

# “Upon this Blasted Heath”: *Macbeth* Before and After the Hurricane

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## Abstract

During the 20th and 21st centuries, writers and performers in the Caribbean have used Shakespeare as a means to give language and form to their experience. One such example is the 2016 Shakespeare in Paradise performance of *Macbeth*, which both represented the destruction of Hurricane Joaquin and seemed to anticipate the destruction of Hurricane Matthew. The staging of these two hurricanes and their aftermath, I argue, is rooted in both the actual and mythological history of the play. In the Shakespeare in Paradise performance, the advent of natural disaster appeared as images of destruction, the staging of trauma, as well as geographical and material allusions.

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## Introduction

Shakespeare has a long history in the Caribbean. As early as 1823, prior to the British abolition of slavery in 1833, Alexander Barklay describes Christmas celebrations during which black performers took part in a staging of *Richard III* (Fayer, 2003). After the abolition of slavery, as the goals of the British Empire expanded from commerce to indoctrination, Shakespeare was adopted as one aspect of the process whereby the colonial authorities sought to transform former slaves into loyal British subjects. The widely-used *Royal Reader* textbooks included several excerpts from, and summaries of, Shakespeare (Folger Shakespeare Library, 2015). During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, international touring companies often passed through the Caribbean as they traveled between Europe and America. As Shakespeare became a recurring presence in

Caribbean school-life and entertainment during the late 19th century, Shakespeare performance was absorbed into local traditions, creating localised (what Brandon, 2010, might call “indigenous”) Shakespeare—performances that, in various ways, have sought to express something of the Caribbean experience through Shakespeare. The island of Carriacou, for example, developed the Shakespeare Mas', during which players in bright costumes challenge one another to recite passages from *Julius Caesar* (Fayer, 2003). As the various British Caribbean islands gained independence, Shakespeare remained a signifier of education, mainly through recitation and elocution competitions. Shakespeare was also appropriated within anti-colonial discourse as a means to express the violence of colonialism. In the decades following independence, Shakespeare's role in various parts of the Caribbean has evolved

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from a symbol of high culture and anti-colonial resistance to a means by which writers and theatre companies might comment upon contemporary social issues. Shakespeare in Paradise—an annual Bahamian theatre festival, originally launched in 2009—is an example of contemporary Shakespeare in the Caribbean. Each year Shakespeare in Paradise features a localised Shakespeare production such as, in 2012, a production of *The Merchant of Venice* which addressed contemporary prejudice by staging a Haitian Shylock. Shakespeare, then, provides a means to articulate aspects of life in The Bahamas, not only in the relationship between colonized and (neo)colonizer, but as an ongoing means to examine Bahamian selfhood.

On October 2, 2015, Category 4 Hurricane Joaquin tore through Long Island in The Bahamas. It travelled the full length of the island, causing flooding, power outages, and destruction. Part way through the storm hurricane shelters had to be evacuated because of damage from water, displacing people, many of whose homes were uninhabitable, to neighboring buildings (“Long Islanders,” 2015). A year later, the Bahamian theatre company Ringplay gave a performance of *Macbeth* as a part of Nassau’s 2016 Shakespeare in Paradise theatre festival. The performance was the third time the Bahamian *Macbeth* had run, having previously been performed in 2001 and 2004 (Bethel, personal communication, 2016). This third performance made some significant alterations to the 2001 and 2004 versions: the earlier incarnations of the play had moved the in-text location from Inverness to the Bahamian island of New Providence, whereas the 2016 rendition relocated *Macbeth* to Long Island and reinvented the witches (Patrice Francis, Jovanna Hepburn, Onike Archer, Rashad Ferguson, Theo Bonamy, and Leroy Strachan), who had formerly been performed

