

University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Laurie Johnson

Borrowed robes and garbled transmissions: echoes of Shakespeare's dwarfish thief

Abstract:

When Shakespeare's plays are creatively reinterpreted or rewritten, 'Shakespeare' invariably remains locked in as the fixed point of reference: rewritings *of* Shakespeare; reinterpretations *of* Shakespeare, and so on. Since 1753, Shakespeare source studies have been mapping the source materials on which his plays were based, which should have enabled us to loosen this fixed point of reference and to begin to picture the much longer history of reinterpretations in which the plays participate. Yet traditional approaches to Shakespeare source studies merely lock in a new point of reference, encompassing both source text and play. This paper aims to show that the new source studies unravels the notion of an 'original' by enabling us to unlock broader fields of exchange within which Shakespeare's texts and our interpretations circulate together. Using the example of *Macbeth* and the language of borrowing and robbery within it, this essay illustrates the capacity for creative or writerly engagements with a Shakespearean text to tap, perhaps even unconsciously at times, into a history of words and images that goes far beyond the 400 years that we are marking in this year of Shakespeare.

Biographical note:

Laurie Johnson is Associate Professor (English and Cultural Studies) at the University of Southern Queensland and President elect of the Australian and New Zealand Shakespeare Association. His publications include *The Tain of Hamlet* (Cambridge Scholars, 2013), *The Wolf Man's Burden* (Cornell, 2001), *Embodied Cognition and Shakespeare's Theatre: The Early Modern Body-Mind* (co-edited with John Sutton and Evelyn Tribble, Routledge, 2014), and *Rapt in Secret Studies: Emerging Shakespeares* (co-edited with Darryl Chalk, Cambridge Scholars, 2010).

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Adaptations, interpretations, performances, retellings – Shakespeare’s plays retain currency through creative practices and imaginative scholarship, but this is invariably undertaken with ‘Shakespeare’ seen as the fixed point of reference: adaptations *of* Shakespeare; interpretations *of* Shakespeare, and so on. By maintaining this fixed point of reference when we approach a Shakespearean text for reinterpretation and/or rewriting, we potentially paint over the much longer history of reinterpretations in which the text itself participates. For more than half of the 400 years that separates us from Shakespeare’s career as playwright, scholars have been mapping the source materials on which his plays were based, which should at some point have been sufficient to remove the stigma of fidelity that attaches to creative engagements with Shakespeare’s work. Yet traditional approaches to Shakespeare source studies merely stretch out the frame of reference to cover both Shakespeare’s sources and his repurposing of the materials at his disposal in a tightly-woven one-to-one relation. Our reinterpretations and rewritings remain badged as borrowings of a Shakespearean ‘original’ that encompasses both source text and play. In new approaches to source studies, though, the notion of an original has begun to unravel, enabling us to imagine broader fields of exchange within which Shakespeare’s texts and our interpretations circulate together. Glimpsing the wide fields of exchange in which the story of *Macbeth* and the language of borrowing and robbery within it have circulated, this essay will illustrate in some small measure the capacity for creative or writerly engagements with a Shakespearean text to tap, perhaps even unconsciously at times, into a history of words and images that goes far beyond the 400 years that we are marking in this year of Shakespeare.

Studies of the narrative and dramatic sources for Shakespeare’s plays date back to Charlotte Lennox’s *Shakespeare Illustrated, or the Novels and Histories on which the Plays of Shakespeare are founded, collected and translated from the original authors. With critical remarks*, of 1753 – Lennox compiled numerous sources for Shakespeare’s plays, but views the existence of these sources as grounds upon which to denounce him for lacking any ‘Degree of Invention’ (iv). Lennox’s judgement of Shakespeare was based of course on standards of poetic invention that had evolved significantly in the 140 years separating Shakespeare’s works from her assessment of them. Throughout the nineteenth century, the project begun by Lennox was taken further by John Payne Collier, whose *Shakespeare’s Library* was so extensive that it had to be published in serial form over the course of three years, from October 1840 to November 1843 (Freeman and Freeman 2004: 1175). Instead of seeking to discredit Shakespeare, though, Collier’s project was now to so thoroughly furnish our knowledge of Shakespeare’s sources that we could appreciate anew the powers of ‘our Great Poet’ for compressing the vast resources at his disposal into a dramatic and poetic unity. Unfortunately, Collier was himself discredited in the 1850s, when a number of his antiquarian ‘discoveries’ were shown to be forgeries, casting a pall of doubt over most of his scholarship. His research into Shakespeare’s sources should have been exempt from the scandal, and modern assessments of the questionable documentation in his scholarship bear out this suggestion that Collier’s work on the sources was exemplary (see, Freeman and Freeman 2004: 1175).

Several scholars produced similar collections in the century after Collier's work, with a particular focus on Shakespeare's debt to the English chronicles in developing his History plays, but source studies fell into disrepute again in the early twentieth century following a series of published studies of spurious analogies (see, Bullough 1975: 342-43). Source studies survived at this time mainly to ongoing interest by some editors of Shakespeare's plays, for whom glosses of the text often included passing reference to potential source material and parallels in other literature of the period. A revival seemed likely with the appearance of Geoffrey Bullough's eight-volume collection, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, beginning in 1957 and completed in 1975. At the end of his mammoth project, Bullough prepared a 64-page essay for a General Conclusion, providing a series of new observations generated no doubt after the publication of the earlier volumes, but also commenting on the value of Shakespeare source studies in letting us 'glimpse the creative process in action as he took over, remade, rejected, adapted, or added to chosen or given materials. Indeed, I would claim that this is the best, and often the only, way open to us of watching Shakespeare the craftsman in his workshop' (346).

