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## Adaptation as Transmutation: Shakespeare in Orson Welles "Voodoo" Macbeth and Kurosawa's Throne of Blood

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**Adaptation as Transmutation: Shakespeare  
in Orson Welles' "Voodoo" *Macbeth* and  
Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood***



*Throne of Blood, 1957 Toho Company*

Senior Project Submitted to  
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## Table of Contents:

Introduction: The Adaptation Debate	2-5
Chapter One: Critical Interpretations of <i>Macbeth</i>	6-10
Chapter Two: Orson Welles “Voodoo” <i>Macbeth</i>	11-23
Chapter Three: Akira Kurosawa’s <i>Throne of Blood</i>	24-40
Conclusion: The importance of Adaptive Freedom	41-43
Bibliography	44-46

## Introduction: The Adaptation Debate

It would be difficult to define the term “adaptation” in a way that could be mutually agreed upon throughout the world of art and literary criticism. Webster’s dictionary defines adaptation as a “movie, book, play, etc., that is changed so it can be presented in another form.” This is just vague enough to be uncontroversial. When it comes to actually examining a formally derivative work of art, there seem to be degrees of change that determine whether or not said work actually qualifies for application of the term. Those deemed *too* altered might be categorized as “inspired by” or “an allusion to” the source material. But what must a work of art retain in order to be considered an adaptation? Different media call for different approaches. Some purists, for example, would consider a film version of a play to lack adaptive veracity if it were to drastically alter or omit the original text. It would be impossible to hold a film version of a novel to the same standard; however, as it is understood that much of the text would be translated into action and visual imagery. Is text more crucial to a play than it is to a novel? I would argue the opposite, given that a play can still exist with absolutely no dialogue (Beckett’s *Act Without Words* springs to mind), whereas you would be hard-pressed to read a novel with absolutely no text. In fact, the novel itself would cease to exist.

Shakespeare's plays are just as pregnant on the page as they are in performance. So where does one end and the other begin, when it comes to adaptation? This is a riddle without an answer but it forces us to consider the many components that come together to form the identity of a work of art. Still, identity itself is not a constant, relying on audience perception to play an important role in its creation. Two separate audiences could react to the same piece of art very differently, but one reaction would not be more valid than the other. In my opinion, the mark of great art is an ability to transcend what originally tied it to place and time, becoming something that is always in flux depending on the interests and needs of the current audience. Shakespeare's mutability has marked his body of work as fertile ground for adaptation.

Adaptations based on classical works seem to be subject to particularly intense scrutiny. Pillars of the Western cannon are deemed even more precious, Shakespeare being no exception. Many scholars have devoted their entire lives to Shakespearean analysis, spending countless hours of research attempting to pinpoint the Bard's true artistic intentions. It can ruffle their feathers when a new production of one of his play seems to miss the mark. Fear of condemnation by critics might limit an adaptors' creative choices, and there's certainly no shortage of stale Shakespearean drama. *In Shakespeare on Film* Judith Buchanan discusses the potential freedom (and potential failures) in breaking from textual reverence when adapting Shakespeare, "Creativity, in this sense (through translation and text modification) can, of course, mean a whole range of extravagant or distracting departures from the driving impulses of the play as received. At its best, however, it may also mean a freedom from the paralyzing respect that can potentially dog productions in the original language" (71-72).

In an age when young people have been afforded a host of new and ever more stimulating distractions, it seems most important to reinvent the classics in a way that will appeal to a society that has become wholly numb to material deemed “archaic.” I am not arguing that we should dumb down these works or concede to make some of the more difficult or controversial aspects more palatable for a mass audience, but rather consider what themes have the most contemporary relevance and highlight those themes accordingly. This is not blasphemy or pandering, it is the desire and creativity to re-imagine a seminal work in a whole new light. This should be encouraged rather than diminished.

In this paper, I have chosen two controversial versions of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* within which to explore the complicated nature of adaptation. The first is a stage production directed by Orson Welles in Harlem, New York in 1936, subsidized by the Federal Theatre Project. The play is set in post-colonial Haiti and has since been dubbed the “Voodoo” *Macbeth*. The second is a film version of the story, entitled *Throne of Blood*, directed by Akira Kurosawa in 1957. Kurosawa transplants *Macbeth* from medieval Scotland to feudal Japan. I’ll begin by discussing some notable interpretations of the original *Macbeth*, in order to add context by which to consider these derivative works of art.

What interests me particularly about these two works is how their approaches to the source material differ and what they reveal about the complex political climates within which they were produced. Another compelling element I will consider is how cinematic Welles’ stage version of *Macbeth* is, while *Throne of Blood*, drawing heavily from Japanese Noh conventions, takes a very theatrical approach to film.

Regarding Shakespeare's language, Welles and Kurosawa take very different approaches. Welles retains most of Shakespeare's original text, although he edits down some of the longer scenes and reassigns dialogue amongst the characters, to further emphasize his own interpretation. Kurosawa, on the other hand, eliminates the text almost completely. Rather than grapple with the difficulty of translating Shakespeare's text into Japanese, and in doing so ultimately losing much of its poetry, Kurosawa chooses to implement very minimal dialogue in his adaptation. The fairly sparse conversation between characters does not attempt to mimic Shakespeare's style in any way, and yet it conforms fairly strictly to the plays original timeline, and evokes very powerful responses, despite foregoing the Bard's most moving and eloquent speeches.

I chose to focus on these two very different adaptations of *Macbeth*, in order to emphasize not only Shakespeare's timeless and transcendent nature, but also its mutability in the face of fresh cultural imperatives. In this paper, I will examine the adaptive choices of these productions from a creative, social and political perspective. I hope to open up a conversation about the nature of adaptation and encourage young artists and academics to consider the limitless potential in drawing inspiration from Shakespeare's works.

## Chapter One: Critical Interpretations of *Macbeth*

*Macbeth*, like all of Shakespeare's works, inspires a multitude of different analyses. In the hundreds of years of Shakespearean scholarship, attitudes about the themes and meaning of *Macbeth* have continued to evolve, indicating how this work can be molded to fit innumerable historical and intellectual frameworks. Although certain interpretations may be more relevant to contemporary society than others, it would be purely subjective to choose one as an authority over the others.

*Macbeth*, in all its psychological complexity and moral ambiguity, has produced a wide range of thematic interpretation, some in almost direct opposition to each other. These theories indicate just as much about the time and place in which they originate, as they do the depth and breadth of the original text. This is Shakespeare's greatest gift, in my estimation. As much as his plays had contemporary relevance for their original Elizabethan audiences, they continue to resonate with modern artists, critics, and spectators who continue to produce and enjoy new and exciting interpretations.



The earliest interpretations of *Macbeth* tend to classify it as a traditional Christian morality play, the sort of which that flourished throughout the Medieval Period and Renaissance. “It typically presents the fall of a man who may be basically or originally good but is always corruptible through the temptations of the world and his own pride or ambition. This action occurs against the structure of a fundamentally ordered and benevolent universe, which is finally self-restorative despite the evil and chaos temporarily unleashed within it, since crime will [win] out and sin is always repaid, “ (Felperin 92). It is easy to see how *Macbeth* can be interpreted thus to fit into this framework. Lust for power drives Macbeth and his wife to murder. Consequently, Lady Macbeth’s guilt drives her to madness and then suicide. Macduff, Thane of Fife, and Duncan’s loyal subject, accompanies Duncan’s heir (Malcolm) to England, in the wake of the king’s assassination. His loyalty to the throne drives him to abandon his family and leave them vulnerable to Macbeth’s murderous intentions. The fact that Macduff sacrifices his loved ones in order to defend Scotland’s natural bloodline makes him all the more selfless and valiant. Macbeth’s bloody treachery is repaid when virtuous Macduff kills and decapitates him. Order is restored when Malcolm, the rightful heir, ascends the throne.

