle. The aim of the article is to show how this multifaceted legacy of Shakespeare's life and work helps build dystopian visions of contemporary communities or images of state and political justice. In other words, the article intends to analyse ways of visualizing modern societies through the palimpsestic presence of the Renaissance master.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, English Drama, adaptation, Edward Bond, Frank McGuinness, David Greig.

The aim of this article is to look at the presence of Shakespeare and his work in contemporary English drama and see how his multi-layered influence shapes the thinking about the modern state. Instead of analysing a vast territory of film and theatre adaptations, this analysis concerns itself with plays which use the

---

\* University of Lodz, Poland. [michal.lachman@uni.lodz.pl](mailto:michal.lachman@uni.lodz.pl)



Bard's plots as well as life to weave their tales of utopian or dystopian communities. On the one hand, the objective of the article is to focus attention on playwrights who reconnect with Shakespeare's drama; on the other, the article aims to describe how contemporary English dramatists compose their dystopian visions by using fragments of plays and biography of the Renaissance master. Shakespeare's presence in contemporary drama needs to be seen in a broad cultural context, as an anthropological phenomenon which encompasses the legacy spreading from film, history, economy, and politics to colonialism, capitalism, and nationalism. Shakespeare, therefore, is approached here not merely as a formidable producer of plots offering inexhaustible staging or filming possibilities, but as a cultural construct whose overall power, dynamics, and legendary significance can all be employed for a better understanding of contemporary political and social life.

Dramatic works and their theatre productions selected for this analysis do not retell Shakespeare's stories; they refrain from a simple adaptation of his plots for contemporary times. Instead, Edward Bond's *Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death* (1973), Frank McGuinness's *Mutabilitie* (1997), and David Greig's *Dunsinane* (2010) appropriate vast amounts of cultural material associated with Shakespeare's life and work, and accumulated through centuries of intertextual, palimpsestic recycling to reflect on the concepts of community, on the moral condition of state now and in the future. The political narratives which these playwrights offer are particularly subversive due to specific perspectives from which they are written. Edward Bond is an experimental, post-war political playwright, associated with left-wing opposition to the mainstream British drama of the 1960s and 1970s. Bond's *Bingo* shows the Bard at the end of his life, in Stratford, when the famous playwright seeks refuge from the London life and where private issues take over in defining his life choices. In this picture, Shakespeare is shown as a greedy entrepreneur who readily joins a group of money-grabbing investors from the local town. His biography helps Bond to build the image of the proto-capitalistic society of today as dystopian vision dominated by ruthless competition. Frank McGuinness, representing Northern Irish literature, maintains a characteristic ambivalence towards English tradition of writing and sees its presence both as a disruptive and creative force. In *Mutabilitie*, McGuinness dramatizes the clash of two cultures—English and Irish—by staging an imaginary and intensely absurd visit of Shakespeare to the Green Isle. The Bard, disillusioned with London life and culture, seeks comfort and employment among the Celtic natives and local English aristocracy. His search for personal renewal turns into a serious political disaster which paints a dramatic, dystopian vision of British colonial conquest and its founding philosophy. Finally, for David Greig, representing Scottish theatre, Shakespearean legacy remains a field for cultural debate over Scottish

independence.<sup>1</sup> His *Dunsinane* provides a dramatic sequel to the plot of *Macbeth* in which we follow the brutal struggle for domination over Scotland between Malcolm and Grauch, Macbeth's miraculously saved wife. For all the variety of the three works, what unites these stylistically diversified and historically separated plays is the refusal to adapt Shakespeare's plays directly in their plots and characters. The plays analysed here creatively engage with his complex legacy, drawing inspiration both from literary and cultural contexts of the Bard's life. Recycling his biography with the accumulated myth, or providing an imagined sequel to one of his major plays, opens spaces for utopian speculation in which realistic mechanisms of power connect with fictionalised scenarios for political history. The aim of this article, then, is to analyse how these playwrights imagine utopian and dystopian communities using Shakespeare as their raw material.

For these playwrights Shakespeare's oeuvre offers an endless collection of ready-mades: artefacts in the form of scenes, landscapes, emotions, treacherous plots, ironic romancing, or iconic characters which can furnish a modern play with meaningful scenarios. The universe of the Renaissance author functions as a museum of objects which have grown to be seen as cultural artefacts through a long history of reception, reinterpretation, and maturation. Ready for a creative revival, they come down to contemporary times more as products of collective imagination than as authentic fragments of their own epoch's material history.