The great achievement of Bullough's collection was perhaps diminished to some extent by its untimeliness, given that English departments the world over were already rejecting the idea of 'Shakespeare the craftsman' by the time the collection was complete. Bullough's project was quite possibly itself a reaction to the New Critics and their insistence that reading authorial intention commits an intentional fallacy (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946: 474). What would the study of Shakespeare be if lumbered with a fallacious Bard? By the time Bullough's task was complete, New Criticism had given way to poststructuralism, with its death of the author, but a renewed interest in historicism was in the offing, presaged by Hayden White's *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe* (1973), which included a methodological statement on the forms of narrative used by historians. By the end of the 1970s, Shakespeare Studies found its theoretically-informed response to the New Critics in a method focusing on the 'textuality of history' (as White demonstrated) and the 'historicity of texts' (Montrose 1986: 8). Such formulations sounded the death knell for source studies, since they located Shakespeare's plays within a broad confluence of cultural processes in which meaning is constantly constructed and then renegotiated according to the forms of texts and the power relations or institutional structures in which these texts circulated – it would no longer matter whether Shakespeare read this or that chronicle history; it would only matter that both Shakespeare's plays and other texts of any kind could be examined as different forms of expression arising from the same cultural milieu.

While this 'new' historicism eschewed source study, there remained a very active group of scholars working within editorial and textual studies who maintained an interest in the source materials under the auspices of questions of 'textual transmission' – this is a term originally used in studies of the history of the Bible to refer to the reproduction of the texts by different hands, in translation, and across different modes of production, but which was adopted by Walter Wilson Greg in a lecture delivered to the Bibliographical Society on 19 February 1912, to describe the primary goal of the bibliographer if the profession was to remain relevant beyond the classifying of books

for librarians. In ‘What is Bibliography?’ Greg outlined the value of critically-oriented bibliographic studies for the editors of literary works: ‘the science of the material transmission of literary texts’ was essential in dealing with textual evidence in the production of authoritative editions (Greg 1914: 47-48). Greg’s foundational principles remained more or less valid for the remainder of the century, ensuring that editors of Shakespeare’s works also retained an interest in the search for source materials, especially where evidence of the transmission of a phrase or idea could be used to solve a textual crux for an editor confronted with differing print versions of a play. Yet this editorial side interest remained for the most part the last bastion of source studies within Shakespeare scholarship during the last four decades, until only relatively recently when a ‘new source study’ has begun to emerge.

This new source study is less concerned with questions of which texts Shakespeare must have read to inform his characters, plots, or even turns of phrase, because most of its proponents have trained in cultural and textual theory and understand full well the risks inherent in attempts to fully reconstruct a one-to-one relationship between Shakespeare and a finite set of sources, as if this could ever be enough to explain how ideas come into being and circulate within a culture. Shakespeare’s supernatural figures, for example, need not have been sourced from a specific text like Reginald Scot’s *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) nor even perhaps from folktales, when the world in which he lived contained more than enough people who genuinely believed in demons, sprites, and other assorted entities, both malevolent and benign. Yet the proponents of this new source study are no longer willing to argue primarily by analogy between a Shakespearean and a non-Shakespearean text in hopes that this will return Shakespeare’s writing, and us, to a moment in which such beliefs were widespread. Within the renewal of source studies, there is a greater emphasis than perhaps ever before on concerns with textual transmission, precisely because the circulation of ideas can no longer be accepted as something that happens before the text; rather, we are now invested heavily in understanding how the circulation of ideas takes place *within* the circulation of texts – in print or in performance, in the case of theatrical texts.

While new source studies acknowledges that ideas also circulate verbally, we are bound to study only the material textual traces of the past in the hope that we might be able to identify the echoes of the verbal. My interest in this paper is to some extent already to want to go beyond this focus on the traces of the past, where this ‘past’ is understood as related to a relatively static moment in time. Textual transmission can and should be understood as a process that takes place across time and, as such, one that may connect us to the past without imagining that the distance between present and past can ever be collapsed altogether. In what follows, I offer a series of vignettes and brief studies that I hope will prove illustrative of this approach to understanding the different ways in which ideas and words are transmitted across time, a process that cannot be presumed to unfold in any straightforward linear fashion. We shall begin with what might seem at first to be little more than a loose thread in the weave of a scholar’s curious anecdote, but as we tug harder at that thread, I hope to reveal a deep history of the transmission of an idea that has come down through the centuries in somewhat garbled fashion.

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Macbeth's exit at the end of this scene seems intended for him to remove his robe and crown for the ensuing scene with his wife; in this scene, he and she are probably in the costumes they wore just before the murder, giving a further visual signal that their robes and crowns are 'borrowed,' since the wearers appear in them so briefly. While Banquo is being murdered, the Macbeths can resume these robes and crowns for the 'great feast' and 'solemn supper' to which all enter in procession. The sudden sight of the first murderer at the door almost on the heels of this procession again juxtaposes a King's robes with a killer's tatters (MacIntyre 1992: 290).

