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Jean-François Ducis: Re-Creating Shakespeare for an Eighteenth-Century Audience

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French playwright Jean-François Ducis (1733-1816) forged a career out of reinventing the works of Shakespeare for the French stage. The adaptations penned by Ducis during the eighteenth century paved the way for theaters ever after to reinvent and update classic plays in a style that resonates with the playwright's new audiences. Key to this success is his tendency to set a classic play in a non-traditional time and place, but with which the audience can associate and connect. Ducis introduced Shakespearean plays to audiences in France, on the continent, and in South America, and his plays were commercially successful. He made a substantial contribution to French theater, and he was made a member of the French Academy. Therefore, he should have retained an exalted position in theater history; however, his name has become but a footnote in theater history.

My interest in Ducis's work was piqued when I enrolled in a graduate course in Shakespearean theater at The Ohio State University. For a class project I researched the original 1790¹ script of Ducis's adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, housed in The Ohio State University Theater Research Institute: as a result this script was displayed in a university library exhibition on Shakespeare and I began work on bringing a reading of Ducis's play to the stage. I then had Ducis's script translated by Elizabeth Rachel Willis, a graduate student in the OSU Department of French, for the purpose of performing Ducis's adaptation of *Macbeth* with my theatrical organization, the Drake Oration Company. The performance was held at the Davis Discovery Center in Columbus, Ohio.² During a post-performance "talk-back," members of the audience asked questions of the actors and director about the production, before a reception at a local art gallery.

The performance at the Davis Discovery Center was open to the public and admission was charged on a "pay-what-you-like" basis, allowing students and patrons of limited means to attend. Semi-costumed actors performed in battery-operated "candlelight," in keeping with traditional lighting of the eighteenth-century French stage. Some costume accessories like a dagger and crown were used to suggest action and

position. The entrance and exit music was from André Ernest Modeste Grétry's *Andromaque*.

John Lough attributes Ducis's fame to writing for the common man rather than for the educated elite who may have read Shakespeare's unabridged works. Ducis's plays were successful in their day in terms of attendance. According to Lough, Ducis's *Romeo and Juliet* (1772) attracted over 16,000 spectators during a nineteen-performance run, which established Ducis's reputation as a popular playwright (180-81). Lough cites a 1783 letter written by theater critic J. F. de La Harpe who stated that the modern "plebian audience" did not have the same high standards as the "select spectators" of previous periods (222). Based on the attendance figures, the plebian audiences enjoyed Ducis's production and made the works commercially successful.

Ducis conceived of staging *Macbeth* decades before actually debuting his adaptation on Monday, January 12, 1784 at the Théâtre du Faubourg St-Germain (Golder 166). Golder notes this long incubation period by referencing a letter written by Ducis on May 14, 1772 to Prince Louis-Eugène in which he wrote '*Je m'occupe de Macbeth*' ("I am dealing with *Macbeth*"). *Macbeth* is mentioned next in the records of the Comédie-Française on November 29, 1773 (163). Perhaps the earliest extant version of Ducis's *Macbeth* is the Beljame MS Golder has found dated 1751, now in the collection of the Bibliothèque de l'Université de Paris, which predates the Folger MS, perhaps by several years (167, 181). This is an early example of Ducis's habit of rewriting and revising his plays.

Ducis worked solely from the translated Pierre-Antoine de La Place texts during his work with Shakespeare from 1772 through 1778 (Golder 167). When Le Tourneur translated a collection of Shakespeare's plays in 1779, Ducis began incorporating these translations into his works. The publication of Le Tourneur's translations motivated Ducis to complete his own adaptations of the Shakespeare plays; he began with *King Lear* (*Le Roi Lear*) before tackling *Macbeth*, which he read on Saturday, September 21, 1782 to his actors, "who accepted it by 14 votes to one" (164-65).

The Ducis production of *Macbeth* was delayed and the reasons for this seem to be a combination of family crises and business complications. Golder attributes the delay to the death of Ducis's eldest

daughter, Laure-François, from tuberculosis, the same disease that had killed his wife (165), while Joseph H. McMahon states that Ducis's wife and two daughters died from an "unidentified plague" (15). Monaco, meanwhile, writes that the play "was delayed because of the insistence on the part of two actresses, Mlle Clairon and Mme Vestris (who was to be his Lady Macbeth), that he make certain revisions" (139). The changes requested by these actresses are unknown. In any event, Golder relates that the play was finally cast in August 1783 and a reading was held to give the actors and interested parties an introduction to the script (Golder 165).

