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ROUNDTABLE 3: FOREST ECOLOGY AND ENGAGEMENT

"Making Trees" from *Macbeth* to the Modern Day

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Abstract

This roundtable contribution considers methodologies for expanding Shakespeare's heritage reach beyond England, through the framework of the "Birnam's Oak // Scotland's Shakespeare" project, a community-based project in Perthshire designed to create an expanded model for Shakespeare heritage by cohering a more interdisciplinary range of heritage narratives (local, global, literary, ecological). This piece outlines the project's narrative strands in relation to co-curricular educational programming: a four-session programme designed for year 5 and year 7 pupils.

Keywords: Birnam Oak; co-curricular programming; Scotland; Shakespeare heritage

When we think of Macbeth, we probably aren't thinking of an eleventh-century medieval Scottish king. We are thinking of a famous story by a famous English playwright. When we think about Birnam Wood however—a moment in the play where a forest "moves" against Macbeth, just as the witches predict—we tend to think of it as something more than what it actually is in Shakespeare: an ecologically destructive event. Positive associations with Birnam Wood as a collective resistance, a move towards resolution, or even a moment of ecological agency feed off an interpretative heritage that extends well beyond Shakespeare himself. Illustrating this multivalency, through an educational approach that places the literary study of *Macbeth* alongside local and global histories of engagement, and a greater ecological understanding of what it takes to make, move, or destroy a wood, offers more than just an opportunity for interdisciplinarity. Both inside and outside of a classroom, this way of seeing Birnam Wood shows us ways of extending Shakespeare heritage beyond the playwright's own texts and stories, to include a broader range of histories, interests, energies, and meanings within the "Scottish" play.

But why should we look for ways to extend Shakespeare's heritage reach? He already has enormous cultural value. In a 2014 international study of Britain's soft power, the British Council cited Shakespeare as "by far" the figure most frequently (and warmly) associated with British culture.[1] "Shakespeare is a leading light for Britain's outstanding reputation for culture globally," wrote the Rt. Hon. Ed Vaizey in the British Council's 2016 *All the World's*

[1] Culligan, Dubber, and Lotten 2014, 16.

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report on Shakespeare's particular value to the UK.[2] Whether through individual or collected works, histories of performance, characters, or more, Shakespeare's value to the UK has been confirmed many times over, though sometimes more noticeably abroad than at home. In a 2015 YouGov survey, participants located outside the UK more frequently agreed (compared to UK-based respondents) that they liked, understood, and found Shakespeare's work relevant (*All the World's*, p. 8–9). Significantly more of the UK-based control group respondents—over 30 percent—actively disagreed that Shakespeare's work was likeable, understandable, and relevant. These findings make clear that managing Shakespeare's reputation is a live challenge for the UK, and perhaps especially urgent in domestic settings.

All the surveys referenced above, outlining Shakespeare's value as well as his reputation both within and outwith the UK, noticeably refer to the UK in homogeneous terms. Its constituent nations (England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland) are never considered separately, even though each of these countries sets out different educational requirements for studying Shakespeare at secondary level. Scotland does not currently require any study of Shakespeare at secondary level, whereas England, Wales, and Northern Ireland do, to varying degrees. At the same time, Scotland receives an enormous amount of touristic interest through Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, and the 24 sites across the country which, according to Scotland's national tourism organisation VisitScotland, can claim historic, literary, or production connections to the play and its doomed king.[3] One of these sites, the Birnam Oak in Perthshire, clarifies both the challenges and opportunities in developing Shakespeare heritage sites not connected to the body of the playwright himself (e.g., his birthplace or burial site).



Photographic illustration of the Birnam Oak.

[2] Vaizey 2016, 2.
[3] VisitScotland n.d.

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There are several immediate challenges to presenting this tree as a coherent Shakespeare heritage site. The first is that there is in fact no Birnam Oak mentioned anywhere in *Macbeth.* There is only the Birnam Wood, which Shakespeare only references in collective terms, as the wood or the forest. Birnam Wood also famously moves *away* from Birnam, towards Dunsinane. For a tree to have survived the events described in Shakespeare's play and exist as a contemporary heritage site in Birnam, it would have needed to miss Malcolm's battle entirely or have recovered from the human-induced trauma of having its limbs ripped untimely from its trunk. The Birnam Oak also post-dates the historical events covered in Shakespeare's play. Even with its impressive age (estimated between 500 and 600 years old), the Birnam Oak is not old enough to share a timeline with Macbeth, King of Scots who (contrary to Shakespeare's depiction) enjoyed a longer and more successful reign in the eleventh century. The Oak *was* an established tree during Shakespeare's lifetime, the composition and the original performance of *Macbeth*, but it is not clear that the playwright ever saw it himself, or indeed any other part of the ancient Birnam Wood.

Nevertheless, Birnam has been receiving visitors searching for a landscape "rendered classic ground by the magic pen of Shakespeare" at least since the mid-eighteenth century.[4] Shakespeare's version of the Macbeth story brings many people to Scotland—but once they are there, there is a much wider range of stories to tell about the place, its heritage, and its way of defining its Shakespeare connection. The *Birnam's Oak* project works to harness this range of stories and connection points, both as a way of opening up the possibilities for Shakespeare heritage narratives and to reframe those narratives using site-specific coordinates: the strands, influences, and connections that resonate in Scotland, for the community around the Birnam Oak.