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The 'Multiple Murderer Court Scene,' with which the third season of *Monty Python's Flying Circus* opened on 19 October 1972, sees a robed Terry Jones as Judge read out a list of people alleged to have been killed by one man:

Judge (Terry Jones): Michael Norman Randall, you have been found guilty of the murder of Arthur Reginald Webster, Charles Patrick Trumpington, Marcel Agnes Bernstein, Lewis Anona Rudd, John Malcolm Kerr, Nigel Sinclair Robinson, Norman Arthur Potter, Felicity Jayne Stone, Jean-Paul Reynard, Rachel Shirley Donaldson, Stephen Jay Greenblatt, Karl-Heinz Mullet, Belinda Anne Ventham, Juan-Carlos Fernandez, Thor Olaf Stensgaard, Lord Kimberley of Pretoria, Lady Kimberley of Pretoria, The Right Honourable Nigel Warmly Kimberley, Robert Henry Noonan and Felix James Bennett, on or about the morning of the 19th December 1972. Have you anything to say before I pass sentence?

Randall (Eric Idle): Yes, sir. I'm very sorry (Chapman *et al* 1989 v. 2: 45).

Many of the names used in this sketch are silly, fictional ones but the eleventh name on the list, attracting easily as many laughs as the rest, is definitely not fictional: it is Stephen Jay Greenblatt, a name synonymous with the scholarly movement known as New Historicism, which redefined Shakespeare Studies in the 1980s and 1990s. Reflecting on the use of his name by the Python team, Greenblatt observed anecdotally two decades later that his name had been mentioned in a 'long list of names of people who've been killed by a deranged dwarf,' exclaiming, 'and it's a *laugh* line!' (Greenblatt 1994: 122). Greenblatt's concern is with the source of the laughter: it took him years of living in England to become accustomed to the 'note of risibility that they introduce into their voice at the name of the other, as it were' but that 'at first,' he was merely puzzled that anybody might find his name funny at all.

While Greenblatt was concerned with the source of the laughter, he did not pause to question *the source of his name* in this sketch – how, in other words, did the Python team know of his name? By 1972, Greenblatt had not yet made his name as one of the world's pre-eminent Shakespeare scholars – his work on Walter Raleigh and the Renaissance was a year away (Greenblatt 1973) and the introductory essay in which he, almost by accident, gave the name 'new historicism' to this approach to Shakespeare scholarship was still ten years away (Greenblatt 1982). By 1965, though, his Honours dissertation had been published in the Yale College Series, as *Three Modern Satirists: Waugh, Orwell, and Huxley*, and it is reasonable to speculate that the university-educated humourists were familiar with it and the 'poetics of satire' that it develops. To proponents of an older tradition in source studies, this could be sufficient to establish

the 1965 work as a viable ‘source’ for Greenblatt’s name in the Python sketch and might prompt a further suite of studies of the *Monty Python* series in terms of this source text and its analysis of satire. In this tradition, biographical information will usually be consigned to a footnote if it is mentioned at all – the question of transmission must needs be primarily textual, since that is where the evidence of borrowing is most explicit. Yet we may miss something about how Greenblatt’s name ended up in a Monty Python sketch if we fail to mention the simple fact that from 1965 to 1966, Greenblatt and Idle were both residents at Pembroke College in Cambridge University (Larsen 2008: 353) – so the years of living in England to which Greenblatt refers as he reminisces about the sketch include a significant length of time spent living alongside Idle.

Greenblatt is not, of course, concerned with how his name ended up in the sketch – the anecdote he offers in the interview with Noel King is little more than an amusing curio. Yet readers familiar with his work will know that Greenblatt has never been backward in using his personal experiences to illustrate an academic point, as for example his story at the end of *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, in which he refused to help a fellow airline passenger who was going to visit his son in hospital and who therefore asked Greenblatt to help him learn to lip read the phrase ‘I want to die’ (Greenblatt 1980: 255-56). Greenblatt refused because he could not be sure the man was not, ‘quite simply, a maniac’ who would in fact try to kill him once the words had been uttered. The point of the anecdote was to reinforce the sense that his identity and the words he utters are coincident with each other. If we take this story together with the anecdote about the ‘deranged dwarf’ we might also begin to form a sense of Greenblatt’s unease at any representation of his own death – not, I might add, an irrational reaction, but the earlier anecdote provides added poignancy as well as explaining why Greenblatt did not see the funny side of having his name included in a list of murder victims.

Greenblatt’s anecdotes, whether they be personal or historical, are thus not to be seen as fodder for source studies; rather, they represent the ‘touch of the real’ that reminds us of the immediacy of the world in which a literary text, read alongside the anecdote, circulates (Greenblatt 1997: 15). As my brief consideration of the possible source for his name in the *Monty Python* sketch demonstrates, we run a risk of overstating a direct relationship between two texts if we assume that one acts as the source for the other without also considering more interpersonal connections. Yet I am inclined to think there is more to the anecdote than meets the eye, both as a general rule of thumb and in relation to Greenblatt’s ‘deranged dwarf.’ Let me explain by considering another anecdote from *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, in which a personal experience is offered as an illustration of the way in which, in *The Jew of Malta*, the audience is rendered complicit in the crimes of Barabas:

Years ago, in Naples, I watched a deft pick-pocket lifting a camera from a tourist’s shoulder-bag and replacing it instantaneously with a rock of equal weight. The thief spotted me watching but did not run away – instead he winked, and I was frozen in mute complicity. The audience’s conventional silence becomes in *The Jew of Malta* the silence of the passive accomplice, winked at by his fellow criminal (1980: 216)

While I do not dispute that this actually happened to Greenblatt, it is nevertheless instructive to recall a particularly literary precursor – the idea of a Neapolitan shrug has been in popular currency in English at least since Thomas Nashe’s *Unfortunate Traveller* (1593):

Whereupon it is growne to a common prouerb, Ile giue him the Neapolitan shrug, when one meanes to play the villaine, and makes no boast of it. The onely precept that a traoueller hath most vse of, and shall finde most ease in, is that of *Epicharchus, Vigila, & memor sis ne quid credas*; Beléue nothing, trust no man: yet séeme thou as thou swallowedst all, suspectedst none, but wert easie to be gulled by euery one (Grosart 1884: 142-43).