Ducis's forte was in staging Shakespearean plays for his own audience, and the new productions did require him to reinvent some scenes to suit the French sensibilities of the day. In Ducis's telling, Macbeth becomes a tragic, guilt-ridden murderer who, Golder states, "stoically accepts the inevitability of retribution" (180). The play's banquet scene was changed because eating was an activity reserved for French comedy and considered inappropriate for tragedy. Ducis gets around this by having the ghost appear at a coronation ceremony rather than a banquet. It was, however, acceptable to show the "nocturnal attack on the palace and ensuing pandemonium, under cover of which the murder is committed" (181), illustrating audiences' willingness to accept the sin of murder on stage, but not gluttony.

Ducis had reason to be very excited about his first staging of *Macbeth*, because it attracted the attention of the Comte de Provence, who later became Louis XVIII. He appointed Ducis as his *secrétaire des commandements*, or advisor and confidant to the French royal household. The run of this play brought in 4,688 livres, the largest box office of any Ducis play with this company (Golder 166). Golder goes on to report that Ducis postponed publishing *Macbeth* until 1790, even though some of Ducis's other plays were published within weeks after opening on the stage (167). Monaco states that "because of innumerable alterations and corrections not only before but also during the first run of seven performances it is harder than usual to reconstruct how his play was staged at a particular moment" (140). The frequent changes in the script indicate that either Ducis was unsure of his own setting or the stakes were very high in terms of pressure from his patron to produce a

successful show. These numerous changes may also have been a factor in delaying the publication of the play.

According to Jon Pemble, author of *Shakespeare Goes to Paris*, the marriage of French plays and Shakespearean theater resulted in “spectacle and ostentation” with less emphasis on the dialogue. As a result, “French Shakespeare was, in a word, operatic” (95). Pemble comments that although Ducis introduced Shakespeare’s works to the French stage, Ducis has become a forgotten playwright. Pemble adds, “He could neither speak nor read English, and his knowledge of Shakespeare was derived entirely from the translations of La Place and Le Tourneur” (Pemble 95-96). It is important to note that La Place translated only one play in its entirety—*Richard III*. For the rest, he was content to “summarise in a connecting narrative what seemed to him the less important scenes. He also gave an abstract of the plots of twenty-six other Shakespearean plays” (Ward).

Perhaps because of its dependence on La Place, Ducis’s uninspired dialogue lacks the luster of Shakespeare’s poetic language. Pemble proffers that Ducis took great liberties in adapting Shakespeare’s works for the French stage; his “*Macbeth* had no witches (except as an optional extra, never used), no porter, and no banquet, and it was many years before a sleepwalking scene was added” (96). Monaco attributes Ducis’s many changes from Shakespeare’s original text to La Place having “cut and summarized many scenes, especially the comic and indecent ones” (11), including those in *Macbeth*. In fact, some of Ducis’s numerous revisions did include witches named *Personage Un*, *Personage Deux* and *Personage Trois* in a collection published in 1845. In some versions, the witches not do make an appearance at all (McMahon 20-21).

Ducis added and subtracted characters appearing in Shakespeare’s play in order to clarify the story for an eighteenth-century French audience. Pemble notes that Banquo was removed and unfamiliar characters named Frédégonde, Iphycitone, Loclin and Séver were added (96). Golder had this to say about character changes: “Frédégonde is clearly Lady Macbeth. Queen consort to Chilpéric I of Tournai in the sixth century, Frédégonde rose to power by causing Chilpéric to dissolve his first marriage and to have his second wife strangled. She then removed the king himself and ruled through her young son, Clotaire II” (171). This leaves little doubt about Frédégonde’s sinister character, making her “a

classic villainess, the dynamic mainspring of the action and a resourceful instigator of crime” (193). In Ducis’s production, Lady Macbeth’s son has a role in the play; Lady Macbeth is also consistent in her lust for power, and she is unrepentant, unlike in most versions of the play where there is a clear transition in her persona from feminine to femme-fatale.