It is important to stress that the three plays analysed here represent Shakespeare and his dramatic plots as cultural meta-narratives which have the power to reflect contemporary imagination in its literary and political character. Engaging with Shakespeare's legacy opens a path of communication between the past and the present. On the one hand, it is simply a homage to the earlier, past epochs that could be seen like the Globe Theatre's historical productions of Shakespeare's plays. They are, in W.B. Worthen's words, "restored performances" (98), and they exemplify the experience of the "living history" (93) which modern audiences can relive and reuse as a historical time-travel. Yet, on the other hand, the dramatic adaptations created by Bond, McGuinness and Greig assume there exists a fundamental continuity or similarity between what Shakespeare perceived as a universal mechanism of power and its current incarnation as political oppression or philosophical doctrine. This dystopic fantasy, extending from late Renaissance to the postmodern era and later, is not merely a costumed performance of the living past. What it amounts to is a zone of reference in which, as Jan Kott claimed, every epoch finds its own reflection.

---

<sup>1</sup> Greig was actively engaged in the 2014 Scottish Referendum, supporting the independence vote (Saunders 119).

This article does not aim to provide a theoretical analysis of whether a given contemporary play belongs to the genre of adaptation, appropriation, or any other subdivision within the broad area of recycling and reusing Shakespearean plots, characters, or traditions. Instead, it is interested solely in analysing the end-products of such appropriating mechanisms, that is, the created image of the society and community. However, it is worth pointing to at least two studies which make use of a broad variety of theories in providing a systematic analysis of Shakespearean revivals or rewrites. Martin Scott's more classical approach rests on the concepts of intertextuality in his surveys of the post-war drama covering the work of Tom Stoppard, Arnold Wesker, Eugene Ionesco or Charles Morowitz. He acknowledges the rich tradition of textual borrowing from Shakespeare's text, accumulating the "traditions that have grown around it through its performance over the centuries" (Scott 7). This study is significant for the fact that it recognises the importance of the entire, extended history of reclaiming Shakespeare as a contemporary author. A similar approach can be found in a recent study of appropriations of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama by Graham Saunders. His investigation into Renaissance dramatic legacies concerns a wide variety of authors (from Howard Barker to Sarah Kane, from Wesker and Morowitz to Jez Butterworth), and declares specifically what remains the major analytical perspective also of this article, namely, to see Shakespeare not as an isolated historical occurrence, but rather as a "process going beyond one of exposure, to the creation of *cultural space* within the existing architecture of the Shakespearian text" (Saunders 5). Shakespeare is therefore seen here as a timeless "cultural space," constantly being extended and growing with the new reflections of its contemporary interpretations.

Politically speaking, the post-war English drama, with all diversity of its politicized message, employed Shakespearean plots and characters to voice its own dissatisfaction with the country's politics and morals. Especially in the 1960s and 1970s, left-wing writers saw Shakespeare as a powerful force to debunk the narrative of economic success or the positive story of the post-war consensus, showing the decomposition of the welfare state. Shakespeare creeps into the dark area of social life where the state fails to deliver on its major promises of prosperity. As Ruby Cohn observes, especially the leftist playwrights of the then younger generation who debuted in the 1970s, that is David Hare, David Edgar, and Howard Brenton, engaged in the task of scratching the "conservative veneer" of English politics (49) by using the Bard's oeuvre to paint a dystopian image of the community in which the levelling up of chances and prospects had not materialised. These "left-wing adaptors" of Shakespearean plots contested the "genteel cultural heritage" of English public life and exposed its "inadequacy" in reference to challenges of current politics (Cohn 49). In the background to these subversive derivations of Shakespearean

legacy there lies the noble tradition of theatrical adaptations of his plays epitomized by the stately acting style of Laurence Olivier whose social position and artistic profile offered easy targets for the young left-wing attackers. John Osborne's *A Place Calling Itself Rome* (1973), David Edgar's *Slag* (1970) or *Death Story*, and Howard Brenton's *Revenge* (1969) and *Thirteenth Night* (1981), adaptations of, respectively, *Coriolanus*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*, were all, in Cohn's view, attempts to both refute Shakespeare as a figure of authority and tradition as well as revise his heritage to provide critical perspective for the current politics of the state (1988, 50). By the same token, David Greig's *Dunsinane*, in Graham Saunders's opinion, can "incorporate elements from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and at the same time negotiate between medieval Scotland and recent military conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq" (9).<sup>2</sup>

For Bond, McGuinness and Greig, Shakespeare constitutes part of the state-of-the-nation tradition of writing; a figure useful in describing and analysing the story of economic and social development which had gone askew. Shakespeare became manufactured goods, a product of culture whose democratic availability provided a proof for the success of the welfare state principles. For instance, Sean O'Casey, an Irish playwright and socialist who struggled for class betterment through cultural means, offers a telling example of the appropriation of Shakespeare seen as an element of cultural capital which needs to be fairly redistributed:

I look forward to the day with confidence when British workers will carry in their hip pockets a volume of Keats's poems or a Shakespeare play beside the packets of lunch attached to their belts. (26)

In this context, Shakespeare appears as an emblematic author of wisdom and culture, of sophistication and refinement, whose presence should be mandatory in the life of every worker as much as machines, tools and modernized technology are indispensable in the smooth operation of industrial societies. Shakespeare as a grease of cultural revolution effectively sums up the speculative projection of fictional political concepts onto the canvas of contemporary society. The Shakespearian thesaurus turns into a fictional parlance of change and progress, but also of social critique.