Naples and its population are reduced to the level of a commonplace, but with one important difference: Greenblatt’s Neapolitan co-opts the traveller not with a shrug but with a wink, a variation that signals an allusion to Clifford Geertz’s *Interpretation of Cultures*, the very text that Greenblatt cites in the introduction as an influence on his method and which he mentions in his final anecdote as the book he wanted to read on the plane instead of mouthing ‘I want to die’ to the passenger seated next to him. Geertz spends several pages in the introduction to his book expanding on a problem posed by Gilbert Ryle concerning when a person knows if another person is twitching or winking: ‘the object of ethnography,’ he notes is ‘a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted’ (Geertz 1973: 7).

In the introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt cites Geertz but does not mention the winking, so his anecdote seems to float free from any potential connection to Geertz as a source. That his particular example also situates his experience within a history of literary commonplaces related to Naples is also left unsaid, so the anecdote can attach itself to the touch of the real in a less fettered fashion than drawing attention to any sources allows. A similar point can be made, I think, about his *Monty Python* anecdote. To anybody who read Greenblatt’s account of the sketch and who, like me, was also familiar with the episode, the most striking feature of the story is that he refers to the principal character in the sketch as a ‘deranged dwarf’ when in fact it was Eric Idle who appeared in the role as the accused in the dock – apart from Idle being a man of average height, there is no reference to his character being imagined as a dwarf, deranged or otherwise. In the sketch, the humour is achieved by virtue of Idle’s calm, apologetic presence and his ability to charm the courtroom to such great effect that he is given a heavily reduced sentence: ‘Six months ... But suspended’ (Chapman *et al* 1989 v.2: 47). Whence, then, Greenblatt’s diminutive serial killer? One answer may be to look to Shakespeare, in one of his descriptions of a killer who cannot stop killing: in Act 5 Scene 2 of *Macbeth*, the Scottish Thanes discuss their reasons for supporting the attack on Dunsinane, chief among which are the murders committed by Macbeth:

Cath. Great Dunsinane he strongly Fortifies:
Some say hee’s mad: Others, that lesser hate him,
Do call it valiant Fury, but for certaine
He cannot buckle his distemper’d cause

Within the belt of Rule.
Ang. Now do's he feele
His secret Murthers sticking on his hands,
Now minutely Reuolts vpraid his Faith-breach:
Those he commands, moue onely in command,
Nothing in loue: Now do's he feele his Title
Hang loose about him, like a Giants Robe
Vpon a dwarfish Theefe (*Macbeth*, TLN 2189-2200).

Whether he is conscious of the allusion at the heart of his anecdote, Greenblatt thus scaffolds personal experience upon a Shakespearean source. That this source, *circa* 1992, is *Macbeth*, is all the more telling when we observe that the four books which made his fame from 1980 to 1991 contain only one passing reference to this play between them.¹ Could this cryptic nod be a late gesture toward a text he has hitherto ignored: the return of the repressed?

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Prince George. Ah Blackadder. It has been a wild afternoon full of strange omens. I dreamt that a large eagle circled the room three times and then got into bed with me and took all the blankets. And then I saw that it wasn't an eagle at all but a large black snake. And also Duncan's horses did turn and eat each other. As usual ('Duel and Duality.' *Blackadder the Third*, episode 6, 1987)

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When David Garrick decided in 1744 at the age of 27 to produce and star in the Scottish play, he did so with the stated aim of restoring to the theatre Shakespeare's original text, following eight decades in which William Davenant's heavily adapted text was the version of choice for Restoration productions. Davenant's amendments to Shakespeare's text facilitated addition of dancing, music, and song, as well as an abundance of properties and mechanical stage effects suited to an operatic production – John Downes, writing in 1673, described the play as

being dressed in all its Finery, as new Cloath's, new Scenes, Machines, as flyings for the Witches; with all the Singing and Dancing in it ... all Excellently perform'd, being in the nature of an Opera, it Recompenc'd double the Expencc (Wilders 2004: 11).

Despite a significant array of changes that Davenant thus made to the play text, the sense in which the productions kept intact a direct lineage to Shakespeare was achieved through the figure of Davenant himself, who it was said had seen Shakespeare's company in performance prior to the Interregnum or who, via a myth Davenant helped propagate, was actually Shakespeare's son (Schoenbaum 1991: 63). Davenant instructed Thomas Betterton on how to play Shakespeare's roles as the playwright himself had intended them to be performed, and this sense of direct lineage thus passed down from Betterton to George Powell, John Mills, and James Quin, each of whom added their own flavour – Powell was wont to employ ranting while Mills tended too much to descend into monotone (Bartholomeusz 1969: 30) – but all of whom played Davenant's text. When Garrick announced his intention to produce *Macbeth* 'as written

by Shakespeare,' Quin responded with incredulity: 'Don't I play Macbeth as Shakespeare wrote it?' (Bartholomeusz 1969: 39).