Ducis took liberties to connect Shakespearean characters with familiar personalities from folklore. This change, similar to the molding of Lady Macbeth, was to provide his audience with insight into the motives of the characters by aligning them with familiar characters from folktales, mythology, and classical drama. The names of non-Shakespearean characters in Ducis’s *Macbeth* were borrowed from the cult of Ossian. For example, the character of Loclin represents other warrior characters associated with Scandinavia; the character Salgar represents a hunter, and the actor portraying Duncan’s son Malcôme-Salgar carries a bow on stage (Golder 172). The names provide spectators with historical echoes, and the props reinforce character types. Hecate, for example, takes on new character names: Iphycione (Erichtonne in some plays), Golder suggests, is reinvented as a “Greek divinity.” Given Ducis’s fascination with Greek tragedy, it is hardly surprising that Ducis molds his characters to resemble Greek gods. This new Hecate goes into a trance in order to make her predictions: she seems to be a combination of Greek oracle and festival fortune-teller (181).

Ducis also incorporates operatic elements of special effects, as a means of modernization, into his adaptations. Opera was well established in France by Ducis’s day, and for this reason his *Macbeth*, as well as his other Shakespearean adaptations, included references to the Bard’s work with “a few basic themes, the occasional well-known phrase, a loose treatment of time and place, and operatic stage effects” to connect the Shakespearean adaptations with familiar musical performances of his day (Pemble 97). Opera transforms a play into fantasy for adults, with glamorous costumes, opulent sets and sumptuous set pieces, and vocal music: all elements freeing theatrical performances from the commonplace settings of traditional stage plays. Also, during the eighteenth century,

[N]ew types of plays began to appear. One of these new types was called, rather inappropriately, *drame*, meaning a serious work not quite in the class of conventional tragedy. In this group were

included the *tragédie bourgeoise*, dealing with commonplace people and often ending in comparative happiness; also the sad or tearful pieces (*comédie larmoyante*). There was also the comedietta, a short piece, sometimes with music, resembling the “one-actor” of vaudeville. (Bellinger)

These new forms of playwriting were concerned more with the individual and personal relationships than with social issues. Eighteenth-century France provided an especially auspicious time for Ducis to introduce his Shakespearean adaptations, because audiences were open to experiencing new forms of theater. The Shakespearean plays neatly fit the parameters of the new drama, comedy, and tragedy plays.

This new era in theater was influenced in part by philosophy, including the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. John Golder believes that Ducis’s objective was to portray the character of Macbeth through the lens of “Rousseau’s constructive view of human nature,” which supports the position that “evil is not a part of man’s original nature; secondly, that vice and error, being foreign to man’s constitution, are introduced to it from the outside and change it for the worse and, thirdly, that since man has an inherent capacity for good, no villain is beyond redemption” (195). This assessment hints that Ducis was searching for the humanity within Shakespeare’s characters and drawing it out through Macbeth’s remorse. This may explain his omission of the witches in *Macbeth*, as if he viewed them as completely dark characters outside the realm of humanity. This argument does not take into account the female characters, such as Lady Macbeth, who in Ducis’s production seem beyond redemption.

Pemble argues that Ducis did not intend to authentically reproduce Shakespearean plays but to make the works contemporary. The changing political tide in late eighteenth-century France inspired Ducis to initially create *Macbeth* “as a play of the *ancien régime* [which] acquired a revolutionary slant when it was revived in 1790....but in the later version the victorious Malcome (*sic*) becomes a constitutional monarch. He is crowned as ‘first citizen’ (‘premier citoyen’), and bound by oath to observe the book of the law (‘le livre de la loi’)” (99). This is a reflection of the changed France after the Revolution. In order to gain a following during a period of civil unrest, Ducis was in the difficult position of pleasing his former royal patrons and those who were now in

power while still forging a connection with the theater-going public. He accomplished this by creating multiple versions of each play which were altered per performance, depending upon the audience in attendance.

Even though Ducis's productions resonated with his public, some theater critics of the day were harsh in their assessments. Pemble notes that critics "La Harpe and Julien-Louis Geoffroy were especially hostile" toward Ducis (219), and that critics who initially complained that Ducis had "polluted French theatres with Shakespeare" later condemned his works as "having disfigured Shakespeare beyond recognition" (98). "However harshly Ducis was criticised as a dramatist in his own right," Golder says, "his essential conservatism made him preferable to Shakespeare, whose name continued to be synonymous with vulgarity and tastelessness throughout the period" (330). Pemble cites a review of an 1839 revival of *Othello*, which stated that "the play 'made a poor showing'" and the "old-fashioned speeches" produced "profound boredom" in the auditorium (98). This review is consistent with Golder's assessment of early audience reaction to the performance: they learned of much of the action through conversation and dialogues (191). Indeed, there is not a great deal of action in Ducis's *Macbeth*, and much of the action is described in speeches.