The vision of the world apart remains one of the most constitutive features of literary utopia. As a genre, it comprises a universe whose location is placed outside of the geographic, social, philosophical, or scientific boundary of

---

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive analysis of Greig's relation to the Middle East and its role in writing *Dunsinane* see: Rodríguez, pp. 64-5.

the current, real, and lived realities.<sup>3</sup> There may be different visions of such apartness, yet, there needs to be a mechanism of setting fictional plots and characters aside. Moreover, the traditional utopia offers “alternative solutions to reality,” which “by means of fantasy” attempt to “imagine possible alternatives” to the known world and create a critical vision of what reality might be like in the future (Vieira 5-7). Among many characteristic elements of the utopian vision, “one of its most recognizable traits is its speculative discourse on a non-existent social organization which is better than the real society” (Vieira 7).

It is also significant to stress the basic relation or formal affinity between utopia and dystopia. The latter is commonly understood as an “evil place” operating as “the opposite of ‘utopia’, the bad place versus what we imagine to be the good place” (Claeys 2017, 4). As Claeys explains in his comprehensive study of dystopia, the two genres might be seen as “twins, the progeny of the same parents” (7), and as such they both “conceive of ideal harmonious groups” (8).<sup>4</sup> However, as the concept of the “evil place,” dystopia operates with a different “spectrum of anxiety” to utopia and in its darker vision, it evinces a highly developed “obsession with enemies,” combined with the “determination to eliminate them, or at least neutralize their threat” (8). Therefore, dystopia offers the “management of fear” (9), to contrast with the utopian projection of hope. Finally, as Claeys stresses, dystopia is “intimately interwoven with discourses about ‘crisis’” (14).

Without going into a complex formal discussion of the various subdivisions of the utopian genre,<sup>5</sup> one can state after Robert C. Elliott that “the difference between More’s *Utopia* as utopia and Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* as satire is the difference in distribution of positive and negative elements” (24). If utopia, or dystopia, is a vision of idealized dream (or nightmare) of social state, Shakespeare functions in it as a pivotal point of reference for the expression of fictional admiration and criticism, for evaluation and judgement, for beauty and ugliness, for justice and injustice. Shakespeare’s legacy helps contemporary playwrights to distribute such positive and negative elements across their reframed dramatic plots.

Edward Bond’s *Bingo* (1973), written two years after his most famous Shakespeare adaptation, *Lear* (1971), illustrates the typical strategy of the left-

---

<sup>3</sup> For the general introduction to utopia see *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature* (Claeys 2010). On the general philosophy and history of utopian writing and thinking see: Vieira.

<sup>4</sup> Or, as Claeys also calls it, they “exhibit a collectivist ethos” (2017, 8).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Arthur O. Lewis enumerated a “range of forms of anti-utopian fiction, including reverse utopias, negative utopias, inverted utopias, regressive utopias, cacotopias, dystopias, non-utopias, satiric utopias, and nasty utopias. These are classified into three main groups: the anti-totalitarian, the anti-technological, and the satiric, or combinations of all three” (qtd. in Claeys 2017, 275).

wing writers in revising the Bard's work and life for the purpose of commenting on the economic realities of the day. The play dramatizes Shakespeare's final stage of life which he spent in Warwickshire away from the London hullabaloo. His days are filled not with intense poetic and dramatic creativity but with assisting his wife's illness and discussing business with local farmers. Bond frames the iconic biography of the greatest English writer with motifs of social inequality and injustice which Shakespeare himself condones and which he is too greedy to stop. One of the central plot lines of the play concerns local investors who plan to procure land by introducing a complex land enclosure policy. While considerable capital is inevitably going to flow straight into their pockets, for many small-time land holders, the plan leads to evictions, poverty, and bankruptcy. What is more, part of the land to be bought out is owned by the town council and generates rent money which pays for food for the local homeless and unemployed. In other words, Shakespeare's position, secured by his previous literary career now makes him one of the players in the capitalistic charade. The way Bond tells the story suggests that Shakespeare's moral standing, and his assessment by posterity, should rather be critically checked by the fact of his involvement in the business clearly exploitive and inhuman.