And yet, didacticism and upholding Christian values have never been Shakespeare’s primary dramatic concern (Levinson 5). To reduce *Macbeth* to a story of good ultimately triumphing over evil, strips it of its emotional complexity and reduces the characters to allegorical symbols whose main function is to further the message of the play. It is a testimony to his ingenuity that he was able to fit *Macbeth* into such a popular framework and serve it up to his audience in the form that would have been most

digestible to Elizabethan audiences, undoubtedly familiar with the longstanding morality play tradition (Levinson 5), and yet the content didn't exactly match the form. As Arthur Levinson explains, "Because a tragic protagonist overpays for his errors, critics ignorant of the art equate Shakespeare's tragedy with those didactic medieval plays that preached on sin and damnation. It has been commented that this mistake foredooms a grasp of tragedy; rigid minds, twisting it into Christian Medieval mode, make it end too neatly with either a saved hero or a villain damned to the everlasting flames," (5).

Reading the play through the lens of modernity makes it more difficult to attest to the idea that good ultimately *does* triumph over evil, in the world of *Macbeth*. In *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, Jan Kott describes *Macbeth* as far darker and more sinister than a tale of scriptural redemption.

Kott is famous for his theory of the Grand Mechanism, which he sees as ever-present in Shakespeare's Histories: "Shakespeare's Histories are *dramatis personae* of the Grand Mechanism. But what is this Grand Mechanism which starts operating at the foot of the throne and to which the whole kingdom is subjected? A mechanism whose cogs are both great lords and hired assassins; a mechanism which forces people to violence, cruelty and treason; which constantly claims new victims? A mechanism according to whose laws the road to power is at the same time the way to death? This Grand Mechanism is for Shakespeare the order of history, in which the king is the Lord's Anointed" (38).

He compares the structure of *Macbeth* to that of Shakespeare's Histories, with one crucial distinction: "*Macbeth* does not show history as the Grand Mechanism. It shows it as a nightmare...History, as a mechanism, fascinates by its very terror and inevitability.

Whereas nightmare paralyses and terrifies...History in *Macbeth* is confused the way nightmares are; and, as in a nightmare, everyone is enveloped by it," (Kott 86).

This confusion is evident in the opening scene of *Macbeth*, through the words of the witches. In reply to the first witch's inquiry as to when they will reconvene, the second witch replies, "When the hurly-burly's done, / When the battle's lost, and won," (Shakespeare I.i.4-5). It is unclear whether or not this is a general statement about the nature of war or a foreshadowing of Macbeth's victory on the battlefield, which leads to Duncan's demise, and the ensuing bloodshed. Either way, it suggests that there is a duality to this concept of victory, as it is predicated on someone else's defeat. Furthermore, war can be costly even for the victor, so some degree of loss comes with every win. Duncan is a prime example of this in that his defeat of Norway and promotion of Macbeth in the wake of his military triumph, eventually precipitate his own end.

The language of confusion continues in the opening scene as the witches chant together the words, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," (I.i.9) shortly before their exit, as if to imply that foul and fair are not fixed concepts, they can be interchangeable, or based on perception. There are no absolutes in this world, least of all the concepts of good and evil. The original, treacherous Thane of Cawdor is stabbed and beheaded. Macbeth is named the new Thane of Cawdor, thus the first element of the witches' prophecies is realized. It is this act that emboldens Macbeth to move forward with his plan to murder the king. When Malcolm and Macduff return to reclaim the throne, Macbeth is himself run through and decapitated, echoing the fate of the original Cawdor. Malcolm, the true heir, is then able to take the throne. The play may end at this point, but there are no assurances that Scotland's former peace and prosperity has been restored. Macduff and Malcolm

have bloodied their hands in order to regain power, and blood has a way of begetting more blood.

The second scene of the play, in which the wounded captain recalls Macbeth's bravery on the battlefield to Duncan and his attendants, also sets the stage for an illustration of the complexity of the human condition, resistant to finite labels of "good" and "bad." When Macbeth and the king finally come face-to-face in Act I, Scene 4, Duncan showers Macbeth with flattering epithets ("O worthiest cousin," [I.iv.14] and "My worthy Cawdor," [I.iv.48]), detailing his nobility and valor. This proves to be dramatic irony, once Macbeth's treacherous ambitions are incited.

Until the witches ignite his lust for power, Macbeth is by all appearances a loyal and virtuous man. Lady Macbeth, in the midst of devising their murderous scheme, doubts her husband's ability to follow through with such heinous acts: "Yet do I fear thy nature,/ It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness," (I.v.16-17). This establishes his character as generally sympathetic. The most terrifying aspect of Macbeth's bloody, treasonous acts is that he is not inherently evil. This suggests that anyone, under the right set of circumstances, is susceptible to Macbeth's brand of wicked temptation.

## Chapter Two: Orson Welles' "Voodoo" *Macbeth*

In September of 1935, as part of Roosevelt's New Deal, the Works Progress Administration was formed. The goal was to provide millions of depressed Americans, now surviving on public charity, with jobs supplied by the federal government, according to their own skills and trades. The WPA received a federal endowment of five billion dollars, less than 1% designated for stimulus in the arts, including theatre (Houseman 173).

The Federal Theatre Project, formed under the WPA, was a relief measure with the intention of putting thousands of unemployed theatre artists back to work, while providing affordable entertainment for Americans to enjoy. "Within a year of its formation, the Federal Theatre had more than fifteen thousand men and women on its payroll, at an average wage of approximately twenty dollars a week," (Houseman 174).

Hallie Flanagan, no Broadway baroness, was rather a "wild little woman" who led the Vassar Experimental Theatre. Flanagan, who strongly believed in the "social and educative force" (Houseman 174) of progressive theatre, was appointed the national

director of the Federal Theatre Project. Her agenda became clear when, upon assuming office, she proclaimed, “While our immediate aim is to put to work thousands of theatre people, our more far-reaching purpose is to organize and support theatrical enterprises so excellent in quality and low in cost, and so vital to the communities involved that they will be able to continue after federal support is withdrawn,” (Houseman 174). Flanagan saw potential beyond the pragmatism of putting food in the mouths of otherwise starving artists. She saw the opportunity to provide a cultural and social outlet for the American public, which was becoming increasingly more desperate and disenfranchised by the state of the economy.

That year, under the umbrella of the New York WPA Federal Theatre, the Negro Theatre project was created. The prominent African-American actress, Rose McLendon, was approached to serve as head of the project. She accepted on one condition, that a qualified, white partner be provided, to serve as her artistic and executive equal (Houseman 179). She reached out to her friend, producer John Houseman, and he agreed to serve as co-head. There was certainly controversy in the African-American theatrical community surrounding the appointment of a white man in such an influential role on the project. Unfortunately, it was ultimately agreed that the reality of the racial climate was such that without a connected white man at the helm, nothing coming out of the marginalized Negro theatre would be given any attention within “serious” theatrical circles (Houseman 178).