Not all theater critics were opposed to the French renditions of Shakespeare. McMahon comments that Ducis's plays "were well-received...and won him a seat in the French Academy" (16). This honor was bestowed upon Ducis when the death of Voltaire created an opening in the Academy. As McMahon notes, this is ironic because of Voltaire's disdain for the Bard: "Voltaire weighed the values of the Shakespearean *oeuvre* and found its creator appallingly wanting" (14).³

Other adaptations of Ducis's Shakespearean plays remained in production in France well into the nineteenth century at the Comédie-Française and the Odéon. Golder notes that Ducis's *Macbeth* "did not leave the Paris stage until 1842" (333). It remained in public favor for decades, precipitating revivals for many years after the initial production. *Macbeth* was brought back to the stage in 1798, somewhat closer to an original Shakespearean text, with Talma and Mme Vestris in advanced age again playing leading roles (Monaco 183). This was a significant cultural event in which "Bonaparte, the future emperor, attended the performance at the Théâtre Feydeau on April 22, 1798," adding a sense of

dignity to the occasion (183). Legendary actress Sarah Bernhardt appeared in Ducis's *Lear* at the Odéon Theater in the mid-nineteenth century, helping to facilitate the widespread popularity of both mainstream and adapted Shakespearean plays.

Ducis inspired other playwrights to create their own versions of Shakespearean tales: according to Pemble, internationally renowned novelist Alexander Dumas translated *Hamlet*. Dumas had "seen a performance of the Ducis imitation in his youth, and he claimed to have been so deeply impressed that he learnt the leading role by heart and never forgot it" (109). Monaco examines other versions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: impressed by a performance in London, Ducis's contemporary G.-R. Lefebvre de Saint-Ildephont also wrote a version of *Macbeth* in 1783. Although Lefebvre's version "shows consideration for historical exactness" by dressing Lady Macbeth in traditional white mourning (138),⁴ it was rejected by the Comédie-Française, since Ducis's *Macbeth* had already been accepted for production at this venue: it would have been unusual for a theater to present two versions of the same play during the same season. These Shakespearean productions may not have occurred if Ducis had not made the plays accessible to French audiences.

Parisian theaters were ideally suited for staging Shakespeare's works because "ballet, pantomime, and supernatural effects," new to French productions, could be properly accommodated by the Comédie-Française (Pemble 166). Each of its theaters has a seating capacity of about 2,000, which is greater than the number of seats in almost all modern Broadway theaters. The French theaters of Ducis's day were equipped with "stage machinery and technical resources" allowing for operatic staging of the plays, "replete with ancient, medieval, and modern pageantry, battles, crowds, supernatural phenomena, and musical and choreographic interludes" (166). Pemble reports that for Ducis's *Macbeth* at the Comédie-Française in 1784 "evocative gothic scenery was provided and music was used to create an appropriate mood" (167). This statement could be used to describe a modern-day operatic version of *Macbeth*; however, this production also "featured the first appearance on the French stage of a Shakespearean ghost" (167). It is historically significant that the ghost appears in Ducis's *Macbeth*, in which "there was no Banquo, but murdered Duncan reappeared and shook his gory locks both

at Macbeth and at the audience” (167). Given that Ducis’s monologues could be quite long, the audience may have welcomed the excitement.