as Obeah women, as rapping radio talk-show hosts. The last performance of the 2016 show’s run took place on Saturday October 1st, and anyone who picked up a newspaper over the following days to find a review of the play, would instead have been greeted with news of another incoming storm, “Direct hit for Nassau” read the front page of *The Nassau Guardian* (Jones, 2016, p. 1). As the last performance of *Macbeth* took place, Bahamians were placing boards over their windows and buying tinned goods. Many of those who had the means booked flights to the U. S. The last plane left Nassau on October 4th. Two days later Hurricane Matthew, another Category 4 storm, tore through several Bahamian islands, including New Providence. Matthew, like Joaquin, uprooted trees, damaged infrastructure, blocked roads, and destroyed homes. It left most of the island without power for weeks. These two storms, the worst in living memory, just a year apart, left many people displaced and without power, and, in the case of Matthew, caused an estimated \$500 million in damages (Jones, 2016). Such was the impact of the storm that it cast a shadow not only over the events which followed, but over the events which preceded it. This paper seeks to demonstrate that while the staging of *Macbeth* did not seek to overtly anticipate or describe either the past destruction of Joaquin or the coming disaster of Matthew, the two storms shape the meaning of the 2016 staging of *Macbeth* such that in its textual alterations, its set, and its invocation of media, the staging of the play rhymes with and obliquely describes the trauma of Joaquin and Matthew.

The 2016 performance of *Macbeth* found in Shakespeare an appropriate means to describe and anticipate disaster. Shakespeare, after all, lived in a time of great political, social, and religious uncertainty. Katherine Firth (1979) argues that *Hamlet* makes heavy reference to Doomsday pamphlets which were circulated

during Shakespeare's lifetime, and Hiroshi Ozawa (1995) asserts that discourse concerning eclipses, which sparked speculation that the end of the world was coming, are evident in Shakespeare's works. Many of these fears were well-grounded: Shakespeare's England was threatened by multi-year famines during the 1590s, intermittent outbreaks of plague, the threat of invasion by Spain, and the possibility of civil war following the death of the childless Queen Elizabeth. It is inevitable then, that Shakespeare's stage served as a means to play out those anxieties. His history plays, for example, describe the War of the Roses, in part, as a means to explore the consequences of a pending civil war. The language of his plays, particularly *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, contain a great deal of apocalyptic references. Of particular relevance to the 2016 performance of *Macbeth* is the movement back and forth before and after the disaster being described; Maurice Hunt reads in *Hamlet* "a singular forward backwardness of the last days" (2005, p. 381). Hamlet teases Polonius about looking forward as he walks backwards. He describes a regression from old age to childhood, and regresses to pre-Christian cultural practices. For Hunt, then, Shakespeare's depiction of apocalypse involves a temporal disruption and reversal—of the past erupting, trauma-like, into the present.

In addition to embodying many of the anxieties of Shakespeare's age, *Macbeth* has a (perhaps unearned) reputation for anticipating, or even causing, disaster. Just as the 2016 performances were bookended by two natural disasters, the play was one of two productions by Shakespeare's company, the King's Men, to bookend barely-averted man-made disasters. In 1604, The King's Men twice staged *The Tragedy of Gowrie*. The authorship of the play has been lost to history, and no copies survive, but we know broadly that it described

a failed assassination attempt on James IV of Scotland—the man who had gone on to become James I of England. 1606 saw another failed attempt to assassinate James, this time in the form of the infamous gunpowder plot. As James Shapiro persuasively demonstrates, *Macbeth*, which was likely Shakespeare's first play written after the gunpowder plot, was the sister play to *The Tragedy of Gowrie* in that both describe the imperiled life of a Scottish king and the near-destruction of the royal bloodline. In the centuries that have followed, *Macbeth* has become associated with disaster in another way – it has gained a reputation for being cursed. The myth can be traced to Max Beerbohm in 1898, who claimed that the biographer John Aubrey and the diarist Samuel Pepys both recorded examples of actors playing in *Macbeth* becoming mysteriously sick. Both anecdotes were entirely fictional, and yet Beerbohm's assertion that *Macbeth* brings disaster has gained considerable purchase within theatre communities (Maguire & Smith, 2012). Actors often refer to it using the somewhat more oblique title "The Scottish Play", and the British actor Adam Woodyatt caused a small stir when he refused to say the name of the play on a celebrity game show ("EastEnders," 2001). *Macbeth*, then, in both its inception and its stage mythology, has disaster in its DNA.