In an educational setting, this multi-pronged approach to interpretation and heritage begins by confronting Shakespeare's writing directly, to identify and interpret what is present in the text, and *only* the text. Building on this foundational work, the project then approaches Shakespeare's Macbeth story with an expansive, interdisciplinary, and inclusive methodology. By tracing the many sources, post-playwright, that influence our thoughts, emotions, and understandings of what happens in Shakespeare's play, this project invites people to reconsider why, how, and for whom Shakespeare matters. Drawing on four linked sessions of co-curricular programming delivered to year 5 and then year 7 pupils in Birmingham (UK), this piece describes the *Birnam's Oak* project methods for fostering connection to and through Shakespeare, using a four-strand narrative approach to *Macbeth*'s Birnam Wood that emphasises text, local history, global engagement, and environmental stewardship.

1. Shakespeare's text

In *Macbeth*, we first hear of Birnam Wood through one of the witches' prophecies: "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until/Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill/Shall come against him" (4.1.108–110).[5] Hearing this, Macbeth believes he is safe because he falsely assumes that this can never happen: "That will never be," he declares, because "Who can impress the forest, bid the tree/Unfix his earth-bound root?" (4.1.110–12). The play raises and swiftly dismisses the possibility of Birnam Wood's agency, and not even the prophecy's

[4] Garnett 1800. There are other references to Birnam's Shakespeare connection in volumes published in 1771, 1795, and 1799.

[5] Shakespeare 2005.

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eventual fulfilment reverses this. When the wood does move, it is because Malcolm has instructed each of his soldiers to "hew him down a bough/And bear't before him" (5.4.4–5). The wood moves because men have chopped it down and carried its pieces into battle. Once the battle begins, Birnam Wood is never mentioned again: its branches and boughs are likely dropped on the field in the heat of battle and left behind when that battle concludes. What, then, is Birnam Wood's power within the play?

We begin with an active introduction to *Macbeth*, using theatre-based practice. During this *Macbeth* "whoosh," the students familiarise themselves with Shakespeare's tragedy by acting out its core scenes, focussing particularly on the emotion and action of the play. Though the Birnam Wood scene features in that session, we do not emphasise it until session 2, which we begin by asking pupils to run through the scene again twice, experiencing it once as one of Malcolm's soldiers and once as one of the trees of the wood itself. We then invite the students to reflect on how it felt to be one of the trees, compared to being a soldier. We ask them to consider:

- Which role required more active use of their bodies?
- Did performing the chopping and moving of trees make them feel more or less powerful in the scene?
- How did it feel to be moved around in the performance space (as a tree), rather than actively navigating the space (as a soldier)?

We also ask them to think of other ways to "be powerful" in performance. For example: When they were trees, did they take up more space with their bodies, to assist their classmates in concealing their advance on Macbeth? Through questioning and performance, we encourage students to see that it is possible to be visually impactful without having significant agency in the scene, but it is also true that the experience of making themselves trees helps students notice how human characters are driving the action of the play. This exercise also helps students track the play's failure to account for the Birnam Wood, post-battle. By the end of the scene performance, the students acting as trees are left behind as the story continues.

2. Local/Historical

At the end of these performance-based exercises, students capture their feelings by contributing descriptive words that represent their interpretations of Shakespeare's Birnam Wood. These words are written on paper oak leaves and then attached to a (drawn) tree trunk. The single completed "tree" that emerges represents all the ideas and feelings of everyone who has been part of "the wood." This allows us to introduce the real Birnam Oak that still exists in Perthshire and explain how this individual tree also now represents the historic wood that once existed.

We then share the story of the Dunkeld Bridge Toll Riots, which used the Birnam Oak as a primary site for coordinating action and support. The paired villages of Dunkeld and Birnam (where the Oak is located) are separated by River Tay, which was connected via ferry link until a bridge (financed by the Duke of Atholl) opened in 1808. Tolls were levied to recoup construction costs, but by 1853, residents believed these costs had been recovered, and continued tolling was unjust.

In 1869, a sign appeared in both villages announcing "A PUBLIC MEETING at the OLD OAK TREE, BIRNAM." That meeting, which shared "important intelligence in connection the

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PONTAGE FRAUD," resulted in coordinated community action to resist the bridge tolls. Both the meeting and the action that followed it invoked the spirit of Birnam Wood as a collective movement against a singular and corrupt figure. Through this local story of harnessing a literary and historic site's energy to address a new and urgent problem, we encourage students to see heritage sites as layered in their significance and relevant not just to one group of people or moment in time, but as having long, rich, multivalent histories. Building on the collection of words they used to describe their own feelings about Birnam Wood, we then ask the students to write new words (on paper acorns) to reflect their widened understanding of what the Birnam Oak stands for in its local space. Taken together, at the end of session 2, students have used creative practice to understand the Oak and the Wood as having significance that has been developed over many centuries, by many people.