Harlem, long struggling and neglected, was devastated by the depression. Most local businesses refused to employ African-Americans, so bootlegging and gambling had become a vital part of the local economy. Landlords gouged their tenants (charging

double the rent for what one would pay in a comparable white neighborhood) without providing leases, so there was no government oversight or quality control to ensure that living conditions were adequate. Protesting or “troublesome” tenants would be added to an organized landlords’ blacklist (Houseman 176). “Unemployment had long been endemic in Harlem; with the depression, it became critical,” (Houseman 176). These conditions, along with a myriad of other systemic injustices, led to a boiling-over of frustration and discontent, culminating in the Harlem Riots of 1935.

The Negro Theatre project certainly could not cure the ills of this struggling community, but it did provide between seven and eight hundred local jobs, becoming the city’s largest employer of African-Americans in a single unit (Houseman 177). Of the five hundred odd people cast as performers, only about a hundred and fifty were professionals. The most experienced force employed by the project was the crew. Denied access to the Stagehands Union on the basis of race, most had been forced to abandon the theatre and attempt to apply their skills in other fields. This rare opportunity to return to their chosen profession “made theirs the most consistently enthusiastic department of the project,” (Houseman, 183).

Houseman split the company into two groups: “One would be devoted to the performance of plays written, directed and performed by and for Negroes, in Negro locales and preferably, on contemporary Negro subjects. The other would devote itself to the performance of classical works of which our actors would be the interpreters, without concession or reference to color,” (Houseman 184). For the delicate task of erecting the first classical foray of the project, Houseman turned to twenty-year-old director Orson Welles.

Welles was ambivalent at first, forced to consider how the commitment would interfere with his burgeoning and lucrative radio career. He was inspired to take on the project when his wife, Virginia Nicholson, suggested he direct a version of *Macbeth* set in Haiti, replacing the witches with voodoo priestesses. Welles saw parallels between the world of the play and the reign of Henri Christophe, the Haitian slave who overthrew the despotic French colonial government, only to become a tyrant in his own right.

Christophe had committed suicide when it became apparent that his own people were beginning to turn against him (France 56). On a practical level, it was more believable to audiences to envision an all black cast in the West Indies, as opposed to Medieval Scotland (McCloskey 409). The transposition also afforded Welles many opportunities for the spectacle of shock and awe that seemed to be his primary directive when it came to his work on the stage. Aiding him in realizing this vision were Nat Karson (costume and set designer) and Abe Feder (lighting).

Karson's costumes were influenced by the French Colonial Directoire period (the style of clothing that was à la mode in Colonial Haiti), but like everything about Welles production, were exaggerated for effect. Martha Gellhorn, as quoted by John Houseman in his memoir, describes Macbeth's "superb military costumes of canary yellow and emerald green," Macduff's striking battle attire, replete with "a pair of epaulets a foot wide...complemented by a pair of satin-striped red and white breeches," and ball gowns of "salmon pink and purple," (201). The murderers appear villainously in long, dark cloaks and giant imposing, two-toned stovepipe hats, giving the impression of 19<sup>th</sup> century pallbearers.



The permanent set was a multilevel castle, comprised of battlements, ramps, and an ominous tower, at the foot of which stood the throne. Birnam Wood was transformed into a sinewy Haitian jungle and a tropical backdrop came down in front of the castle for these scenes. Karson's jungle was a direct extension of the Voodoo element, comprised of untamed, sprawling fauna with a more than mild suggestion of a giant, skeletal human torso and pelvis at the center. When Birnam Wood came to Dusinane, heralding Macbeth's downfall, the entire castle set was enveloped in tropical foliage, strangled by hanging vines and obscured by palm fronds. The human world had been physically invaded by supernatural forces and was now entirely at their mercy.

"The problem of the witches" is often cited as the most difficult obstacle to overcome when attempting to make *Macbeth* digestible to modern audiences. As early as 1745, Samuel Johnson's *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth*, already described the witches as outmoded and distracting from the tragic power of the play thus: "A poet who should now make the whole action of his tragedy depend upon enchantment and produce the chief events by the assistance of supernatural agents would be censured as transgressing the bounds of probability. He would be banished from the theatre to the nursery and condemned to write fairy tales instead of tragedies," (Miola 206).

Rather than downplay the supernatural components of *Macbeth* in order to placate modern skepticism, Welles' Voodoo Priestesses (led by a cloaked, male Hecate with a twelve-foot bullwhip) became the focal point of the production. They appear in six of the eight scenes that Welles' paired down from the original script. Many *Macbeth* productions cut the role of Hecate entirely (often excising all of IV.i with it), but Welles took the opposite route, re-arranging dialogue and stealing lines from other characters to

widen Hecate's narrative scope. As aforementioned, he re-imagines Hecate as male, outfitting him in a black cloak over a bare torso and snugly fitted pants. (Although I found no mention of this in my research, my own limited knowledge of Haitian Voodoo leads me to believe that Welles may have been inspired by the figure of Papa Legba, an immortal trickster who serves as intermediary between the human and spirit worlds.) Hecate even assumes the role of the third murderer, thus assuming a tangible responsibility in the slaying of Banquo. In Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, it is the witches that attend her in the place of a doctor and gentlewoman. In Shakespeare's original text, a marriage of the witches' prophecies and Macbeth's hunger for power, compel the plot forward. Theirs is a power of suggestion, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. In Welles' production, the witches play a much more active role in the horror and bloodshed.

A prime example of Welles' efforts to elevate the witches' role is illustrated by his re-assignment of Macbeth's speech about slaughtering Macduff's family to Hecate, increasing his evil influence. Hecate instructs him to "give to th' edge o' th' sword/His wife, his babes..." (IV.i.150-151), rather than, as in the original, Macbeth uttering these words himself, to Lennox, in the wake of Macduff's flight to England. As far as Welles' is concerned, Macbeth is merely a puppet, a zombie, completely vulnerable to and molded by supernatural elements.

And yet, Macbeth is not Welles' witches' only object of interest. They are hedging their bets in the battle for complete supremacy. For example, it is Hecate that advises Malcolm to cut down the boughs of Birnam Wood in order to conceal his army (McCloskey 7). The agents of evil in "Voodoo" *Macbeth* are perniciously invasive,

without regard for allegiance. Their objective is violence and mayhem and they are willing to achieve that, by any means necessary.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is tragic in the Aristotelian sense. Macbeth's crimes and subsequent grappling with conscience arouse pity and fear in the reader. He believes that every misdeed will be the last, but finds himself committing ever more horrendous acts in order to secure the power he's wagered so much to gain. As he declines into a state of violent paranoia, he becomes more and more a caged animal, trapped in a prison of his own design. Welles absolves Macbeth of this internal struggle in his adaptation. As Richard France states, "The 'Voodoo' *Macbeth* was conceived as a suspense thriller about a man who is manipulated by the forces of darkness. His nobility and conscience are overcome by the power of the witches, who control both Macbeth and the world he inhabits...His version of *Macbeth* is hardly tragic," (56).

Another choice Welles made to alter the world of the play was to change the delivery of Banquo's "Thou has it now" speech (III.i.1-10). In the original text, Banquo says it as an aside, expressing genuine concern that fulfillment of the prophecy may have been sped along by treachery on Macbeth's behalf. In Welles' production, Banquo delivers these lines directly (and menacingly) to Macbeth, almost as a threat. Typically, the Banquo character, in his enduring loyalty and patience, serves as a foil for Macbeth's moral failings. Both men are addressed by the Weird sisters and promised some form of future glory, and yet Banquo remains unswayed. This indicates the role of free will in Macbeth's increasingly unconscionable acts. Welles' choice to infect Banquo with the same evil we, the audience, see permeate the entire production, effectively removes the capacity for free will. In "Voodoo" *Macbeth* there are no good men and bad men, the

dark charm has been cast across all the characters. They have lost all autonomy and capacity for choice. Hecate and the priestesses look on with sadistic amusement as these humans enact the bloody ballet the forces of evil have choreographed.

