Masks and Melodramas: Theatrical Influences on Film Adaptations of *Macbeth*

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Abstract: This paper presents a comparative analysis of two film adaptations of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606)—Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015). Specifically, I explore the influence of Japanese Noh theatre in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* and the influence of Victorian melodrama in Kurzel's *Macbeth*. In doing so, I aim to present Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as a case study of how film adaptations can give new meaning to their source texts by putting them in dialogue with other theatrical traditions.

Macbeth (1606), like all of Shakespeare's plays, originated in the theatre and therefore incorporates seventeenth-century English theatrical traditions. However, both Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957) and Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* (2015) draw on theatrical inspirations that are not distinctly Shakespearean; rather, the two adaptations are distinctively informed by their own culturally relevant theatrical traditions. For Kurosawa, this influence is the Noh theatre tradition (a Japanese theatrical form with five distinct types that blends movement and music), and for Kurzel, it is Victorian melodrama (an English theatrical form and precursor to sensation fiction, which features extraordinary events). This article focuses on how these films incorporate the aesthetics of different theatrical traditions to reimagine Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In doing so, I aim to present Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as a case study of how film adaptations can give new meaning to their source texts by putting them in dialogue with other theatrical traditions.

Akira Kurosawa's transcultural adaptation of Shake-

speare's *Macbeth*, though not well received by critics at the time, is now considered a "masterpiece" of Shakespearean adaptation (Suzuki 93). *Throne of Blood*'s reputation as a cinematic cornerstone—both for adaptations and for film in general—can be understood through its unique tone and striking visuals that stem from Noh theatre. Noh, known for its Buddhist themes, handcrafted masks, and use of chants and songs, is a traditional Japanese theatrical form that originated in the fourteenth century (Gainor et al. 23). Perhaps more than any of Shakespeare's other works, *Macbeth*, with its tale of a hubristic and ambitious tragic hero fits well into the Noh tradition, as Noh incorporates Buddhist teachings of the destructiveness of desire (Gainor et al. 23). As Mikiko Ishii explains, Noh's bamboo masks also link it to the traditional Buddhist saying, "paint bamboo; devote yourself only to painting bamboo, until you yourself become bamboo" (Ishii 54). The centrality of these carefully crafted masks in Noh, worn by the *shite* (main character), reflects the theatrical form's incorporation of Buddhist traditions and Japanese culture. Just as "Noh is a living art … seen as introducing Japanese culture in a wider sense" (Ishii 43), Shakespeare dramatized and commented on English culture and history in his plays.

Kurosawa engages with both Shakespeare's text and Noh's aesthetic in *Throne of Blood*. Of the five types of Noh plays, *Throne of Blood* best resembles *Shura mono* ("warrior plays"), and Kurosawa's adoption of *Shura mono*'s themes emphasizes Macbeth's role as a warrior and reframes his fall from grace. Kurosawa's choice to adapt *Macbeth*—Shakespeare's own "warrior play"—naturally invokes elements of *Shura mono*. The translation of thanes and kings to samurai and lords is clear: all of these positions are entangled in tensions of power and violence, as well as their accompanying emotions. Makeup is an integral part in this translation of *Macbeth*, conveying the traditions of Noh. The *shite* is generally the only mask-wearing character, and the intense, glaring eyes of Washizu (the adapted name of Macbeth) are reminiscent of the traditional Noh warrior mask, which features severely arched brows and large eyes. The representation

of Washizu as the hero of a warrior play primes audiences to believe he will act with honour, making his descent into murder and madness all the more subversive. Kurosawa also incorporates elements of *Shura mono* in the ceremonial promotion of Washizu. In the source text, Ross and Angus (two of the king's messengers) meet Macbeth on the road back from battle and inform him of his promotion to "Thane of Cawdor" (1.3.100). Kurosawa radically adapts this intimate exchange, making it a public spectacle, with Lord Tsuzuki (the adapted name of Duncan) promoting Washizu to Lord of the North Garrison at Spider's Web Castle in front of a large congregation of warriors. Recontextualizing this scene, Kurosawa reminds his audience that Washizu exists in the public eye. Unlike in the play, where his promotion is relatively private, an entire cohort of soldiers has witnessed Tsuzuki's love of Washizu, making the latter's subsequent murder of his lord appear even more dishonourable. By featuring this distinct samurai tradition, Kurosawa emphasizes Washizu's role as a warrior and visually grounds *Throne of Blood* in the *Shura mono* tradition, allowing his audience to gain a more nuanced and disturbing understanding of Macbeth's character in the play.