3. Global/Artistic

In session 3, we move students beyond Shakespeare and beyond Scotland to consider a broader range of representations of Birnam Wood, as a way of signalling how this work extends cultural interpretations of what the wood means. The idea of the Birnam Wood as synonymous with a resistant (often collective) spirit has been imagined and redeployed in many other global contexts. Polish author Włodzimierz Odojewski's short story, about a journalist's efforts to uncover the truth about the Katyn massacre, is notably titled: "The wood comes to Dunsinane Hill" ("Ku dunzynańskiemu wzgórzu idzie las"). Lin-Manuel Miranda's hit musical *Hamilton* sees Alexander Hamilton refer to himself as Macbeth to Congress's Birnam Wood: "They think me Macbeth, ambition is my folly [...] And Birnam Wood is Congress on its way to Dunsinane."[6] New Zealand author Eleanor Catton's 2023 novel *Birnam Wood* follows an anti-capitalist guerrilla gardening group (calling themselves "Birnam Wood") that seeks to combat food scarcity by planting and harvesting crops in unused green spaces. These references suggest just how captivating Birnam Wood is as a concept, but they also testify to a growing force of association that ties the wood to action for justice, in many different contexts (moral, political, ecological).

After encountering examples of global usage of the Birnam Wood to speak to topics in social and environmental justice, we ask students to design their own version of the wood, either drawing on the example of the Birnam Oak/Wood or using a tree or forest that is personally relevant to them or to their community. Here again, we encourage students to think about their wood in action: what it thinks, feels, and wants to achieve. Building on the creative writing work of session 2, this session offers students another way of thinking about "making" trees work for their interests and ideas. This session also positions the students themselves as part of the Birnam Wood's rich interpretative history, fostering connection through independent creation.

4. Environmental

The final session returns to my original observation, which is that when we take a moment to consider the Birnam Wood as a collection of trees, we notice that its appearance in *Macbeth* is ecologically destructive: a moment in which the trees are subjugated by the plans of men. Within its community (and for the many visitors that still seek it out), the Birnam Oak, however, is loved primarily as one of Scotland's ancient trees (rather than a literary site). Though Netflix's *The Diplomat* notably referenced another "Birnam Oak" situated at the

[6] Miranda 2015.

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US ambassador's estate ("Some sneaky Winfield groundskeeper knew [the former owner] loved the Scottish play, so he lopped a cutting off the last remaining oak in Birnam Wood and planted it in this garden"), the community in Dunkeld and Birnam has long cultivated their own Birnam saplings from the Oak's acorns, as a way of extending and preserving the Oak's legacy. This preserving instinct now feels increasingly urgent in the wake of the felling of the Sycamore Gap tree.[7] In session 4, students learn how to "make" a tree from an acorn. They work together to illustrate the process of germinating an acorn towards sapling cultivation—capturing another sense in which a tree might naturally move, as part of its growth cycle. We end by decorating individual paper trees, at varying stages of development, for final compilation as that group's "Birnam Wood" for display in their school: this represents a collective response, formulated through many different, and different kinds, of analysis and engagement.

At the end of the programme, students receive a germinated acorn in an acorn vase, so they can track its development against the representations on their poster. This final stage also connects to the project's commitment to formalise the community practice of cultivating new saplings from Birnam Oak acorns. Once sufficiently matured, those saplings will be planted across the UK to initiate a new wave of Birnam Wood movement. This new march replaces the ecological destruction of Malcolm's army with something more positive, personal, and generative, championing the agency of trees through the stories told about them.

Macbeth will always be an undeniable coordinate in cultural imaginings of Scotland, but it is not necessarily an easy or a comfortable one. As the playwright David Greig has often commented, "It's always felt a little bit cheeky that unquestionably the greatest Scottish play was written by the great English playwright."[8] This difficult space—in which a dominant text is somehow both questionably and *un*questionably Scottish—explains what James Loxley has referred to as "Shakespeare's uncertain place in Scottish culture," a relationship he describes as "an ambivalent mixture of high regard, deep familiarity, and a persistent vein of estrangement."[9] The *Birnam's Oak* project works to address this condition by "making" the trees of Birnam Wood work in new ways, recognising the contribution and influence of individual strands, and putting them together to form something more meaningful, more tied to place, and more reflective of the multivalent energies that "make" Shakespeare heritage.

Dr Toria Johnson is an Associate Professor of Early Modern English Literature at the University of Birmingham, and the author of *Pity and Identity in the Age of Shakespeare* (D.S. Brewer, 2021). She has published on a broad range of topics, including Ben Jonson's creative engagement with Shakespeare, the intersection of law and emotion in early modern Europe, cultures of fear in Macbeth and Othello, and the impact of the Reformation on English understandings of compassion. She is currently leading the Birnam's Oak // Scotland's Shakespeare project, a community-driven project focusing on Scotland's Shakespeare heritage locations.

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[7] Cahn and Chung 2023.
[8] Greig 2010, qtd. Wrench 2023.
[9] Loxley 2021, 292.

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