Welles' loud, bold, cinematic approach to *Macbeth* certainly had mass appeal, but it was not merely spectacle for spectacle's sake. Richard France asserts that it "made its statement by evoking a world dominated by evil...a nightmare more than a reality... Welles played on his audiences' current nightmare-the threat to which they had become habituated-of fascism and impending war," (56). John Houseman makes this habituation clear in his autobiography when establishing the timeline for relocating the Negro Theatre Project from its temporary home base in lower Manhattan to its more permanent headquarters in the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem. The moving process occurred "just about the time Mussolini was invading Ethiopia"; a few weeks later, as they began renovations on the long-abandoned building, "the Japanese were invading the Chinese mainland" (182). In Germany, The Third Reich had assumed power two years prior, and the country was rapidly being consumed by Hitler's brand of fanatical, racist nationalism. America, caught in the throws of its own economic crisis, watched on with terror as the globe grew ever closer to the crisis point that would precipitate World War II.

The witches in Welles' *Macbeth* are more than cackling soothsayers, more than evil incarnate, they are invaders, conquerors. Susan McCloskey expresses the trajectory of their strategic takeover quite well: "As soon as Macbeth came under their spell, they began to move from the jungle into the palace. After Duncan's assassination, they appeared on the battlements. After Banquo's ghost disrupted the ball, Hecate came through the castle's gateway to lead Macbeth to the witches. By Welles' last act, the

witches had penetrated as far as Lady Macbeth's chamber... Having begun the play by casting a spell over Macbeth alone, they closed it by entralling the entire court. The pattern of their steady encroachment, the relentless extension of their influence, redefined the shape of the play's action and transformed *Macbeth* from a tragedy of character into a melodrama of supernatural imperialism," (411-412).

\* \* \* \* \*

"Voodoo" *Macbeth* was indisputably a commercial success. As John Houseman recounts, it "played for ten weeks at the Lafayette with never an empty seat, then downtown at the Adelphi...for an additional run of two months," (203). Following this happy reception in New York, "*Macbeth* was sent on a triumphal national tour of WPA theatres," (Houseman 205). As much as it appealed to the masses, *Macbeth* received mixed reviews from several of the more influential dramatic critics of the time. Brooke Atkinson of *The New York Times* gave a wavering appraisal. He was particularly fond of the treatment of the witches, praising it as "logical and stunning and a triumph of theatre art," (France 71). On the other hand, he felt the delivery of the language left something to be desired, stating: "They speak the lines conscientiously, but they have left the poetry out of them," (Houseman 201). Houseman found this criticism laughable, given the fact that "...Welles had gone to such pains to accomplish this with his Negro cast: the elimination of the glib English Bensonian declamatory tradition of Shakespearean performance and a return to a simpler, more direct and rapid delivery of the dramatic verse," (201).

Percy Hammond of the conservative Herald Tribune wrote, “The Negro Theatre, an offshoot of the Federal Government and one of Uncle Sam’s experimental philanthropies, gave us, last night, an exhibition of deluxe boondoggling,” (Houseman 202). And yet it’s clear in the language alone that this is “not so much of a review as an attack on the New Deal,” (202). Aside from the obligatory accounting for taste that any production must encounter in the face of reviewers, “Voodoo” *Macbeth* had to contend with the critics’ own political agendas.

I believe Welles’ “Voodoo” *Macbeth* to be completely well-intentioned and groundbreaking in that it was the first main-stage production of a Shakespeare play to be performed by an all Black cast. However, I feel I would be remiss if I did not mention some of the more problematic aspects of the endeavor. Marguerite Rippy speaks to this in her essay “Black Cast Conjures White Genius: Unravelling the Mystique of Orson Welles’ *Macbeth*,” detailing the “troubling blend of racially progressive politics and racially insensitive opportunism on Welles’ part that are characteristic of the production as a whole,” (Rippy 83).

Rippy asserts that Shakespeare’s England regarded Scotland as a brutal, savage land, much as Welles’ audiences might have considered post-colonial Haiti under the reign of Henri-Christophe (83). As a result, he has, “been criticized for reenacting white colonial fantasies of race. Indeed Welles incorporated modernist fantasies of the primitive into his “Voodoo” *Macbeth*, even as his production encouraged multiracial social agitation,” (Rippy 84). I believe it is important and valuable to consider that something socially relevant as well as economically stimulating for a suffering demographic, can at the same time reinforce a white fascination with black exoticism. Although I don’t

believe Welles' *Macbeth* can be rightly accused of "performing blackness" in the minstrel sense, there is something unsettling about a white, American male director attempting to access an oppressed culture.

Bernice Kliman refers to the production as "paternalistic" as a result of having "white men in the positions of leadership," but goes on to report that "years later the black staff members very readily affirm, in oral histories, that they had full confidence in the talents of Houseman, the director of the WPA's Negro Theater project, and Welles," (Kliman 88). However, despite Welles' and his genuinely progressive politics, best of intentions, and the full support of an all black cast and crew, contemporary (white) audiences perhaps weren't totally prepared for classical theatre performed "without concession or reference to color," (Houseman 184).

Kliman speaks to the "White reviewers' racism" that "can be inferred from the comedy they discovered in the brilliantly-clad ballroom dancers, served champagne by liveried footmen; it seems that they could not accept as serious the idea that Negroes should be waited upon by other Negroes," (89). Rippy, too, mentions that, "failing to appreciate the psychological complexity of Welles's overall adaptation...the word 'amusing' keeps popping up in their reviews—a word not normally applied to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," (87).

Even well-meaning journalists of the time appeared to fumble, as we can see from Martha Gellhorn's description: "...these Negroes had taken Shakespeare to themselves and that *Macbeth* would remain in this audience's mind from now on, as a play about people living in a Haitian jungle, believing in voodoo, frightened and driven and opulent people, with shiny chocolate skins, who moved about the stage superbly, wearing

costumes that belonged to them and suddenly belonged to the play...The lines were spoken without Negro accent, but in those beautiful voices made for singing; and the gestures were lavish, but not amateur or overdone,” (Houseman 201). Gellhorn meant to laud the production for its universality and ability to transcend cultural boundaries, but to read her words from a modern perspective, one cannot help but balk at her patronizing tone and reference to outdated stereotypes.

Conversely, Edward R. Murrow in his *Stage* magazine review found the production itself to be offensive, citing “an insidious ‘blackface attitude,’ one that not only disregarded but burlesqued the ‘truer emotional roots’ of the Negro people,” (France 70). Murrow’s position is in some ways quite progressive, but he goes on to editorialize about the nature of the Negro condition, speaking to “the passion, beauty, cruelty, suffering, aspiration, frustration, humor, and, yes, victories of a deeply emotional race,” (France 70). Even the liberals of the era can’t seem to avoid a note of racial condescension when attempting to discuss their own cultural criticisms.