While Washizu represents the *Shura mono* aspects of Noh in *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa's Lady Asaji (the adapted name of Lady Macbeth) reveals the influence of a second type of Noh: *Katsura mono* ("woman plays"). *Katsura mono*'s defining characteristic is its female-led narrative; Lady Asaji's makeup and remarkably unmoving face, particularly in the beginning of the film, are a perfect recreation of the Noh woman mask—smooth, stark white, with narrow eyes and brows smudged high on the forehead. Including a second character with a mask-like face goes against the Noh tradition of having only one masked *shite*; in doing so, Kurosawa experimentally blends *Katsura mono* and *Shura mono* (which equates Lady Asaji and Washizu) and elevates Lady Macbeth's relatively subordinate role in the play to a more active role in the adaptation. *Macbeth* grapples with the consequences of ambition, fate, and manipulation; therefore, Kurosawa's representation of Lady Asaji—the catalyst

of chaos, who drives her husband to murder—as an equally strong second *shite*, emphasizes the agency that the character possesses in the original play. Notably, in this adaptation, Lady Asaji bears her own name rather than being nominally defined in relation to her husband, as "Lady Macbeth" is in the source text. By including and amending the traditions of Noh theatre, Kurosawa's adaptation grants Macbeth's wicked wife much more agency than Shakespeare's play.

Finally, Kurosawa draws on *Kichiku mono* ("demon plays"), a third type of Noh theatre. *Kichiku mono* is known for its supernatural themes and unsettled spirit characters, and Kurosawa reconstructs these elements in his adaptation. The men's ominous chants in the opening voiceover, as well as the sung prophecies of the forest spirit (the adapted witches), not only links *Throne of Blood* with Noh's traditional use of chanting and singing but also creates a sense of unease in the audience. This unease is heightened with the visual ambiguity created in the greyscale mist. Despite the availability of colour film technology in 1957, *Throne of Blood* is visually distinct: shot in black and white and shrouded in fog, the film emphasizes Washizu's hubris-clouded judgement. As in the play, the forest spirit appears early on to signal an unsettling of the natural order. In the play, the question of the witches' humanity remains unanswered, but Kurosawa's spirit distinguishes itself to Washizu and Miki (the adapted name of Banquo) as a part of the supernatural world by remarking, "you humans! I will never comprehend you. You are afraid of your desires—you try to hide them" (*Throne of Blood* 0:17:06–0:17:18). In separating itself entirely from the human world, the spirit draws attention to the *Kichiku mono* influences on the film. *Throne of Blood*'s singing, setting, and spirit relocate Shakespeare's *Macbeth* to feudal Japan and the *Kichiku mono* realm of ghosts and demons. This relocation obscures the monstrous actions of Washizu. Beyond Shakespeare's "fair" Scotland turned "foul," Kurosawa's stage is otherworldly, and the audience is left to wonder if the same ethical rules apply to the protagonist in this strange space.

Although Kurzel adapts the same source text as Kurosawa, their audiences are temporally, geographically, and

nationally distinct. In response to a shift in audience, from twentieth-century Japan to twenty-first-century North America, Kurzel emphasizes intimacy, violence, and seduction in his adaptation—techniques popularized in Victorian melodramas. This Victorian theatrical form, known for its sensational stage productions, paved the way for Western plot-driven sensational films. As Peter Brooks explains, "the contemporary form that most relayed and supplanted melodrama [is] the cinema" because of its reliance on evocative performances and universally understood themes, such as the "incessant struggle against enemies" (12, 15). Kurzel exploits such melodramatic traces in his raw, sexually charged, and expressive adaptation with bloody onscreen betrayals, erotic encounters, and weeping women. In *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Brooks states that "the desire to express all seems a fundamental characteristic of the melodramatic mode" (3). Kurzel follows this mode of exhibition, particularly in the murder of Duncan, which drastically differs from the play. In the original play, Macbeth claims he hears a bell "that summons [him] to heaven or to hell" (2.1.64) and exits. He re-emerges "[*carrying two bloody daggers*]" (2.2), but the play excludes the audience from the extradiegetic physical act of regicide, leaving them to imagine the murder for themselves. By contrast, Kurzel's horrifying display of violence recalls classic melodramas in which "the evocation of bloody sacrifice, eliciting a state of moral exorbitance, authorizes the intensity of the encounter" (Brooks 7).