The Shakespeare in Paradise performance of *Macbeth* drew upon the recurring apocalyptic themes found in Shakespeare and the extradiegetic mythology which surrounds the play. It foreshadowed the coming hurricane, and in an enactment of the "forward-backwardness" Hunt reads in *Hamlet*, it was also haunted by Joaquin. One area in which the apocalyptic tone of the play, as well as its diegetic and metadiegetic disruption of chronology seemed to rhyme with the post-hurricane experience was in its staging of

trauma. Living through a hurricane can be a source of trauma (Jaycox, et al., 2010). A trauma victim often feels that their experience refuses to remain in the past; that, like Banquo's ghost, it erupts, unexpected and uninvited, into their consciousness. The traumatic moment, Luckhurst asserts, "issues a challenge to the capacities of narrative knowledge" – it collapses time so that the moment of trauma appears to repeat itself (2008, p. 79). It cannot be narrated because it seems to be trapped in an ongoing now: Trauma, Blanchot asserts, "comes before it comes and lasts after it has happened" (1995, p. 54). The shattering effect of trauma leaves the victim unable to find expression or order in his or her experience. This sense of temporal disruption means that trauma, to borrow Caruth's phrase, is a wound that "cries out" (2016, p. 2). Trauma demands expression, and yet it deprives the trauma victim of the means to speak. Attempts to describe the traumatic moment, then, often involve "circling around" the event itself – approaching the subject obliquely, or symbolically (Luckhurst, 2008, p. 118).

These signs of trauma shot through the 2016 performance of *Macbeth*, in which the past, like the moment of trauma, threatens constantly to infringe upon the present. The change in location from Inverness (by way of New Providence) to Long Island offered an appropriately "blasted heath" for the play's setting (1.3.75, p. 972). The invocation of Long Island and, specifically, Long Island after Joaquin, extended beyond the language to the scenery on stage; the upstage and downstage were divided by a screen, behind which were placed leafless, seemingly dead, trees (see Figure 1). These stripped and uprooted trees, separated from the action of the play, provided seats for the weird sisters and Banquo's ghost (Mark Humes). Often, as in the scene in which Macbeth (David Johnathan Burrows) saw Banquo sitting at his

table, this ethereal space seemed to exist only in Macbeth's mind. These dead trees belonged, in other words, to a place which pushes against consciousness, occupied by things dead and otherworldly. Perhaps appropriately, as a resident of Long Island, even from the play's opening, Macbeth was haunted both by images of the destruction left by Hurricane Joaquin and, indeed, the destruction that was to befall him. He finds over the course of the play that the violence of the storm, like the violence of his own deeds, is not consigned to the past or future but erupts into the present. In a characteristic of both the trauma narrative and the forward-backwardness of Shakespearean apocalypse, the moment of trauma refuses, for Macbeth, to remain consigned to the moment of its occurrence.

The play also returns Macbeth, and brings him forward, to the moment before the storm. When the witches tell Macbeth that he "shall never vanquished be until/Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/ Shall come against him" (4.1.107-109, p. 985), he replies "That will never be" (4.1.110, p. 985). In the *Shakespeare in Paradise* staging, Macbeth, exhausted by anxiety, sinks to the floor with laughter. The idea that a wood might uproot itself seemed impossible— so inconceivable as to be beyond contemplation. Like Macbeth, Long Islanders (and, in many cases, the residents of Nassau) did not anticipate what was to come, and, for many, their lack of foresight became embroiled in the trauma of the event itself. In the aftermath of Hurricane Joaquin, Long Island resident Pedro Rolle told *The Tribune*, "this came upon us so suddenly that most persons were ill-prepared or unprepared for this, and a lot of the normal stuff they do did not get done in terms of securing their homes" (Long Islanders tell, 2015). The trees of Long Island, in both the diegesis of the play and in the 2015 storm, did move, just as the trees of Nassau would in the

days to follow the performance. In *Macbeth*, of course, it is war, and not a natural disaster, which uproots Birnam Wood, and yet the aftermath seemed, for many, indistinguishable—*The Nassau Guardian* described Bahamians living in “post-world war” conditions (Jones, 2016, p. 6). Trees, more than anything else, attest to the violence

of a hurricane. Long after fences were reconstructed, power lines repaired, window-panes replaced, and street signs restored, the incongruously autumnal bare trees and mounds of rotting foliage attested to the scars left by the storm. *Macbeth*’s incredulity regarding the movement of trees seemed both resonant and eerily prescient.



Figure 1. *MacBeth*, *Shakespeare in Paradise*, 2016. Photographic image © Kelsey Nottage. Used with permission.