Aside from these examples and Kliman and Rippy’s more general descriptions of white reviewers’ difficulty taking a “Negro” *Macbeth* seriously (despite the very serious, and sometimes terrifying, treatment of the material by Welles and cast), John Houseman tells a personal anecdote in his autobiography about a critic “tactfully” requesting that he and his wife not be seated “next to Negroes,” (198). As tactfully as the request might have been delivered, it would be completely unconscionable for a critic to do anything of the sort today. I am not suggesting that it is at all appropriate in a 1936 context, but the anecdote itself speaks to the differences between what could be comfortably uttered in Jim Crow era America versus the current political climate.



Considering how much we have advanced in terms of racial politics over the past eighty years, it is understandable that we would feel a measure of discomfort when confronted with subject matter that is both progressive and undeniably dated. That said, I think it is also important to consider this work within the context of its time. In 1930s America, the idea of Black actors performing Shakespeare was the subject of ridicule. It had hitherto only been done in blackface, serving to capitalize comically on the absurdity of the concept. Houseman and Welles treated their production of *Macbeth* with a sensitivity, seriousness, and artistic pride that undoubtedly encouraged the theatrical community to appreciate Black performers outside of the burlesque context to which they had been typically relegated.

Of particular interest to me, and I shall end on this quote, was a review included in Houseman's autobiography from the "militant Negro journalist" Roi Otley: "The Negro has become weary of carrying the White Man's blackface burden in the theatre. In *Macbeth* he has been given the opportunity to discard the bandana and burnt-cork casting to play a universal character... From the point of view of the Community, Harlem witnessed a production in which the Negro was not lampooned or made the brunt of laughter. We attended the *Macbeth* showing, happy in the thought we wouldn't again be reminded, with all its vicious implications, that we are niggers," (202).

## Chapter Three: Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*

The works of Shakespeare, along with many other Western writers, were first introduced to Japan during the Meiji era (1868-1912). This was considered a period of great enlightenment and, as Erin Suzuki details, a time when "...there were two distinct yet related approaches toward the influx of Western culture: the first one was awe and inquisitiveness, in which the Japanese were eager to copy and adapt that knowledge to become a powerful and respected presence among Western nations; while the second attitude found the Western perspective to be a useful tool for addressing domestic concerns, such as reforming feudal hierarchies and an out-of-date, corrupted government," (94). The European Age of Enlightenment had occurred over a hundred years prior and grappled with a lot of problems currently facing Meiji era intellectuals. Among these were the will of the individual self versus the collective needs of society, the hazards of tyranny, and the struggle to break ties with superstition and oppressive religious dogma in the quest for new knowledge.

Although there was an immediate fascination with Western literature and philosophy, incorporating this into the fabric of Meiji era culture proved difficult. "As Japanese society suddenly found itself coming to terms with these new ideas of the self

and the radical potential of individualism, the young intellectuals of the Meiji era felt a particular affinity in the early Renaissance writings of Shakespeare, which were written during and in response to an era faced with a similar conflict between a traditional past based upon hierarchal group identification and potentially dangerous new ideas about the individual self that threatened to destabilize and undermine the existing social structure,” (Suzuki 94). It’s no surprise that those directly benefiting from the feudal hierarchy were extremely critical of the Western influence. The pervasiveness of free thought that characterized the Meiji era was short-lived, as Japan soon began a period of increased militarization. In the time spanning the beginning of the First World War through the inception of World War II, Western thought became more and more politically controversial, until the Interior Ministry banned it outright (Suzuki 94). During the war, heavy censorship was directed towards any Anglo-American material in books, newspapers, television and films. Anything deemed suspect was excised.

The loss of the war began a twelve-year period of American occupation. The ban on Western art and subject matter was lifted, but the occupying forces implemented their own thematic restrictions. Any films that could be construed as communistic or in any way seditious were outlawed. Also forbidden was anything that seemed to glorify or celebrate Japan’s feudal and militaristic past (Suzuki 95).

It became clear that Western democracy had its limits and American liberalism in Japan extended exclusively to ideas that “complied with the political goals and ambitions of the United States,” (Suzuki 95). There was hypocrisy implicit in this double standard, complicated by the quickly implemented political democracy, which did little to change the existing hierarchical social structure. Japanese liberals and intellectuals became

increasingly disillusioned and critical of the American reconstruction, which “left much of the conservative old guard in control of the bureaucracy and infrastructure of the government,” (Suzuki 95). Despite the passionate rhetoric of a new dawn and a promise of a democratic, demilitarized utopia that the occupying forces brought to the defeated, impoverished nation, the Japanese people saw very little true reform in the years that followed.

Kurosawa first intended to start work on a version of *Macbeth* in the late forties, but when Welles’ upcoming film adaptation was announced, he decided to put the project on hold. Almost a decade went by before he began production on his own re-imagining of the play, *Throne of Blood*. It’s worth mentioning that this is the English renaming and that its Japanese title—*Komonosu-jo*—literally translates to “Spider Web Castle.”

Shakespeare scholar and Kurosawa enthusiast Robert B. Watson suggests a parallel between the dethroned emperor Hirohito and his Duncan counterpart in *Throne of Blood*, Lord Tsuzuki. Kurosawa’s *Macbeth* (known in the film as “Washizu”) thus embodies the anger, ambivalence and cautious optimism of Japan during the period of post-war American occupation. This can be seen in *Throne of Blood*’s version of Act I, scene 2, when the wounded captain reports to Duncan about *Macbeth*’s bravery and the general state of the uprising they are attempting to quell.

In Shakespeare’s original text, Duncan is effervescent and flattering during this scene, proclaiming *Macbeth* both a “valiant cousin” and “worthy gentleman” (I.ii.24) and later telling the captain, “So well they words become thee as thy wounds,/ They smack of honour both,” (I.ii.43-44). Lord Tsuzuki, *Throne of Blood*’s Duncan counterpart, is far less amiable and emotive. His cold expression barely changes over the course of his

encounter with the captain. Watson speaks to how Japanese audiences would have recognized this subtext: “Emperor Hirohito’s failure would have been coded in the passivity of the Great Lord in the face of imminent defeat, and the force of modern Western consumerism would have been visible in the blind hunger of Washizu, who does not yet quite recognize the deadly labyrinth into which it might be leading him,” (12).

Although I intend to expound further on *Throne of Blood’s* brilliantly violent ending later on, it seems pertinent to note that Watson goes on to reinforce the ambiguity of this conclusion in light of political relevance, “Washizu [cannot] quite understand, right up to his dying moment, how he was caught (as tragic heroes so often are) between the commands of two contradictory cultural imperatives,” (12).

In reading the original text of *Macbeth*, the character of Duncan is made to seem nothing if not honorable. His benign, paternal qualities make him appear a most innocent victim of the thane’s treachery. And yet Arthur Levinson points out that Holinshed (whose *Chronicles* served as Shakespeare’s main source material for *Macbeth*) describes Duncan as “so gentle of nature and negligent in punishing offenders that ‘seditious commotions arose,’” (Levinson 28). I think Shakespeare was sensitive to this interpretation in that Duncan makes himself vulnerable to Macbeth’s betrayal in the wake of another Thane of Cawdor turning against him and aiding in a Norwegian siege. Duncan is shocked to hear of this man’s defection and describes him as “a gentleman on whom I built/ An absolute trust,” (I.iv.14-15). Duncan is clearly trusting to the point of his own peril. The age-old adage, “Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me,” comes to mind.

And yet, the fact that Duncan's venerable passivity is repaid by being murdered in bed by a man he'd just promoted makes him a pretty sympathetic character. In a subtle, yet crucial, departure from the original plot, Kurosawa's Tsuzuki is less innocent, in that he seized the throne only after slaughtering his own master. This adds an additional element of moral ambiguity that illustrates Kurosawa's own contentious relationship with the exchange of one regime for another.