While *Throne of Blood* notably lacks physical intimacy, Kurzel's Macbeth bears all, with the conspiring couple's coitus shown explicitly in the chapel prior to Duncan's murder. The films engagement of the audience in this intimate act mimics elements of melodrama, as melodramas famously "suited the public's taste for spectacle" (Gainor et al. 57). By highlighting taboo physicality, Kurzel's adaptation draws on the conventions of melodrama to titillate and excite. Nineteenth-century melodrama was also the antecedent to the Victorian sensation novels, which revolutionized narrative style, "provid[ing] a model for the making of meaning in fic-

tional, dramatizations of existence" (Brooks 13). Sensation fiction, more explicitly than melodrama, introduced many of the tropes seen in Hollywood film noir (the film genre that *Macbeth* fits most comfortably into), such as the conniving femme fatale who corrupts good men and brings ruin to households, as featured in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), and the "woman in white" character, a mysterious, seemingly supernatural woman, as introduced by Wilkie Collins in *The Woman in White* (1859).

Kurzel exploits the tropes of nineteenth-century sensation fiction in his interpretation of Lady Macbeth, portraying her as a femme fatale and a "woman in white." The first instance of overt melodramatic coding in Kurzel's *Macbeth* comes when Lady Macbeth kneels in a chapel and lowers her eyes. The framing and blocking of this scene suggest that she is about to pray, but when the camera cuts to the object of her gaze, Macbeth's letter, the film undercuts her suggested piety. When she declaims her desires to be "unsex[ed]" and "fill[ed] … from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (1.5.37–39)—a most unholy prayer—she cements herself as the narrative's devious "damsel." This subversion of religious expectations relates her to the deceitful femme fatales of Victorian melodrama and sensation fiction. Literary scholar Nora Gilbert details the ways in which Victorian culture has informed the genre of film noir by paying particular attention to the role of women in these respective genres (Gilbert n.p.). Gilbert finds them to be remarkably similar: they both weaponize sex and subvert expectations of female submission. Lady Macbeth's villainy and seduction are brought to the forefront of the narrative as she convinces Macbeth to murder Duncan, and these qualities are emphasized as her dark gown and hair allow her to blend into the dim, "unruly" (2.3.46) night. Lady Macbeth's sensational portrayal early in the film affirms her character's bloodlust and dominance in the source text.

However, Kurzel's fidelity to Lady Macbeth's noir characterization shifts as the film progresses. After Macbeth's ascension to the throne of Scotland, Kurzel's Lady Macbeth slowly devolves from sanity, as conveyed through her ap-

pearance, to embody the Victorian "woman in white." The "woman in white" is a significant figure, not only dominating the genre of sensation fiction but also haunting the stage in Victorian melodramas and the screen in a multitude of modern films (Salah 33). Kurzel's incorporation of this literary and theatrical trope reimagines Shakespeare's meddling, mortal character as an ethereal being, complicating *Macbeth*'s plot (which is largely driven by her narrative agency). Her queenly attire, while embellished, is pale in colour—a far cry from the simple, utilitarian black gown she donned in her earlier predatory state. While this alteration of garment colour reflects Lady Macbeth's shift in status, it more significantly represents her shifting mental conviction. In Kurzel's adaptation, after the murder of Macduff's family (at which she weeps), Lady Macbeth returns to the chapel where she had once prayed for apathy and dominance. Here, her madness becomes fully apparent, and her costuming, relocation, and framing characterize her as a "woman in white." Her ghostly pale face; her loose, gauzy, ghost-like shift dress; and her aimless barefoot wandering in the moor code her as a supernatural being. Her "out damned spot" monologue is whispered, with Lady Macbeth staring unblinkingly into the middle distance as tears fall freely down her face, stressing her detachment from reality. At the end of her monologue, the camera cuts to her dead child (added in the adaptation), suggesting that she is on the same plane as the dead now, at least in her mind. The film's notable reframing of the words "wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look not so pale" (5.1.51) as instructions to her dead child, rather than to herself, suggests that she craves to be reunited with her dead child, whatever the cost. Moreover, the film's relocation of Lady Macbeth's monologue from the palace to the moors, as well as her ethereal appearance in this scene, reveals the influence of melodramatic Victorian culture on Kurzel's adaptation.

Both Japanese and English theatrical traditions have informed contemporary adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* draws on Japanese Noh theatre, and Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth* incorporates el-

ements of Victorian melodrama and sensation fiction. The former's adoption of Noh traditions remediates the source text to emphasize the protagonist's role as a warrior, the insidious agency of his wife, and the moral ambiguity of the plot's supernatural aspects. By contrast, the latter's inclusion of melodramatic and sensational tropes complicates Lady Macbeth's character and resituates the early modern *Macbeth* in a wider tradition of storytelling. The distinct cinematographic choices made by Kurosawa and Kurzel demonstrate the endless flexibility of the artistic medium of film adaptation, with its ability to reimagine texts and place them in dialogue with other theatrical traditions.

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