Macbeth is still successfully being reinvented in the twenty-first century. A recent modernized version was staged at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway starring Scottish-American actor Alan Cumming in the title role of the “Scottish play.” The play ran from April 7 to July 14, 2013 and grossed over \$5 million (“Broadway Grosses”). The production’s website describes this intense version thus:

Directed by Tony winner John Tiffany (*Once*) and Andrew Goldberg, this “stirring turn by Alan Cumming packing theatrical thunder and lightning” (*Daily News*) is set in a clinical room deep within a dark psychiatric unit. Cumming is the lone patient, reliving the infamous story and inhabiting each role himself. Closed circuit television camera watch the patient’s every move as the walls of the psychiatric ward come to life in a visually stunning multi-media theatrical experience. You cannot miss Alan Cumming in this breathtaking 100-minute “radical re-imagining” (*Variety*) of Shakespeare’s notorious tale of desire, ambition and the supernatural. (“About the Show”)

This latest production proves that there are still new ways of exploring the Bard’s works and re-imagining the title character, just as Ducis did over two centuries ago. Even the Royal Shakespeare Company has toured updated and abbreviated performances of well-known plays, such as the 2012 international run of *King Lear*, which was reduced to seventy-five minutes in order to make it more palatable to young audiences. Strategic cuts, such as those made by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and changes of setting, such as the relocation of action in the Cumming production, are the types of alterations Ducis made in bringing Shakespeare to his audiences.

Ducis played a pivotal role in making Shakespeare’s works accessible on a global scale: audiences in Spain, Italy, and Argentina were first exposed to Shakespeare through Ducis’s translations. These works were also performed in Sweden, Belgium, Holland, Brazil, Poland, Turkey, and Russia (Golder 334). Ducis’s plays may have provided the impetus for audiences to seek out other translations of Shakespearean works. Perhaps updating the time period makes the works more

accessible to some theatergoers: Ducis took this approach in recreating classic plays for eighteenth-century French audiences.

Ducis's name is not often mentioned as one the great figures in the history of theater. There are three overarching reasons for the playwright's obscurity: most existing copies of his plays remain in the original French, Ducis created many versions of most of his plays (which makes it difficult to establish the time and location associated with each version or to pinpoint a definitive version), and the original works of Shakespeare have stood the test of time by resonating with subsequent generations in ways that Ducis's plays have failed to do. Ducis's works seemed old-fashioned to audiences within decades of their premieres. In spite of these points, Ducis was a popular playwright in his day: a claim supported by attendance and box office figures. His lasting contribution to theater is the interest his adaptations generated in exploring Shakespeare's original works, which continues to this day.

Notes

1. Ducis's translation appeared under the title *Macbeth: Tragédie: Remise au theater le premier juin 1790* (Paris: Académie Française, 1790).
2. This theater was built in 1927 as a home for the Players Club, later Players Theatre. When Players Theatre moved out of the space in 1989 it was taken over by the City of Columbus and became the Davis Discovery Center, a performing arts venue for young people which is available for community use (Davis Discovery Center). The Drake Oration Company performed Ducis's *Macbeth* at this theater on May 11, 2012.
3. Voltaire states in the eighteenth of his *Philosophical Letters*, "On Tragedy," that "The English had a regular theatre, as well as the Spaniards, while the French had only platforms" (346). If witnessing Ducis's French interpretations of Shakespearean plays formed Voltaire's opinion of the Bard's work, he may have found the plays more enjoyable on the English stage rather than on a French "platform." However, Voltaire goes on to say that Shakespeare "created the theater. His genius was at once strong and abundant, natural and sublime, but without the smallest spark of taste, and without the slightest knowledge of the rules....[T]he merit of this author has been the ruin of the English stage" (346). One may infer that Voltaire was referring to the content of the works rather than the execution. Voltaire himself admits that it was "very difficult to translate [Shakespeare's] fine verses," and he implores us to "always remember, that when you see a translation, you perceive only a faint copy of a beautiful picture" (347). In translating Hamlet's soliloquy into French, Voltaire sought only to capture the essence of the scene, not to produce a word-for-word translation, which would, as he put it, "enervate the sense" and he invokes the Biblical quotation, "The letter kills, and the spirit giveth life" (348). Pemble notes that "Voltaire, who relished the opera, had reckoned that its intrusion into the tragic stage was going too far. Hearing of [Ducis's] *Hamlet* in 1769, he complained that the 'action' and 'pantomime' were overdone" (172). This comment seems to contrast starkly with Voltaire's generalization about the staid French stage.
4. As portraiture of the era shows, wearing white was the official sign of mourning worn by women of royal blood or high-ranking courtiers. In a painting by François Clouet (c. 1520-1572), "Mary, Queen of Scots is shown, aged 19, in white mourning (*en deuil blanc*) to mark the loss of three members of her immediate family within a period of 18 months" (The Royal Collection).

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