In the *Shakespeare in Paradise* performance, the role of media in disaster, too, was a central concern, and through this the play addressed the possibility of agency when facing the impersonal will of natural disaster. *Macbeth*’s first encounter with the witches took the form of a radio interview in which his occult informants served as hosts. A bewildered *Macbeth* found himself shouting into a telephone, “Say from whence/You owe this strange intelligence?” (1.3.73-74, p. 972). The scene, too, seemed entirely prescient. In the days before Hurricane Matthew hit, a

message one heard repeatedly through news media was that Bahamians should not be complacent about the coming storm. Paige McCartney, paraphrasing Prime Minister Perry Christie, warned Bahamians to learn from the mistakes made during Hurricane Joaquin and “not to get caught by surprise when storms, even ones that appear minor, approach” (2016, p. 3). In her opinion column, Arintha S. Komolafe stated that “Bahamians, in our usual optimism, were quick to suggest that the storm will not be coming out way” (2016, p. 5). Newspapers

and radio programs before the storm advised Nassau residents to put up storm windows, and ensure that they had sufficient clean water and canned food—to do, in other words, all the things which many Long Island residents had not had time to do a year before (see Figure 2). As Matthew approached, newspapers were filled with images of the devastation left by Matthew in both Jamaica and Haiti, and of Bahamians buying tinned goods, batteries, and water and a list of shelters was circulated by newspaper and email.

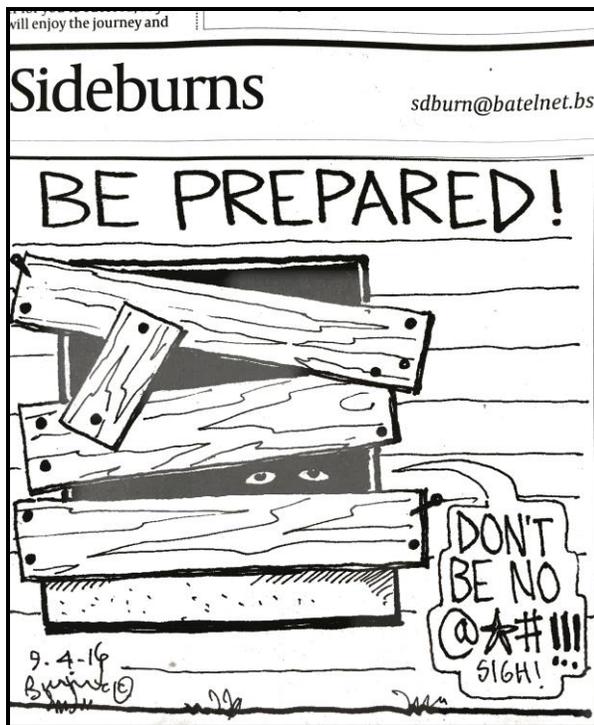


Figure 2. “‘Be prepared’ Sideburns,” *The Nassau Guardian*, October 4, 2016, p. 4. Reprinted with permission.

*The Nassau Guardian* warned that “our personal level of preparedness can determine if we make it, or not; how we survive in the days after devastation or not” (The wisdom of old advice, 2016, p. 4). These warnings seemed to suggest, perhaps unintentionally but quite clearly, that one chooses to be affected by a hurricane – that hurricane victims are, in part, at fault. The injunctions to take action against the coming storm raise

questions concerning agency among storm victims; while storm windows and sandbags, certainly, were a help to some, the storm caused types of damage, such as tearing away roofs, against which there was no possible preparation. These questions of agency were played out in *Macbeth* where, in a circular forward-backward motion representative of both Shakespearian apocalypse and trauma narrative, Macbeth’s actions were both the cause and the result of the witches’ predictions. *Macbeth* thus suggests a circularity of causation, with no clearly defined actor to set the sequence in motion: he kills Duncan because he was fated to do so, and he was fated to do so because he killed Duncan. The witches, reaching him through media, prompt him to take action, and yet, like the victims of a hurricane, Macbeth is ultimately helpless. He is simultaneously at the mercy of forces too large to resist, and an agent in his own demise.