Pursuing this theme, the play follows some biographers' claims suggesting that the author of *Hamlet* was a miser, leaving his wife an old bed as the only inheritance named in the official testament record. Bond, however, further develops the image by showing Shakespeare as an active figure in developing early capitalistic society, with all its ruthless greed and moral dubiousness. Shakespeare's Hamletic hesitation, ironically dramatized in *Bingo* as an intertextual reference to the iconic character from the Bard's famous play, concerns not an existential dilemma but rather the loss and gain of economic profit. The contemporary protagonist is faced with desperate admonitions issued by other, morally sensitive characters, for instance of an elderly woman who warns him against his financial decisions: "If he shut they fields up he'll ruin whole families. They yont got a penny put by" (Bond 18). However, Bond's Shakespeare meekly follows the plan and finds it difficult to oppose the lure of capitalistic exploitation. As Scott observes, in *Bingo* "Shakespeare's humanity is seen to be reduced" (32-3).

The world that Bond tries to show through the redefined biography of the national Bard is aptly illustrated in the figure of one of the investors who persuasively argues that "there will always be real suffering" and justifies the need to accept it:

You live in a world of dreams! Well, what happens when you have to wake up? You find that real people can't live in your dreams. They don't fit, they're not good or sane or noble enough. So you turn to common violence and begin to destroy them. (Bond 50)

The dream which the local investor mentions stands, of course, for Bond's vision of a contemporary capitalistic dystopia. In it, ordinary man is supposed to fit into the rigid profile of a narrative invented by few to exploit the many. Bond's introductory comments to the play clearly indicate his political and economic reading of Shakespeare's mythical status as a national Bard, whose decision to turn into the "property owner" puts him in line with such Shakespearean characters as Goneril, and her philosophy of governance dominated by "prisons, workhouses, whipping, starvation, mutilation, pulpithysteria" (6). The vision of the state in which Bond's Shakespeare is an active part functions according to strictly commercial, and thus cruel, principles:

A consumer society depends on its members being avaricious, ostentatious, gluttonous, envious, wasteful, selfish and inhuman. Officially, we teach morality but if we all became "good" the economy would collapse. Affluent people can't afford ten commandments. (7)

Bond's narrative offers what *The Guardian's* critic, Michael Billington, calls a "radically revisionist portrait of Shakespeare" (Billington, *Bingo*). As the playwright himself warns, he is not "interested in Shakespeare's true biography in the way a historian might be" (Bond 4). Immersed in detailed financial speculation associated with the history of capitalism and commerce, *Bingo* successfully struggles to universalize its message, by addressing general issues of—in Bond's words—the "relationship between any writer and his society" (4). In this sense, Shakespeare's works should be read with the view on the later centuries of social history of which they are a significant part. In Edward Bond's worldview the Bard's cultural impact is significantly responsible for perpetrating social inequality, as in Michael Scott's words, Shakespeare's plays "have to be seen as part of bourgeois art which he raised to its highest form" (35). The reviewers of the 2010 revival of the play presented at the Chichester Festival pointed out exactly this contemporary, social dimension of the dystopian play.<sup>6</sup> For Sheila Connor from *British Theatre Guide*, the production exposed the "social injustice and inhumanity in today's world" (Connor, *Bingo*). Billington, in turn, observed that although such dystopian images "may not overturn the social order, they can both reflect and unsettle it" (Billington, *Bingo*).

The presence of Shakespeare within the dramatic vision functions exactly as a meta-fictional alternative within the realism of the story. In it, Shakespeare's own person, or his protagonists, or fragments of plots, exist as tokens of idealized reality immersed in an invented, contemporary narrative. For most of the politicized works of the twentieth century concerned with echoing the Bard's spectre, his oeuvre signals the arrival of the utopia or dystopia in

---

<sup>6</sup> The Chichester production was directed by Angus Jackson.



social or political dimensions. In case of Shakespeare, the utopian (or more often dystopian) “speculative discourse” (Vieira 7) reuses the Bard’s plots and characters for a critical review of the known reality. It constitutes, as Chad Walsh would put it, an “attack on certain tendencies in existing societies” (qtd. in Claeys 2017, 276).