The stakes for Garrick were high, since this return to Shakespeare's text appeared to even the trained eye of Quin like a departure from the Shakespeare everybody knew and, as reports like those by Downes confirm, loved. As Paul Prescott explains, in the lineage traced by Downes and others, 'Pre- and post-interregnum theatrical culture are umbilically linked in a fantasy of continuity that effaces the rupture of the Civil War,' against which Garrick hoped to 'sacrifice the authority of this performance tradition and ... present his own authority as deriving, *despite* the intervening successions of *Macbeths*, from Shakespeare, and specifically from his text' (Prescott 2013: 37). As it happens, Garrick made compromises, by retaining some of Davenant's lines: for example, the arrival of Macbeth and Banquo in Act 1 Scene 3 was performed at the Globe on horseback, according to the contemporary record of Simon Forman, with Macbeth speaking the first line, 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen', but the Davenant text adds a preceding first line for Macbeth – 'Command they make a halt upon the Heath' – suggesting that their soldiers remain present but just off stage; Garrick kept the extra first line and added a responding 'Halt, halt, halt' spoken 'within' to suggest the order being fed along the line and increasing the implied scale of the forces off stage (Wilders 2004: 86-87, Bartholomeusz 1969: 40-41). Garrick also retained one of Davenant's cuts: the entirety of Act 5 Scene 2 remains absent from his restoration of the text 'as written by Shakespeare', for reasons that would seem to have more to do with vanity than with dramatic necessity or the tastes of the time. Garrick was not a tall man, as an engraving of him alongside Hannah Pritchard (in the role of Lady Macbeth) from the period attests, so he might have wanted to avoid drawing any attention to his stature by including the scene that refers to Macbeth as a 'dwarfish thief' (Prescott 2013: 38).



Fig. 1. *Mr. Garrick and Mrs. Pritchard in the Tragedy of Macbeth. Act II, Scene III*, engraving by Valentine Green, Published by J. Boydell (30 March, 1776), after a design by J. Zoffani. Reproduced with permission, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London

If, for Garrick, the stature of Shakespeare's 'dwarfish' Macbeth was a potential source of embarrassment, he nevertheless retained numerous other references in the play to the robes that in this scene round out the characterization—remember that he is dwarfish

only by virtue of the ‘Giants Robe’ that hangs loose upon him. From the moment the witches refer to him as Thane of Cawdor, to which Macbeth protests that they dress him (address him) in ‘borrowed Robes’ (TLN 215), the image of Macbeth’s ill-fitting garb is used no fewer than eight times to remind us of his unsuitability to rule in place of Duncan (Spurgeon 1935: 324-27). It was only the last two of these – the ‘belt of Rule’ and the ‘Giants Robe’ – that Garrick left out of his ‘restored’ version of Shakespeare’s play. His decision to retain the other references to ill-fitting garb might seem the more puzzling when we note that his own costume consisted of a ‘court dress with a tie wig, a three-quarter-length embroidered coat, and knee breeches,’ the which made him look upon entering the witches’ cave, according to one correspondent, ‘like a Beau, who had unfortunately slipped his Foot and tumbled into a Night Celler’ (Wilders 2004: 16). When Garrick’s older contemporary, Charles Macklin, tackled the Scottish play at Covent Garden in 1773, an attempt was made to recreate the ancient Scottish setting through elaborate scenery, and Macklin’s own costume consisted of a Balmoral bonnet, tunic, and tartan plaid and stockings (Wilders 2004: 17). Macklin’s appearance was compared to a Scotch piper and he was laughed off the stage and into retirement after only a week. The next great actor to play the role, John Philip Kemble, went with a plaid cloak and scarlet breeches which contemporaries were more prepared to accept as characteristic of the military garb of the ancient Scots (Wilders 2004: 86).

Kemble’s cloak would seem also to have at least gestured toward the references to a robe in the text of the play, a specific visual signifier that previous performers had taken as a metaphor not to be matched to any actual costume item. It was not until Edmund Kean took to playing Macbeth in 1814 that audiences would witness the full extent to which costumes could be used to visually convey the sense that Macbeth was unfit in stature to wear the robes of his predecessor – himself a small man, like Garrick, Kean exploited his diminutive frame willingly in the service of a performance that highlighted Macbeth’s limitations, both mental and physical (Bartholomeusz 1969: 147). To enhance the effect, when Kean’s Macbeth took to the stage for the first time as king, he wore a ‘huge cloak’ which ‘was from its magnitude entirely disproportionate to the slenderness of his figure,’ and when he appeared for battle in Act Five, he donned a helmet so large that it appeared to one onlooker to be ‘almost as tall as himself’ (Bartholomeusz 1969: 147-48). In the century and a half following the Interregnum, then, the fate of Shakespeare’s dwarfish thief seemed to have turned around—Davenant may have decked his operatic players out in ‘Finery, new Cloath’s,’ and such, but the imagery of the borrowed robes was all but removed, including Act 5 Scene 2; Garrick restored much of the robe imagery, but not the image of the dwarfish thief, and his own choice of costume was hardly likely to draw attention to the ‘borrowed robes’ thread throughout the play; but by the time of Kean, the dwarfish thief became a crucial image upon which both loose garment and oversized helmet were hung. The extravagances of post-Interregnum stagecraft threatened at first to subsume Shakespeare’s imagery, but they now were deployed in the service of putting the dwarfish thief in the spotlight.