In *Macbeth*, Kurosawa saw a parallel between medieval Scotland and medieval Japan, and set his adaptation during a particularly bloody period in Japanese feudal history, "when samurai warriors first rose up to challenge the authority of the established court," (Savas 19). Kurosawa found himself, in Erin Suzuki's words, "appropriating the narrative of fate versus free will from the context of the politics of the Jacobean Era and applying it to the politics of postwar Japan," (96). The medieval setting certainly didn't diminish its contemporary relevance. When a journalist inquired if he was trying to ask philosophical questions in his films or was purely interested in their entertainment value, Kurosawa answered, "I look at life as an ordinary man. I simply put my feelings onto film. When I look at Japanese history—or the history of the world for that matter—what I see is how man repeats himself over and over again," (Richie 115). This idea of repetition, particularly of mistakes, is one of the major themes of *Throne of Blood*.

Kurosawa prided himself on his use of modern and experimental filmmaking techniques, despite the stale, formulaic tradition of the Japanese *jidaie-geki* or "period pictures." Donald Richie describes these as "highly colored but meaningless historical excursions...content to repeat the cliché, to commemorate the meaningless gesture,"

(Richie 115). Kurosawa, despite producing several loosely classified “historical dramas,” was certainly never content to repeat the cliché.

In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa combines medieval Japanese history (a mainstay of the *jidaie-geki* genre) with Hollywood filmmaking techniques and a contemporary political sensibility. *Macbeth*, as source material, is distinctly Western, but the heavily stylized imagery and staccato rhythm of *Throne of Blood* draw significantly from traditional Japanese Noh theatre. The result is a rich, intercultural tapestry that cannot be molded to fit any one genre.

Although certainly historical and dramatic, *Throne of Blood* is a highly suspenseful thriller, sometimes crossing the line into pure horror. Although the characterizations and sparse set dressings are greatly influenced by Classical Japanese Noh theatre conventions, Kurosawa’s deliberate use of shadow to highlight motifs of dark versus light come from his admiration of American film noir.

The most controversial aspect of *Throne of Blood* as a *Macbeth* adaptation is its complete abandonment of the original language. This sparked a heated debate, particularly between the literary and film communities. Marsha Kinder writes, “In the dialogue concerning the adaptation of Shakespeare to the screen, Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957) is a pivotal film because it polarizes critics—usually according to which medium they feel the greatest allegiance,” (Kinder 339).

Film critic, historian and theorist Stephen Prince says of Kurosawa’s use of *Macbeth* in *Throne of Blood*, “He recognized that the process of adapting literature to the screen is not one of translation but of transformation,” (Prince 142). Conversely, literary critic Frank Kermode doesn’t consider it a true adaptation, describing it as “an allusion to

rather than a version of *Macbeth*,” (Kermode 328). Peter Brook, falling somewhere between these two worlds, lauds *Throne of Blood*, as “a great masterpiece, perhaps the only true masterpiece inspired by Shakespeare,” (Reeves). Although Brook is undeniably enthusiastic about the film’s power and artistic significance, he goes on to state that, “it cannot properly be considered Shakespeare because it doesn’t use the text,” (Reeves 69).

I would make the argument that what *Throne of Blood* lacks in text (there's very little dialogue in the film at all), it makes up for in a dense, deliberate visual language. Kurosawa uses film (a medium obviously unavailable and probably inconceivable to Shakespeare) to give *Macbeth* a new voice.

When considering Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in terms of cultural heritage, it is hard to imagine the play outside of an Anglo-Saxon context. It’s no wonder that it is known in theatrical circles as “The Scottish Play.” *Macbeth*’s Scotland is as vulnerable and tormented as any of the play’s characters. Macbeth and his lady’s moral decline and day of reckoning are paralleled by Scotland’s descent into anarchy.

In Act 4, Scene 3, in a lengthy exchange between Macduff and Malcolm, they speak of Scotland like a beloved and suffering kinsman. Macduff bemoans the state of their fallen “birthdom,” “Each new morn/ New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows/ Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds/ As if it felt with Scotland and yelled out/ like syllable of dolour,” (IV.III.4-8). And later, “Bleed, bleed, poor country,” (IV.III.32). The laments continue: “O Scotland, Scotland,” (IV.III.100), “O nation miserable!” (IV.III.104). When Ross enters the scene, the first thing Macduff inquires about is the state of Scotland, even before his own wife and children. Ross woefully



replies, “Alas, poor country,/ Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot/ Be called our mother, but our grave,” (IV.III.164-166).

It seems only natural that for Kurosawa to re-imagine *Macbeth*, his self-proclaimed “favorite Shakespeare” (Richie 115), for a Japanese audience, he would have to find a way to link it inextricably to Japan itself. Classical Japanese Noh theatre provided the perfect framework within to do so. Kurosawa spoke to Donald Richie about the richness and cathartic power of Noh drama, “I like it because it is the real heart, the core of all Japanese drama. Its degree of compression is extreme, and it is full of symbols, full of subtlety. It is as though the actors and the audience are engaged in a kind of contest and as though this contest involves the entire Japanese cultural heritage,” (Richie 117).

Noh drama emerged during the Muromachi period (1336-1573) and “embodies the classical aesthetic ideal of simplicity-as-complexity,” (McDonald 125). The stages are constructed from untreated wood with a permanent backdrop adorned with a simple, green pine tree. Props are used sparingly and are often simply-rendered suggestions of items for which the audience must infer an identity. “For example, a bamboo frame patched with white rice paper here and there becomes any type of boat or ship...A fan, often carried by the protagonist, serves many purposes: folded, it may be a sword; opened, it suggests a tray or a traveling hat or the like,” (McDonald 126).

In addition to its aesthetic simplicity, Noh plays revolve around two basic character types: *shite* (the protagonist) and *waki* (the deuteragonist). Noh actors wear masks that represent certain stock characters, such as *yaseonna* (the old woman), *shiwajo* (the villainous old man) or *hannya* (an enraged female demon) (Morita, the-noh.com).

There are a wide variety of Noh masks and although the expressions are static, they bring with them a complex emotional history. I have simplified the descriptions of the masks above, but there is a distinct pathos behind these stock characters, linked to legends, folk tales, historical events, and several hundred years of Noh performance. The *shakumi* mask, for example, although fairly neutral in composition, represents a middle-aged woman who is tormented by loss, sometimes of a man, most often of a child (Savas 21). A Japanese audience would be aware of the individual characterizations of these masks as soon as they appear on stage, but there is potential for them to become much more when in action. “Depending...on the illumination and to a great extent the actor’s physical movement, the static mask is capable of expressing a multitude of emotions,” (McDonald 126).

In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa urged his actors to draw inspiration from the Noh style of performance, “I wanted to use the way Noh actors have of moving their bodies, the way they have of walking, and the general composition which the Noh stage provides,” (Richie 117). Richie offers some insight as to why Kurosawa felt that this highly ritualized mode of expression was so appropriate for his vision of *Macbeth*, “The way the actor moves, the way he uses his body, is prescribed, conventionalized...It is the limitations of character which interested Kurosawa in this picture; the Noh offered the clearest visual indications of these limitations,” (Richie 117).