Challenging colonial and national contexts of Shakespearean legacy are present in *Mutabilitie* by Frank McGuinness (1997) which tells a satirical story of the fantasy visit to Ireland undertaken by a character named William. He is a London poet and playwright who seeks refuge from the hostile environment of the imperial capital. McGuinness’s play, set in the late Renaissance period, also dramatizes the life of Edmund Spencer, the Queen’s envoy to Ireland, who controls the native people with military power and with what he considers to be his civilizational superiority. When he tries to convince Elizabeth, his wife, of the need for carrying out the educational project for the Irish, he speaks with a clear, colonial tinge: “they are capable of instruction. They are capable of salvation. [...] They are civilized. I have succeeded in that” (McGuinness 9, 10). The native rulers of the land, king Sweney, his wife Maeve, and their court, live banished in a forest, secretly plotting a rebellion and revenge against the English oppressor. Their hopes are nourished by a legend saying that one day the saviour of the land emerges from water. Accidentally, William, is discovered right by the banks of a local river. The Irish natives immediately see in him the hero ready to fight against the English or, as they claim the “man who will sing the song to save us in English” (McGuinness 17). McGuinness makes Shakespeare an ironic participant of the cultural war between Ireland and England, using speculation about his secret Catholicism and creating a fictional story of the encounter with Edmund Spencer.<sup>7</sup> McGuinness’s William feels dissatisfied with the British society and claims that the English theatre no longer needs him. He wants to “get a job in the civil service” in Ireland (McGuinness 50). The oppressed Irish, in turn, believe that he can perform a miracle through his poetry “In this your theatre you will make our dead rise, William. You will raise our Irish dead, Englishman” (McGuinness 61). Ultimately, William’s visit ends in failure; he leaves without delivering any miracle of redemption for the Irish. His is merely the journey of a disillusioned poet undertaken into the country of oppressed and embittered bards.

As if this dystopian vision was not gloomy enough, Edmund Spencer burns down his own mansion to hasten the return to London. Spencer finally realizes how illusory his ideas about faith and civilization are, seeing that his personal doubts about the social project he performs are getting the best of him. In a monologue just before setting his castle on fire, he admits to a complete

---

<sup>7</sup> Tracing the story of Catholic dissent in Elizabethan England was one of the themes pursued in McGuinness’s preparation for the writing of the play (Greene 92).

failure of implementing British rules on a foreign soil: “Eternal life, eternal light—such illusions of the mind, the broken, battered mind, torn to ribbons on the rack of its confusion” (McGuinness 98). McGuinness accurately presents how the project of spreading the idea of new social order ultimately proves to be a fragile figment of the character’s mind.

What is most interesting in McGuinness’s play is his strategic use of Shakespeare’s half fictional, half realistic figure as a character who intervenes directly in Irish politics. He penetrates the action of the play in a stealthily subversive manner, discussing life and art with Edmund and other characters. He exposes the futility of the English presence in Ireland, the failure of the Irish rebellion and the unreliability of literature or poetry in flaming the fire of potential insurrection. It is in this sense that the play reflects the characteristic feature of the dystopian literary genre in which it is “intimately interwoven with discourses about ‘crisis’” (Claeys 2017, 14). At some point in the story, McGuinness stages a play-within-the-play in which Sweney as Priam and Maeve as Hecuba enact the fall of Troy. Crying and weeping for the “broken towers” of the great city (McGuinness 77) act as an ominous indication of what may happen to England. Moreover, the way McGuinness rewrites the ancient myth foregrounds the glory of the oppressed victims and stresses the necessity to “assemble [here] to sound the song of our saga” (McGuinness 77). This recycled myth is a reminder that even the defeated have the power to survive, and that in stories and legends they make up for what they lack in real power. Their resurrected spirits may threaten the greatest empire, as the Irish chorus sings in a clear reference to England and her Queen: “Great Gloriana, learn from Troy / Your kingdom’s but a paltry toy / Great Gloriana, none are saved / When spirits rise from out their graves” (McGuinness 78). The poetic re-enactment of the fall of Troy points to an eternal cycle of history which predicts how all belligerent empires end; social and political systems created through war waged in the name of superiority of one nation over another are never about establishing civilization; they are about the impermanence of social and political systems. The perishable character of things sonorously echoes in one of the songs performed by File, Spencer’s Irish servant: ‘Ladies fair and men of valour / Flower a day and then wither. / Mankind, the sky, the rivered sea / Sing of mutabilitie’ (McGuinness 43).

Although McGuinness’s play contains many familiar quotes and references to Shakespeare’s original plays and sonnets,<sup>8</sup> the protagonist’s biographical story is intentionally kept unclear and twisted, as McGuinness composes it by following and reinterpreting mythical or legendary gossip about the Bard’s life. For instance, McGuinness’s Shakespeare reveals homosexual desire relating to the Irish men and thus also breaks cultural taboos which have accumulated

---

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Grene’s detailed analysis of these references and borrowings.

around his biography. Shakespeare as gay, Shakespeare as catholic, or Shakespeare, the playwright, who has tired of British theatre, and finally Shakespeare as Ireland's saviour: these ironic appropriations of the historical figure and his fabulated identity create a half-comic, half-provocative dialogue between versions of truth and political or ideological dogmas.