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The ordinary recreations which we have in winter, and in most solitary times busy our minds with, are cards, tables and dice, ... merry tales of errant knights, queens, lovers,

lords, ladies, giants, dwarfs, thieves, cheaters, witches, fairies, goblins, friars, & c. (Burton, 'Cure for Melancholy' in 1652: 314).

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In an important but little-known essay, Barry Nass noted an etymological basis for wordplay involving images of 'robes' and 'robbery,' in three of Shakespeare's plays and in his Sonnet 68 (Nass 1995: 8-11). In addition to the 'dwarfish thief' in *Macbeth*, Nass cites Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale* telling the Clown, 'I am robb'd, sir, and beaten; my money and apparel ta'en from me,' Marina in *Pericles* saying she will 'rob Tellus' of the weed with which she will dress Lychorida's grave, and the reference in the sonnet to 'Robbing no old to dress his beauty new'. We can go further, of course, by pointing out the numerous additional instances in *Macbeth* in which the robe imagery is associated with the protagonist having acquired his standing nefariously. Indeed, we might add to Nass's list the claim by Henry in *1 Henry IV* that he 'stole all Courtesie from Heauen' when he appeared in the presence of the king 'like a Robe Pontificall' (TLN 1869, 1875), as well as Prince Hal's use of the phrase 'a most sweet robe of durance' to rebuke Falstaff for 'a Purse of Gold most resolutely snatch'd on Monday night, and most dissolutely spent on Tuesday morning' (TLN 147-49, 156). Nass points out that the rob-robe link is not merely a modern etymological discovery; rather, it was accepted 'throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance,' especially in legal writing, that 'the Middle English verb *robben* – *to rob* – and the Middle English noun *robe*' both contained 'the sense of clothing taken as plunder' (Nass 1995: 8). While Nass notes the dictionaries of the time do not list etymological information of this kind about either 'rob' or 'robe,' he cites William Lambarde's 1592 *Eirenarcha* as a case in point of a legal handbook in which the origins of the terms are explicitly outlined:

the violent Robber, so called, either by corruption of the Latine *Raptor*, from which our tongue wil easily fal to robber: or else of Robe, because he that after this forcible and fearefull manner, spoyled an other, did use to take his robes (or clothes) from him (qtd. in Nass 1995: 9).

The example of Lambarde demonstrates that some writers of the time were conscious of the common etymology of the two words, which is particularly useful in helping us to see that there need be no single identifiable source text from which Shakespeare acquires the rob-robe imagery he adopts at length in *Macbeth* and on several occasions in other works. Nass observes that similar wordplay appears in English as early as *The Charter of the Abbey of the Holy Ghost* (c. 1390), wherein a pun is made regarding Adam and Eve who, being robbed of their innocence, perceived for the first time that they 'weren bope robbed & nakked' (qtd. in Nass 1995: 9). While he does not identify any literary examples from among Shakespeare's contemporaries, we could note Richard Barnfield's description of Clytemnestra's 'one daies glorious spoile' as a 'rich wrought robe' in his *Cynthia; and the Legend of Cassandra* (1595: 39). We need not claim after the fashion of the old source study that Shakespeare's wordplay cites Barnfield's, or *vice versa*. It is enough to note that the pun they both use builds on a known etymological crossover, and that versions of the pun had been in circulation for some two centuries before it appears in their writings.

Shakespeare's 'dwarfish thief' is thus no isolated image. The appearance of this term in Act 5 Scene 2 of *Macbeth* is the culmination of a recurring motif on the etymological link between 'rob' and 'robe' elaborated throughout the play, and it operates within a tradition in which the pun was well worn for over two centuries. This brief scene – with this organising image at its heart – provides a final justification for the Thanes to march on Dunsinane, so its omission comes at a cost. Yet the 'dwarfish thief' cannot be explained purely in terms of rob-robe wordplay: nothing in the etymology of these terms provides any hint of why the thief in this case must be dwarfish in stature. If Middle English etymology helps us to understand the joke as the early modern audience would have understood it, the dwarf nevertheless remains, unexplained, like the missing last piece of a jigsaw. Could it simply be that in elaborating the rob-robe puns throughout his play, Shakespeare arrived at the point at which the only way to make complete sense of Macbeth's 'borrowed robes' being ill-fitting was to paint a picture of robes that were too large by far for their wearer? In compiling Volume 7 of his *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Bullough identified no viable analogue or source for this image of a dwarfish thief among the ten texts he lists in connection with *Macbeth*. In the final volume, however, he reflects on a number of instances throughout Shakespeare's plays where the playwright drew inspiration from sources other than the 'narrative and dramatic' ones that had been covered in the collection, and he proposes that Marcus Gheeraerts's woodcuts in the 1577 edition of Holinshed might have provided Shakespeare with visual stimulus for several images in *Macbeth* (Bullough 1975: 398-99). In the cut depicting the encounter of Banquo and Macbeth with the weird sisters, Bullough notes, 'Macbeth on horseback is depicted as a small, meagre man against a much larger Banquo', and the Coronation cut depicts Macbeth in 'ample, flowing robes' (399).



