"Remember the Porter" in Rupert Goold's *Macbeth*

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is more than a story of one man’s inner conflict between his good and evil sides; there is no evidence that Macbeth was ever a moral, honorable man. He is depicted by Shakespeare more aptly as a noble and victorious soldier, one who is capable of extreme violence and brutality. The PBS Great Performances adaptation of *Macbeth* focuses on the innate cruelty of Macbeth’s character by enhancing the otherworldly—or more specifically, the nether-worldly—elements of the original play, to suggest that he is being guided toward a predestined path, precisely because he is already predisposed toward evil. The film’s director, Rupert Goold, illustrates Macbeth’s progression to a cruel, Stalin-like dictator by inserting certain minor characters into scenes other than those for which they were originally written, in an attempt to keep them always a part of the plot as both motivators of and witnesses to his decline. Although the three witches are the most recognizable of these minor characters, Goold also utilizes the seemingly unimportant Porter—whose brief appearance in the original text is belied by his frequent appearances in the film—to imply that Macbeth is being methodically shepherded toward embracing his darker side.

The Porter in the written text of *Macbeth* is introduced in Act 3, Scene 2, as a drunken, clownish doorman with an attitude, and then he’s never referred to again in any
subsequent scenes. As he does with the witches, though, director Goold weaves the character of the Porter into numerous scenes throughout the course of the film, where he assumes the roles of other minor characters, delivers specifically selected lines that were written for other characters, or simply appears in the background with no dialogue at all. This is not a case of the same actor playing different roles, something common in early performances of Shakespeare’s plays. With each identity that the Porter assumes, he displays the same insidious behavior, uses the same snide voice inflections, and in all but one scene, is wearing the same disheveled clothing. Whether in the foreground, the background, or at Macbeth’s side, the character of the Porter emerges, as his name signifies, as a transporter, aiding and abetting Macbeth on his predetermined path.

Act 3, Scene 2 takes place in the early morning following the murder of King Duncan. The Porter is awakened by loud, incessant knocking on the door, heralding the arrival of Macduff and the subsequent discovery of the murder. One might assume that a servant in the household of a Thane would be required to greet guests in a more professional manner, so the slovenly, filthy T-shirt he is wearing serves as a conspicuous enhancement of his nasty and offensive personality. Loud knocking often creates a sense of impending trouble and the noise unnervingly introduces the Porter who, in a deep, reverberating voice and with a cackling laugh, establishes his identity by muttering to himself, “If a man were porter of hell-gate he should have [plenty of] turning the key” (2.3.1-2). Goold, it appears, has chosen to accept this as the Porter’s actual vocation, and he is filmed walking down a long, unlit passageway, heightening the impression that he is emerging out of the depths of darkness. He responds to each series of knocks with references to “i’th’ name of Beelzebub,” “th’other devil’s name,” and “professions that go the primrose way to th’
everlasting bonfire,” creating a scene disconcertingly suggestive of the underworld (2.3.3, 7, 17-18).

Much of the Porter’s diatribe is focused on his disdain for the “equivocator,” a sentiment that specifically targets Macbeth and his vacillating uncertainty about committing regicide. When the Porter cries, “here’s an equivocator that could swear in both scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God’s sake” (2.3.8-10), he is making an eerily perceptive reference to both Macbeth and the horror of the preceding night; he seems to be well aware of something evil taking place. The darkness of the corridor deepens, fusing into a murky blackness, and with a single light shining on the Porter as he looks directly at the camera, he makes eye contact with the audience and commands us, in an ominous and foreboding tone, to “remember the Porter” (2.3.20). It’s as though, now that Macbeth has stopped equivocating and done the deed, it’s time for the Porter to step in and take action. The dramatic emphasis placed on this line of the dialogue compels the audience to reconsider his potential significance to the story as a whole.

As the scene moves into the kitchen area, the Porter becomes even more despicable, insidious, and vulgar, accentuating his lewd comments with equally lewd gestures, and performing this offensive behavior in front of Macduff’s wife and children. The kitchen setting is stark and cold. The subway tiled walls, visible pipes, and echoing acoustics provide a basement-like, subterranean quality to the scene that enhances the impression of an association with the underworld. In the exchange between the Porter and Macduff, Goold deliberately elects to leave out the part in which Macduff, by saying, “I believe drink gave thee the lie last night,” effectively excuses the Porter’s behavior as the result of drinking too much (2.3.34-37). Without this reference, the audience is left with a lasting
impression of a despicable, but not necessarily drunken Porter, whose behavior must be attributed to some other influence, one that is not immediately discernable.