On various levels, then, McGuinness's character of the writer enters into dialogue with English and Irish politics as well as with the cultural heritage of the conflict between the two nations. He is an icon shaped by centuries of interpretative effort and theatrical performativity which McGuinness reuses to defame and deform stereotypical ways of visualising the Anglo-Irish past. As Nicholas Grene observed, for McGuinness "the familiar Shakespearean texts are opened out into radically different imaginative territories" (96). Yet, the presence of Shakespeare inside the dramatic world of the play opens such "imaginative territories" on both sides, allowing not just to see the Bard's works in new ways, but to interpret Anglo-Irish cultural and political exchanges from an alternative perspective in which the positions of the coloniser and the colonised are temporarily united with the sense of exhaustion and disillusionment, disappointment, and frustration. Shakespeare, then, quite naturally builds himself into the dystopian fabric of social narrative. His persona travels across time as a historical figure appropriated for revisionist debates about colonialism, English and Irish identity, cultural and sexual politics.

For the contemporary post-war reality, which has been increasingly tinged with the demise of utopian hope and threatened with the spectre of dystopian regimes,<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare's life and dramatic stories offer a fictional mirror but also material for further adaptation, recycling and palimpsestic appropriation. The characteristic polarity between the image of the real place and of no place, the factual history and its fictionalised version, defined for the utopian genre, imposes a special pact on the reader who is both required to trust the accuracy of historical realism and at the same time accept its universalizing potential through fictional redefinition, projection or speculation. It is exactly this pact of belief and trust that is required in analysing *Dunsinane*, a Scottish play by David Greig. The central figure of this work based on Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is Siward, an English general who plays a decisively lesser role in the original play. Greig's work is a "sequel" to Shakespeare's drama, imagining what might happen after the moment the original ends. Siward leads the English army whose military objective is to secure Malcolm's reign and to fight dissenting clans. His political mission is that of bringing order to the Scottish land ripped between fighting factions after the deposition of King Macbeth. On the ground however, the situation turns out to be much more complex. Firstly

---

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Kumar.

because Lady Macbeth, in Greig's version named Grauch, remains alive and active in struggling for her and her son's rights to assume the throne, and secondly because Siward does not understand the cultural or even linguistic complexity of the nation he is expected to subdue. Therefore, his journey in search of a solution to the country's future and to securing English domination over the land is that from hope to disillusionment and from flexible dialogue to utterly vile bestiality. In Siward's case, learning the ropes of the local politics means not only an education in an alien tradition of brutality which sets English statesmanship in bucolically innocent contrast, but also revealing the hard bedrock of manipulation, lies and betrayal which constitute the rudiments of any modern state. The play can be interpreted in the context of current Scottish politics which in 2011—a year after the play's premiere—faced the challenge of the renewed calls for the independence referendum. This political environment imbues Greig's narrative with immediate, contemporary references to the cultural and political domination which England would wish to maintain and solidify, fearing the results of the possible collapse of the Union. However, in Greig's bleak concept of policymaking, one could see a universal mechanism of manipulation, an image of a degraded modern state in which achieving political aims inevitably leads to squandering any ethical values and imposing a system of exploitation.

While at the beginning of *Dunsinane*, Siward declares that his strategic efforts aim at making a "picture of the world which everyone agrees true," Malcolm's attempts to secure the throne for himself drift in an entirely different direction. In a speech to the parliament in which he tries to secure the support of the local clans, he does not leave any illusion as to how he understands the privileges of the monarch:

If you make me king I promise you one thing only—total honesty. In that spirit I offer you the following. I will govern entirely in the interests of me. In so far as I give consideration to you it will be to calibrate exactly how much I can take from you before you decide to attempt violence against me. (Greig 80)

Siward faces the impossible task of pushing the country into any form of stable political balance, and he clearly displays a complete lack of skill in handling political ploys. Shocked by Malcolm's speech, he seeks explanation, asking him "What is it—the joke or the truth?" (Greig 81) and gets an answer which befits the corrupted state that Malcolm wishes to run: "Both." Unable to follow the rules of this game, Siward swiftly transforms into a ruthless military commander, as only battlefield violence seems to give him a sense of control and influence. The second part of the play depicts his gradual deterioration as a person and commander in a world which is too numb to register more deaths and let them change the political reality of the land.