Fig 2. Macbeth and Banquo meeting the witches. Marcus Gheeraerts. Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Ireland*. 1577. Reproduction in Bullough, v7 (1973): 494

Whether Bullough is right or not about the woodcut as a possible visual source for the representation of Macbeth as a dwarf – after all, how are we to know which of these riders is Macbeth and which one Banquo? – his general point is worth acknowledging here: the source for a specific image in a written text may not always be textual. Indeed, I am inclined to ask whether the cut of Macbeth and Banquo on horseback would be sufficient in and of itself to prompt the playwright to round out the rob-robe wordplay with the image of a dwarf. Where Bullough remains ultimately inclined to find the

‘source’ for Shakespeare’s dwarf in the very same text from which the bulk of his story seems derived, I might suggest an alternative way to interpret the tale of transmission involved here. Just as the ample robes in one cut might be a source for the rob-robe motif, we have already seen here that the wordplay involved draws on a much older and more widespread etymological tradition; thus, Shakespeare’s eye might well have been drawn to this image by virtue of his knowledge of a set of associations of rob-robe imagery. Likewise, if the two Scotsmen on horseback prompt Shakespeare to think of a dwarfish thief, then it is more likely that a prior field of associations exists, within which the playwright’s eye might see the small height difference between the two figures as an index of dwarfism.

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How did Dwarves become Scottish?

I am greatly enjoying *The Order of the Stick* gaming comic and of course, they have a Scottish Dwarf. I wonder, did the Scottish Dwarf start with *WarCraft*?

I seem to remember the Scottish-Dwarf stereotype long before *WarCraft II* in 1994, but I’m having a hard time pinpointing examples.

So would someone tell us how our favorite tunnel dwelling axe wielders [sic] become extras in *Braveheart*? (‘Spinachcat 2006)

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In 1549, High Dean of the Isles Donald Monro published his *Description of the Western Isles of Scotland*, in which he documented the existence of the Pygmies Isle, the tidal island of Luchruban (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 50-51). The name of the island is etymologically linked to the Gaelic *luspardan*, which means dwarf and from which the Irish *leprechaun* is also derived (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 54). Monro’s description of the inhabitants of the island became highly influential in shaping a long tradition of accounts of Scottish pygmies that continued into the nineteenth century, but as Lizanne Henderson and Edward Cowan have observed, the pygmy myth might have been so enduring because it tapped into a much older tradition of fairy lore, which held that fairies were small entities that could be found throughout Scotland, including the Western isles (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 50-57). A popular Scottish poem, ‘Ane Littill Interlud of the Droichis Part of the Play,’ from around 1500, featured the adventures of a Droich (dwarf), who had an ability to travel by whirlwind and possessed the gift of prophecy (Findlay 1998: 5, Henderson and Cowan 2001: 49). To underscore the sense that these were no mere legends or creatures of literary invention, we might also note that Walter Ronaldson of Dyce was brought before the court at Aberdeen in 1601 on a charge of ‘familiarity with a spirit,’ after having claimed that for more than two decades, he received regular visits from a dwarf who possessed the ability to pinpoint the location of ‘baith silver and gold’ hidden in a house (Henderson and Cowan 2001: 54-55). Similar tales abound from witch trials throughout Scotland at this time, suggesting that we need not look far to find a cultural commonplace linking dwarfs, witches, and Scotland in a chain of association that Shakespeare could readily have called upon in his Scottish play.

We may search in vain, though, for a link between these chains of association and the rob-robe etymological crossover. Ronaldson's dwarf directed him toward ill-gotten booty, but this is not sufficient to claim that Scottish dwarfs were associated with 'robe' in the sense of plunder. Yet there may be another potential topical source for Shakespeare's Scottish dwarf which, to the best of my knowledge, has as yet gone unnoticed, and which might point us in the direction of a dramatic precursor for the image of a Scottish dwarf unfit for the garments in which he has been decked out. When James VI of Scotland became James I of England in 1603, he appointed a new jester for his English court: Archibald Armstrong was a dwarf from Cumberland who had initially gained infamy as a sheep-stealer, but then made his name for a roguish capacity to embarrass dignitaries at the court of James and then Charles (Otto 2007: 4). Armstrong was no novelty – dwarf jesters were a regular feature of European royal courts and Elizabeth enjoyed the presence of Thomasina the dwarf at her court from 1578 to 1603 (Otto 2007: 67) – but as a Scottish dwarf who had been a notorious thief before he gained a position beside the Scottish King of England, his topical relevance is abundantly clear. It is important that we remind ourselves there is nothing in Shakespeare's Scottish play to indicate that Macbeth is actually a dwarf, so we should not think that Armstrong represents a model for the character; rather, his presence in the court of the English monarch after 1603 creates one of a number of points of reference for topical allusions in the play.