Act 2, Scene 3 is a pivotal one in this adaptation because, in spite of the “Remember the Porter” command, for Shakespeare the role of the Porter was essentially over after this brief appearance; for Goold, it’s just beginning. This scene establishes his persona, linking him, with his appearance and demeanor, to questions of morality and propriety. The use of bright but grainy lighting and the choice to have him look into the camera as he delivers this line, also links him to questions of association with the supernatural. The audience, because of this, should be expecting to see more of him and contemplating his connection to Macbeth.

In the very next scene, Act 2, Scene 4, the Porter takes on the role of Shakespeare’s “Old Man,” who discusses with Ross the evil that took place the night before. He speaks only a select few of the Old Man’s actual lines, but his comment, “’Tis unnatural / Even like the deed that’s done,” is delivered in the same insidious tone, heavy with implications of supernatural forces at work, rather than the apprehensive musings of an insignificant old man (2.4.10-11). The scene ends with the Porter watching television footage of the war that is the background for this film, presenting an image of someone who has an obsession or a morbid fascination with evil.

The Porter appears again at the banquet on the evening of Banquo’s murder. The first line he speaks, “Thanks to your majesty,” is one that, according to the written text, is spoken by the Lords collectively (3.4.2). By having him speak this line alone, the audience is made aware of his presence at the banquet, an odd place for a porter to be. This scene is the only time he is shown wearing something other than his filthy T-shirt, suggesting that he
has disguised himself as a guest. He acts in a slovenly manner, slouching and slurping, distinguishing himself from the more elegant guests at the table and enhancing the vileness of his character. In the Porter’s next line—which belongs in Shakespeare’s text to Lennox, one of the Lords—he motions to Macbeth, “here is a place reserved, sir” (3.4.45), delivering it with his usual menacing and devious tone. He points to a chair that is occupied by a vision of the three witches, who are playing the role of the servants. The chair is clearly cursed; as Macbeth sits down, his very next line is his first confrontation with Banquo’s ghost. Placing the Porter in this particular scene to deliver that particular line implicates him even further as a harbinger of evil.

We next see the Porter in Act 4, Scene 2, where he materializes along with a misplaced Macbeth at the scene of the slaughter of Macduff’s family. He is filmed fully illuminated by the only source of light in the scene, a bright blinding light; all other characters, including Macbeth, are in muted light or in shadow. Goold’s intent is to keep the Porter in the viewer’s sights, a constant reminder of his presence, his otherworldly association, and his influence on Macbeth. Unlike the written play, Macbeth physically takes part in this slaughter and the presence of the Porter suggests that he is there to spur him on, as though he is his second in command. From this point forward, the Porter is often at Macbeth’s side, like Banquo was; the two have become a team, linked together and inseparable.

The Porter continues to play an important role in the climactic scenes where Macbeth finally accepts his fate. It is in Act 5, Scene 3—on the eve of Macbeth’s destruction, as he acknowledges his dark side—that he calls for a servant named Seyton for the first time. The reader reads “Seyton,” but the audience hears “Satan,” and it’s the Porter who
answers the call. This serves to identify him, if not as Satan himself, as one who is almost certainly aligned with him. The manner in which Seyton addresses Macbeth is one of condescension rather than one of deference to a King, and when Macbeth commands him to get his armor to prepare for battle, Seyton rudely defies him and states with a bossy sneer that, “’Tis not needed yet” (5.3.35). It’s Seyton who informs Macbeth that “the Queen is dead” with such blatant lack of regret or emotion, attempting to walk past him without delivering the awful news, that he gives the impression of almost triumphant gloating. Although this is his final spoken line, the Porter remains visible in the background, often in a flood of bright light, making it impossible to ignore his presence during Macbeth’s last stand.

This film adaptation uses the historical imagery of man-made war and the supernatural imagery of servants of Satan to suggest that the human capacity for evil is often inherent and so close to the surface that it just needs a little help to carry it toward its full potential. While Shakespeare, in his text, instructs the audience to “remember the Porter,” there is no evidence to suggest that the Porter ever appears in any later scenes or has any importance to the overall plot or meaning of Macbeth. Rupert Goold takes that one seemingly insignificant line, and by stealing a few lines here and there from other characters, weaving the character of the Porter into various scenes throughout the film, and underscoring his presence with contrasting darkness and bright light to keep him always in our field of vision, he convinces us that he has had a hand in Macbeth’s journey toward evil, and he makes it impossible for us to forget him.
Works Cited