Clearly, Greig's rendering of the universal mechanism of power and domination goes beyond the limited scale of the colonial and economic clash between England and her northern neighbour. Michael Billington, reviewing the Hampstead Theatre production for *The Guardian*, suggests that "Scotland is too complex, tribal and territorially distinctive ever to be understood by the English" (*Dunsinane*). He might as well be voicing his scepticism towards many foreign campaigns undertaken by Western governments over the course of a few decades. The fact that the play's main line of conflict is the colonial contact zone of English and Celtic cultures (some characters in Greig's play speak Gaelic) does not rid *Dunsinane* of universality. Greig, drawing logical political conclusions from Shakespeare's vision of the state, outlines the mechanism of contemporary governance which operates through eradication of political opponents and a philosophy of toxic alliances that we see in many contemporary conflicts. It is not surprising, then, that the London and subsequently the Edinburgh's productions of the play generated associations with current international politics.<sup>10</sup> The critics pointed to how the play's universal philosophy of governance and expansion resonated with ongoing global conflicts and wars. It was obvious that the invading English army, who speak no Gaelic and find themselves treading over an alien landscape, illustrated the philosophy of contemporary military operations carried out on foreign territories and among essentially unfamiliar natives. Robert Innes Hopkins's set design for the Scottish production was built out of stone and the imitation of the stone flags of Dunsinane architecture, additionally spiced with a "large Iona cross [...] on display at the top of a flight of granite steps" (Price 22).<sup>11</sup> The foreign atmosphere of the local landscape turns the English army into invaders who, as *The Guardian* critic Mark Fisher observed, bring associations with a "peace-keeping force making a chaotic situation worse" (*Dunsinane*).<sup>12</sup> The production, then, much in line with David Greig's original intent, assumed new senses in the light of current military operations undertaken by America and other Western states at the time of its premiere. Interventions in Iraq and then in Afghanistan, publicly justified as extended "war on terror" engagements, are highlighted as possible interpretative contexts for the play by the authors of the Shakespeare Theatre Company's resource pack who stress precisely the universality of the dystopian mechanism that connected the production with the current politics:

---

<sup>10</sup> Chronologically speaking, the play was commissioned by Michael Boyd for the Royal Shakespeare Company. It premiered in London at the Hampstead Theatre in 2010 (directed by Roxana Silbert). *Dunsinane* received its Scottish premiere at the Royal Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh in 2011.

<sup>11</sup> On the stage design see: Wallace, 198.

<sup>12</sup> On the theme of Scotland being "defined in opposition to England" in *Dunsinane* see: Rodríguez (63).

“Tragically, the continuing unrest and bloodshed in the Middle East makes the timeless *Dunsinane* even more timely today” (McGlone 6).<sup>13</sup> For the *Scotsman* reviewer, Greig helps us read the “contemporary resonances of the situation” in current politics, that is the presence of the “British troops in Afghanistan” (*The Scotsman*). Or, as Mark Fisher observes, *Dunsinane* exposes the “value judgements behind even the most enlightened attempt by one nation to control another,” through which an “audience in Scotland finds itself empathising with the occupied nations of the Middle East” (Fisher). All these opinions highlight the presence of the dystopian concept of community imagined through a semi-fictional story of Shakespeare’s historical play and reapplied to current political conditions. Such images of politics relying on the violent imposition of rules and laws of the stronger, colonising power constitute the dystopian strategy of reflecting the “management of fear” (Claeys 2017, 9) through which this literary genre builds its critical vision of the world.

As stated earlier, Siward’s journey is that from possible utopia to fulfilled dystopia, as the protagonist of Greig’s play remains stubbornly unable to nuance reality in a way which would grant it a modicum of space to develop beyond his rational limitations. Dystopia is a form of dream, and Siward possesses no capacity for its unpredictable workings:

You’re right, I’m tired, Malcolm. I’m tired of ‘appear’ and I’m tired of ‘seem’.  
I only have bone and flesh and mud and bog and metal. That’s the world my  
power’s in and that’s the world I’ll fight in, and that’s the world in which I’ll  
win. (Greig 112)

Greig imagines the society entrapped by what Clare Wallace calls “England’s paternal control” (205) as thoroughly unable to attain the condition of justice and stability. The picture of the modern state that Greig’s play offers is that of permanent violence and disruption, established and finally justified by long tradition of spreading unrest. For as Malcolm instructs Siward towards the end of the play:

You seem to think peace is a natural state, Siward, and conflict its interruption,  
but the truth is the exact opposite. Peace is what the sea looks like in a dead  
calm—a rare and beautiful moment—something impossible—a glimpse of  
perfection before the wind comes back again. You can no more force peace into  
existence than you can wander across the surface of the sea stamping the waves  
flat. (Greig 126)

---

<sup>13</sup> Graham Saunders reconstructs and analyses the changing political impact of the two productions of *Dunsinane* (in 2010 and 2011) when projected against the conflicts in Iraq and subsequently Afghanistan (122).