Any question of Armstrong's fitness for court was based not on his size but on his low standing as a thief. The nature of his sudden good fortune might well have reminded many an onlooker of the character of Nano in Robert Greene's play, *The Scottish Historie of James the Fourth* (1598): Nano is a dwarf, a fact pointed out on 12 occasions in the play, including the observation by Ateukin regarding his name that 'the etymology of which word is "a dwarf"' (Greene 1598: 34); no sooner is this etymological point confirmed than Ateukin resolves to 'deck thee princely, instruct thee courtly, and present thee to the queen as my gift'. Though Nano will be decked in princely clothes, he will lack any real standing since he remains little more than a prize to be presented as a gift. The relationship between a person's clothing and social standing were codified under the sumptuary laws, most recently set down by Elizabeth in 1574 (Aughterson 2002: 164-67), yet Greene's dwarf understands how to manipulate the codes – most likely by virtue of his instruction from Ateukin – and so he hatches the plan to enable Queen Dorothea to escape her murderer by disguising herself as a man (Greene 1598: 73). When Nano suggests that she should change 'this attire you wear,' Dorothea protests that she would 'clad me like a country maid,' but he responds that this would be a 'base' solution and instead insists she don garments 'as may make you seem a proper man,' although he adds 'the meanest coat for safety is not bad' (73). If there is a link, then, between the figure of the dwarf and the mismatch between garments and stature/status, it may well be that it is owed in part to Greene, albeit perhaps with a nod and a wink to Armstrong, the dwarfish thief-turned-jester at the Scottish-English court.

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Beyond *the* source, then, we find a multitude of potential pathways of transmission. Even the anecdotal or topical reference is invariably filtered through a chain of

associations that cannot be reduced to a single calculated gesture – like Geertz’s overdetermined wink, if we identify the knowing gesture by an author in any dramatic or literary allusion, it is an identification of our own making. This is not to say that Shakespeare’s ‘dwarfish thief’ isn’t derived from any or all of the myriad potential sources I have mentioned here; rather, it is to say that we shape our reading of the playwright’s craft if we seek any single type of source. Thus, if we decide the line references Armstrong, we paint Shakespeare as a typically topical writer; if we see it as an echo of Greene’s Nano, we privilege Shakespeare’s dramatic rivalry with the man who famously called the playwright an ‘upstart crow’ (Greene 1592: 45); and if we find that it must have been inspired by a woodcut in Holinshed’s *Chronicle*, we endeavour to delimit the play’s source materials to the most obvious historical source text. The ways that Shakespeare functions *as source* are equally multifarious, as I hope the short excerpts interspersed through this essay may illustrate: when Burton lists a range of types of subjects of merry tales and yet chooses to list ‘dwarfs, thieves,’ in that order, is he perhaps citing *Macbeth*, consciously or otherwise? More obviously conscious is the reference to Duncan’s horses eating each other, in an episode of *Blackadder the Third*, which borrows from the description of the omens portending Duncan’s murder in *Macbeth*: ‘Duncan’s horses / (A thing most strange and certain) ... ‘Tis said, they eate each other’ (TLN 940-46). Yet in so far as Shakespeare takes the same image directly from Holinshed – ‘horsses in Louthian, being of singular beautie and swiftnesse, did eate their own flesh, and would in no wise taste anie other meate’ (Holinshed 1587: 237) – we may ask if Shakespeare is merely the conduit through which Ben Elton and Richard Curtis source Holinshed with this image?

Similarly, Janet MacIntyre’s scholarly analysis of *Macbeth* to determine the likeliest costumes and costume changes around the murder of Banquo works directly with the play but to the extent that it also reinforces the ‘borrowed robes’ motif, we might also ask if it serves as yet another iteration in the long etymological tradition that Shakespeare echoes throughout the play? Finally, I provided an example of a discussion forum thread in which a gamer asks when Dwarves became Scottish, a question that has become more frequent as both gamers and fans of fantasy narratives have begun to notice the trend by writers and designers to use Scottish accents for dwarf characters. Attempts to answer this have suggested that the fantasy role-playing game *Dungeons and Dragons* is responsible, or that J.R.R. Tolkien started it all in the *Lord of the Rings* novels, but the most definitive answer seems to credit Poul Anderson with the creation of the Scottish dwarf within fantasy literature – his *Three Hearts and Three Lions* (1961) featured a dwarf named Hugi, with a Scottish accent (‘Mark C’ 2012). That the question has never been tackled with a view toward Shakespeare’s dwarfish thief or indeed any of the very old traditions of Scottish dwarfs that I outlined here is perhaps indicative of a tendency within genre literature to want to create internal myths of origin rather than to see generic characteristics as having a longer history than the genre itself.

What do we make, then, of these echoes, garbled transmissions, and myriad potential sources based on sources, of which I have offered little more than a glimpse here? A salient point for practitioners of the new source study may be to acknowledge that as we eschew the one-to-one source text relation in favour of more widespread forms of transmission, we must be prepared to recognise that as an idea or a word is handed

down through the centuries it will become cross-threaded with the transmission of other ideas. The process of etymological crossover that we explored in this paper represents one such mechanism – the mistake we can make is to consider such cross-threading as a form of corruption. Along a similar vein, I will suggest that the creative repurposing of Shakespeare’s words and works provides opportunity to engage also with the many forms in which these works have been transmitted, as well as to participate mindfully in the process of generating echoes and creating new cross-threads. To merely quote Shakespeare knowingly is to cut the connection his work has to these broader and older cultural processes. In our scholarship and in our practice, the new source studies might provide ever newer ways to interpret the playwright’s own nods and winks.

*

Norman. Nudge, nudge. Wink, wink. Say ... no ... more (Chapman et al 1989, v.1: 40).

Endnotes

1. In *Shakespearean Negotiations*, Greenblatt’s one mention of *Macbeth* is in the context of a discussion of the lack of supernatural beings in *King Lear*: there are, he notes, no ghosts, no demons, and ‘no witches as in *Macbeth*’ (1988: 119). Nowhere else does the play appear in this book or anywhere at all in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), *Learning to Curse* (1990) and *Marvellous Possessions* (1991).

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