In order to adhere to the aforementioned “general composition [that] the Noh stage provides,” Kurosawa departed from contemporary filmmaking techniques. Mimicking the perspective of a Noh audience, he heavily restricted any camera movement. It was difficult for Kurosawa’s associates to fully understand this

minimalistic concept. As he recalls to Donald Richie, “There are very few close-ups. I tried to do everything using full-shots. Japanese almost never make films this way and I remember I confused my staff thoroughly with my instructions. They were so used to moving up for moments of emotion and I kept telling them to move back,” (121).

Richie speaks to the alienation that this style impresses, making the case that moving the camera forward “suggests empathy.” Meanwhile, the full-shot “disengages the viewer and allows him to see cause and effect, “ (121). Judith Buchanan asserts that it “helped to determine both the film’s dominant aesthetic and its approach to character,” (75). Indeed, the level of detachment that this directorial choice creates seems to reinforce the idea that these characters are mere symbols of man’s folly, doomed to repeat the same mistakes. The chorus that opens and closes the film (another Noh convention) tells a cautionary tale of a man corrupted by ambition, ultimately murdered by his own treachery and doomed to walk the earth as a restless spirit. The chorus, in both epilogue and prologue, plays over images of a “once mighty” fortress, now reduced to burial mounds. This suggests a level of inevitability that casts a dark shadow over the narrative. We, as an audience, know from the beginning that Washizu will surely meet a bitter end. Rather than encourage us to accompany the characters on their emotional journey, Kurosawa’s use of the full-shot creates an impenetrable distance, almost as though the audience exists in another realm. We are voyeuristic spirits watching this bloody, predictable, mortal tale unfold with morbid curiosity.

Kurosawa reserves one of the few close-ups in the film for the final moment of reckoning: Washizu’s death from a hail of piercing arrows, delivered by his own men. This climactic scene departs greatly from the tightly controlled pace and restricted

movement of the rest of the film. Washizu becomes a terrified, trapped animal, desperately running from end of the fortress to another, as more and more arrows penetrate his armor. The wooden ramps rattle loudly as he clumsily attempts to careen out of the way of the onslaught. The whistle of flying arrows ends in a tinny thud as they hit the castle walls. An arrow pierces Washizu right through the neck, the *coup mortel*, and suddenly there is nothing but silence, stillness. The camera moves in to frame Washizu's shocked mask-like expression. Hitherto so assured of his own, almost god-like, exceptionalism, only in this moment, his last, does he become fully aware of his own mortality. This is the closest the audience will ever get to him, a shared knowledge of the ultimate futility of his pursuits. And then he's dead, relegated to the throngs of restless warrior's spirits, searching for what can never be found.

The supernatural elements of *Macbeth* do not create as much of an obstacle for Japanese audiences as they do for their Western counterparts. *Kaidan*—or ghost stories—hold somewhat of a cultural fascination in Japan and are common subject matter from medieval drama through contemporary cinema. One particular category of Noh (called *mugen* or “phantasmal”) presents stories that blend “natural and supernatural planes of experience,” (McDonald 128). It is from this tradition that Kurowsawa draws inspiration for the world he creates in *Throne of Blood*. Thematically, Noh is “suffused with issues of the resolution of the pain or agony of restless, wandering spirits, both living and dead,” (Zarrilli, et al. 114). *Macbeth*, with its insidious, otherworldly undertones, and its exploration of the costs of bloody ambition (obsession, madness, and subsequent death), certainly shares some of the major tenets of traditional Noh drama.

Although Japanese audiences are used to dramatic renderings of spirits and demons, they would be confounded by the Elizabethan concept of witches displayed in the original *Macbeth*, born out of the Christian tradition. Instead, Kurosawa draws from a well-known Noh drama in his treatment of this plot element. He consolidates the Weird sisters into a single crone, perched at a spinning wheel in a sparse, reed hut, buried deep in the labyrinthine forest. The hut itself is structurally similar to a Noh stage. The old woman at the spinning wheel is an allusion to the play *Kurozuka*, or *Black Mound* (Macdonald 130).

In this story, two itinerant monks, engaged in a long journey, seek lodging for the night at the home of a destitute woman. Although she has very little to share, she welcomes them in and entertains them by singing a long lament about her hardships, meager means, and meaningless existence, all while continuously spinning a hem thread on a spinning wheel. Later, she ventures out of the hut in order to collect firewood to warm her guests. Before doing so, she warns them not to look in her bedroom. One monk's curiosity gets the best of him and he peeks into this forbidden chamber, discovering a pile of human skeletons. The monks attempt to flee but are pursued by the woman, now appearing as an angry demon (in a *hannya* mask). She almost chases them down but is ultimately subdued by the power of the monks' prayers (Savas 22).

As in *Kurozuka*, Miki (the Banquo counterpart) and Washizu also find themselves surrounded by piles of skeletons, just as the spirit disappears in a flash of light. It is clear from the helmeted skulls that these bones belong to casualties of wars past. To me, this suggests that humans are actually capable of far more heinous acts than demons of lore. What makes the *Kurozuka* plot much more complex than your average morality play is

that it illustrates elements of weakness in all of its characters. It is the old woman's kindness and hospitality that allows the itinerant monks shelter from the elements, and they (as monks, existing as symbols of supposed piety and self-control) repay her by explicitly disobeying her orders and giving in to their own petty curiosity. It is only after this betrayal that rage drives her to assume the *hannya* incarnation. By returning to their Buddhist practice and praying her into submission, they are effectively cleaning up their own mess. The humans in this story aren't merely victims of a ruthless, bloodthirsty demon; they are arbiters of their own fate. The demon itself is lonely, forlorn, and deceptively humane.

In *Throne of Blood*, the witch at the spinning wheel is singing, in the low, monotonous style associated with Noh. Her song is thematically similar to the chorus, lamenting the weak, vain nature of man, enslaved by his desires and easily corrupted by power. This bit of poetic irony falls on deaf ears. Washizu and Miki pay no attention to the witches' words and threaten her with violence until she addresses them by name and begins her prophecy. As in the original text, the spirit tells Washizu he will be king (or in this case, the Great Lord) and Miki, without ever taking the throne himself, is destined to father kings. The immediate change in these men's relationship is illustrated in the following scene, when they finally make it out of the forest. They rest in the grass, framing the caste between them, and have a series of awkward false starts as they attempt to discuss the events that just transpired. They laugh off the witch's words but it's already too late. The seed of treachery has been planted and the cycle of terror has begun.

Robert Watson points out another interesting aspect of the imagery surrounding the crone in mentioning the similarities between her spinning wheel and a film projector,

“linking the moment reflexively to its medium, with the implication that the biographies of these men (deluded by desire into believing they have free will) are already scripted, as part of the cycle of life, “(25). As Watson briefly touches on, this “meta-cinematic” (25) element could be Kurosawa’s answer to Macbeth’s famous “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...” speech, particularly the last five lines, “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/ And is heard no more. It is a tale/ Told by an idiot,/ full of sound and fury,/ signifying nothing,” (V.v.23-27). Even as Kurosawa is attempting to create something powerful and relevant in his approach to *Macbeth*, he acknowledges his own limitations. The idea that history repeats itself, so thematically prevalent in *Throne of Blood*, only indicates how futile it is for the artist to attempt to rail against human nature. These stories are retold for a reason.