In the *Shakespeare in Paradise* performance of *Macbeth*, then, media served to disturb Macbeth with the future and to implicate him in his own downfall. Media also, however, offered the possibility of resolution: if radio and newspapers provided the means to warn of the storm, then cellphones were the primary form of communication once it had passed. At the end of the play, the witches leant over Macbeth’s corpse, produced a cellphone, and took a “selfie”. The photographing of Macbeth’s corpse mirrors the culture of citizen journalism in Nassau. When, on July 17, 2015, Ricardo Culmer reversed his truck, killing fellow Bahamian Alpheus Bevens, rather than rushing to help, nearby witnesses took out their phones and started recording (Davis, 2016, p. 10). The phenomenon of phone photography is certainly not limited to The Bahamas, of course, but it had a particular resonance after Matthew, when photographs seemed to outweigh language as a means to express destruction. Inevitably, in

the days and weeks after the storm, when Bahamians met, within minutes (after establishing who did and did not have electricity) both parties would produce cellphones in order to compare videos and images of the storm and its aftermath. This

island-wide obsession was not limited to individuals. Figure 3 is a sample of some of the images published in *The Nassau Guardian* on October 12th under the caption “Hurricane Matthew hits Andros”.

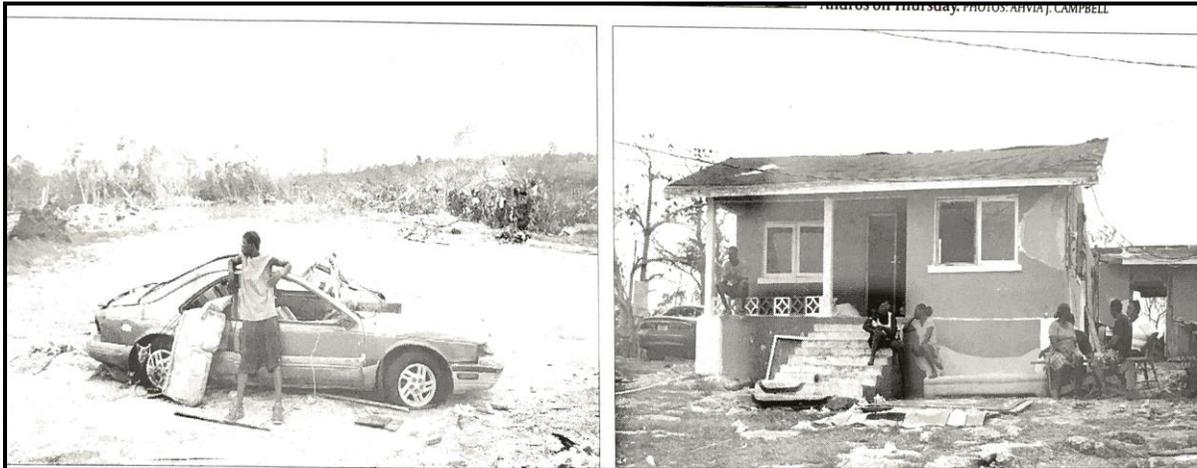


Figure 3. “Hurricane Matthew hits Andros,” *The Nassau Guardian*, October 12, 2016, p. 9. Reprinted with permission.

When the witches photograph themselves with Macbeth’s corpse, it is a ghoulish scene, but cheekily life-affirming. “We survived” such images seem to say. “He did not”. After Matthew, photography was another way for Bahamians to mark themselves as “safe” on social media while at once attesting to the damage inflicted by the storm. “I am safe” the photographs said. “But barely”. Like literature, photographs after the hurricane stood in place of our own words. They spoke so that we would not have to.

Trauma shapes the stories we tell, and the act of storytelling shapes trauma. If trauma destroys our capacity for narrative, then the recovery of narrative offers a possible means to overcome trauma (Frank, 1995). Accordingly, in the weeks following Hurricane Matthew, many residents of The Bahamas engaged in counselling sessions (in some cases through the College of The Bahamas Crisis Relief initiative) and many

more sought informal therapy by sharing the story of their survival with friends, neighbors, colleagues, and family. This process of ordering events into narrative sought to repair the devastation of the storm and to reconstruct the events into a familiar order. In this paper I have sought to show that in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Ringplay found inadvertent expression for the trauma of a hurricane and its aftermath. That their performance of Shakespeare seemed to rhyme with the hurricane-survivor experience can be traced to both the articulation of disaster in Shakespeare, and the long history the people of the Caribbean have with Shakespeare. In its textual relocation, set, and invocation of media, the performance encircled and rhymed with the experience of living through, and living after, a natural disaster. It articulated, in other words, the forward-backwardness of hurricane survival.

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