With such a dystopian vision at hand, Grieg could only finish the play with a vague image of further, unpredictable exploration of an unknown territory. For as Marilena Zaroulia observes, images of utopia and dystopia in Grieg's drama always venture "beyond the realm of language and representation" (34). *Dunsinane* ends with a walk into a moral and political void:

Everything has disappeared.  
There is only the Boy and white.  
And then there is only white. (Greig 138)

This movement "beyond culturally or socially specific codes" (Zaroulia 35) marks the final challenge of utopia or dystopia. Since they do not exist in the immediate reality, they need to be invented with the help of Shakespearean political imagination.

Concluding, many twentieth-century playwrights perceive and describe current political states through Shakespearean concepts. They also imagine possible reformatory scenarios by employing Shakespearean plots as imaginative models, as abstract experiments in political and social science, and as schemes for universal rules in which timeless workings of power and justice can be practically tested. Shakespeare's drama, life and cultural heritage provide not only a common code or vocabulary to discuss politics, but primarily a cultural material on which to build contemporary myths of possible political reforms, and more ominously, in which to phrase warning alarms for modern men and women. Shakespearean plots and characters belong to the political and cultural subconscious of modern times, they exist in the twilight zone of political thinking which cannot be fully hatched if they are not related to his utopian or dystopian scenarios.

### WORKS CITED

- Billington, Michael. "Bingo." *The Guardian*. 25 April 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/apr/25/bingo-chichester-review/>. Accessed 11 September 2022.
- Billington, Michael. "Dunsinane." *The Guardian*. 17 February 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2010/feb/17/dunsinane-review/>. Accessed 11 September 2022.
- Bond, Edward. *Bingo. Plays Three*. London: Methuen, 1987. 3-66.
- Bond, Edward. *Lear*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1972.
- Claeys, Gregory, ed. *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
- Claeys, Gregory, ed. *Dystopia. A Natural History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Cohn, Ruby. "Shakespeare Left." *Theatre Journal* 40.1 (1988): 48-60.

- Connor, Sheila. "Bingo: Scenes of Money and Death." *British Theatre Guide*. 2010. <https://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/bingo-rev/>. Accessed 11 September 2022.
- Elliott, C. Robert. *The Shape of Utopia. Studies in a Literary Genre*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- Fisher, Mark. "Dunsinane." *The Guardian*. 19 May 2011. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2011/may/19/dunsinane-review/>. Accessed 11 September 2022.
- Greig, David. *Dunsinane*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010.
- Greene, Nicholas. "Mutabilitie: In search of Shakespeare." *Irish University Review* 40.1 (2010): 92-100.
- Kumar, Krishan. "The Ends of Utopia." *New Literary History* 41.3 (2010): 549-569.
- McGlone, Jackie. "After the Dictator Falls: Tracing the Steps of Grauch." *Shakespeare Theatre Company Teacher and Student Resource Guide*. 2013.
- McGuinness, Frank. *Mutabilitie*. London, Boston: Faber and Faber, 1997.
- Meckier, Jerome. "Shakespeare and Aldous Huxley." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 22.2 (1971): 129-135.
- O'Casey, Sean. "The Play of Ideas." *Blasts and Benedictions. Articles and Stories*. Selected and introduced by Ronald Ayling. London, Melbourne, Toronto: Macmillan, New York: St Martin's Press, 1967. 24-26.
- Price, Victoria E. "'two kingdoms...compassed with one Sea': Reconstructing Kingdoms and Reclaiming Histories in David Greig's *Dunsinane*." *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen*. 5.1 (2012): 19-32.
- Rodríguez, Verónica and Dilek Inan. "Combining the Epic with the Everyday: David Greig's *Dunsinane*." *International Journal of Scottish Theatre and Screen* 5.2 (2012): 56-78.
- Saunders, Graham. *Elizabethan and Jacobean Reappropriation in Contemporary British Drama*. London: Palgrave, 2017.
- The Scotsman*. "Theatre Reviews: *Dunsinane, A Slow Air, Top Table*." 18 May 2011.
- Scott, Michael. *Shakespeare and the Modern Dramatist*. London: Macmillan Press, 1999.
- Vieira, Fátima "The Concept of Utopia." *Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*. Ed. Gregory Claeys. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. 3-27.
- Wallace, Clare. "Unfinished Business—Allegories of Otherness in *Dunsinane*." *Cosomotopia. Transnational Identities in David Greig's Theatre*. Eds. Anja Müller and Clare Wallace. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2011. 196-214.
- Worthen, W. B. *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Zaroulia, Marilena. "'What's Missing is my Place in the World' the Utopian Dramaturgy of David Greig." *Cosomotopia. Transnational Identities in David Greig's Theatre*. Eds. Anja Müller and Clare Wallace. Prague: Litteraria Pragensia Books, 2011. 32-50.