Another of Kurosawa’s “meta” allusions to this speech can be seen in the banquet scene, as Washizu and his guests are being entertained by a *kyogen* dancer (*kyogen* are the comedic interludes traditionally performed between Noh plays). This performer echoes the sentiments of the chorus and tells the tale of a man, corrupted by ambition, driven to violent treachery, and ultimately doomed to a similarly bloody end. As Erin Suzuki describes, “Like Claudius confronted with the Mousetrap play in *Hamlet*, Washizu demands at this point that the performance be halted; however, he appears to act not out of a sense of guilt or fear of being discovered but as if he no longer wants to watch his own fate played out before him. The play that is being performed in front of him recapitulates the same script through which he has been destined to play,” (97). Clever nod to *Hamlet* aside, this moment in the film directly precedes the introduction of

Miki's ghost. Washizu has been working so hard to maintain composure in the face of his own heinous acts that it is as if this encounter with the *kyogen* dancer has shattered what little sanity he has clung to. In this moment, confronted by his own bleak future (as familiar a story as any fairy tale), he begins his descent into madness.

This incident with the *kyogen* dance further illustrates the horrible predictability of Washizu's nefarious rise and rapid decline. As Suzuki writes, "This narrative invocation points simultaneously to both the future and the past; it is a story of a recurring cycle, a relentlessly repeating play acted out by different characters through the ages. Just as it accurately represents what had happened to Tsuzuki at the hands of Washizu, so the story condemns (and accurately predicts) Washizu's swift ruin, brought by his 'debt of royal treachery,' at the hands of his own men," (97). Perhaps Washizu has heard this common, cautionary tale before, but this time it had a personal resonance. Up until this moment, he was convinced that his version would turn out differently, that he would break the cycle, defy fate. The *kyogen*'s parallel narrative, innocent though it is, is one of many bad omens that Washizu will willfully ignore over the course of his deterioration.

The appearance of Miki's ghost, clearly an agitated delusion, only reinforces Washizu's sense of imminent doom. The moment he hears the witch's prophecy, he falls prey to the folly of vain hubris and ceased to have control over his own destiny. With Asaji acting as an agent of evil (or more benignly, fate), Washizu is doomed to create a web of his own design, a web that will inevitably trap him.

In *Throne of Blood*, the boundaries between the human and spirit world have been blurred. Asaji, Lady Macbeth's stone-faced Noh counterpart, is immediately established



as an agent of evil. For much of the film, she is shown in the kneeling position, in eerie similarity with the witch of the woods. As in the original *Macbeth*, Asaji volunteers to drug Tsuzuki's guard's wine. In a surprisingly terrifying scene, she disappears into a room that is enveloped in complete darkness, from the audience's perspective. The camera lingers on the blackened doorway until she emerges seconds later in what hardly seems like enough time to accomplish her task. It's as though she crossed into another realm to procure the drugs that will ultimately condemn two innocent men. Asaji's lust for power has rendered her inhuman.

She is the character who is most heavily constricted by Noh convention. As Donald Richie describes, "...she is the most limited, the most confined, the most driven, the most evil. She moves, heel to toe, as does the Noh actor; the shape of Isuzu Yamada's face is used to suggest the Noh mask; her scenes with her husband have a very Noh-like composition, and her handwashing is pure Noh drama," (117).

Undoubtedly in order to elevate this element of "pure Noh drama," Kurosawa imbued his *Lady Macbeth* with another level of hysteria by introducing the stillbirth subplot to his adaptation. As aforementioned, the loss of a child was a familiar precipitating event to female insanity in Noh drama. The *shakumi* mask was developed specifically to embody this particular type of untamed devastation. In Asaji's handwashing scene, following the birth of her dead son (chillingly described by the nurse to Washizu as "dead inside of her," as though her body was too cold and forbidding a place to foster life), her face is contorted to form the exact expression that Japanese audiences would be able to identify as *shakumi*, the mask of a woman deranged by loss.

And yet, neither Washizu nor Asaji is afforded the release from torment that provides the typical catharsis in Noh drama. The handwashing scene shows Asaji at her most pitiable, probably in that it's the first time we've seen her in distress, or express any emotion other than the cool, conniving demeanor with which she effortlessly casts her spell over Washizu. Her movements in the handwashing scene are repetitive and robotic, as is the sparse dialogue, giving the foreboding sense of infinity. This image is the last we see or hear of Asaji, thus, we are left picturing her in a cruel limbo of her own design, just as Washizu is doomed to walk the earth as a restless warrior.

## Conclusion: The Importance of Adaptation

### Freedom

What makes Shakespeare, and *Macbeth* in particular, such fertile ground for adaptation is its mutability in the face of contemporary issues. *Macbeth*'s appeal is so broad that its influence extends far beyond that of its original medium. This is something that has been celebrated and enjoyed by audiences spanning four hundred years and, therefore, it feels reductive to argue about what constitutes an appropriate level of reverence to the original text. As any Shakespeare lover will tell you, his world extends far beyond the page.

Art is made to push boundaries and challenge us to consider things (images, history, ideas etc.) from a different perspective. I believe that the fact that Shakespeare's works still inspire so many artists is reverence enough. I know it is spurious to attempt to make claims as to what Shakespeare himself would feel about some of the more daring adaptations of his plays ("Voodoo" *Macbeth* and *Throne of Blood* included) but I believe that his own relationship with his source material indicates how liberal he was on the subject. Shakespeare took historical and literary works such as Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Brook's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet* and transformed them into two of

the most famous and beloved works of the western cannon. I doubt he would experience anything but pure delight to see these works continuing to be crafted, cut, stretched and framed in a way to make them available to new audiences.

I was not drawn solely to these two productions for their exceptional entertainment value, although that certainly made the task at hand more alluring. Both “Voodoo” *Macbeth* and *Throne of Blood* were created during, and in response to, specific periods of political and social turmoil. It is especially compelling to me that these works are representative of two very different cultures, grappling with very different issues at separate moments in time.

Kurosawa encountered a fair amount of criticism from his contemporaries for his choice to delve into classical material rather than focus on the “reality” of current Japanese social unrest. Why dust off an old volume like *Macbeth* when there were actual strikes and picket lines and political uncertainty to document and comment on? I don’t believe Kurosawa, always bold in his assertions, was shirking any responsibility to real-world Japanese issues. He simply used Shakespeare as a framework to within which to express his attitude towards real-world Japanese issues.

Iterations of the phrase, “Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it” have been attributed to both philosopher George Santayana and statesman Winston Churchill. In some ways, this ambiguity strengthens my case. Regardless of who might have written or uttered this phrase for the first time, it has certainly proven itself to be true. By re-appropriating classical works for a modern audience, Welles and Kurosawa turn the act of adaptation, in and of itself, into a cautionary tale. Why does *Macbeth* beckon to us still after four hundred years? Because it is a story that repeats itself over

and over again, and has since the dawn of humanity. Weak, even good, men are still susceptible to blind ambition, ruthless pursuit of power, and violent hubris. In some ways, *Macbeth* ends happily, in that justice is served. As far as the world of the play is concerned, the forces of evil are eradicated and the righteous heir is restored to the throne. And yet, it is never wise or interesting to take Shakespeare at face value. Both Welles' and Kurosawa's adaptations of the play, although vastly different in their delivery, point to a far more insidious interpretation.

Welles and Kurosawa were inspired by contemporary events, and yet chose to set their adaptations in different epochs from their own. They conceived of parallels that drove *Macbeth* into hitherto uncharted territory. They chose to highlight historical similarities beyond medieval Scotland and their own modern, worlds. In doing so, these productions testify to the breadth and scope of Shakespeare's potential. His catalogue continues to inspire new, relevant and challenging works of art, that, in my opinion, only serve to enrich Shakespeare's brilliant legacy.

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