

Cultural Interpretations of Agency in Film Adaptations of *Macbeth*

Macbeth is one of William Shakespeare's most interesting plays, inspiring a diverse array of critical opinions and film adaptations over the years. Perhaps the most interesting and puzzling question raised by this play is the question of agency. Who is controlling the action? What makes Macbeth commit regicide to gain the throne? What causes his downfall? There seem to be four possible answers: 1) Macbeth controls his own fate, and is driven by his own ambition; 2) Macbeth's actions are primarily influenced by Lady Macbeth; 3) Macbeth's fate is being controlled by supernatural forces, specifically the three witches and Hecate; and 4) Macbeth's ambition, his wife's suggestion, and the witches all work together to drive the action. While much critical energy has been spent looking at this question, there has been no consensus amongst critics. Equally valid arguments have been made for each of these answers to the question of agency. It seems Shakespeare's play only raises this question, but does not provide an answer.

However, when carefully viewing film adaptations of *Macbeth*, it becomes apparent that most filmmakers offer an answer to the question of who is controlling the action in the play. One of the most fascinating interpretations of agency is offered by director Akira Kurosawa in *Throne of Blood* (1957), an artistic adaptation of *Macbeth* that strongly reflects the Japanese culture in which it was produced. Kurosawa's film has generally been well-received by western audiences since the early 1960s, with some critics calling it the most successful Shakespearean adaptation on film. The film has received a thorough critical inspection over the years, as critics tried to

examine how it reflected Japanese culture in terms of Japanese theatre convention, post-World War II Western occupation, and samurai culture. However, little research has been done to examine the cultural significance of Kurosawa's interpretation of agency – especially with regard to Buddhism. The following essay examines the filmic interpretations made by Kurosawa regarding this question of agency in his adaptation of the play. Drawing on auteur theory and branching out into cultural semiotics, I analyze the different ways in which Kurosawa manipulates and go beyond Shakespeare's text to support his interpretation. Literary theory and the application of a New Historicist lens allow me to determine how the director's choices reflect the culture in which the film was produced. It is apparent in the film that Kurosawa views the action in the play as being fated, and controlled by supernatural powers. I will show how this interpretation is informed by Buddhism.

To do so, I will examine the witches' prophecy in the play and film to show how it can inform an interpretation of agency. In Shakespeare's play, the prophecy scene and the scenes surrounding it serve to make an interpretation of agency difficult to pin down. In *Throne of Blood*, these scenes show that the action is fated. For comparison's sake, I will look at Rupert Goold's *Macbeth* (2010), which uses these same scenes to support an interpretation of the character of Macbeth as the primary agent in the film. Then I will examine the cultural significance of these scenes in Kurosawa's film.

The most important part of the play to look at when examining a production's interpretation of agency is the witches' prophecy to Macbeth in scene 1.3, as well as the scenes leading up to it. In scene 1.2 of Shakespeare's text, after hearing of Macbeth's success in battle, King Duncan announces to Ross and others that he will name Macbeth the replacement of the treacherous Thane of Cawdor. So when the witches prophesy Macbeth's future to him in scene

1.3, saying “hail to thee, Thane of Glamis,” “hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor,” and “thou shalt be king hereafter” (Shakespeare), the only one of these predictions that has not come true yet is Macbeth’s ascension to the throne: it is already decided that Macbeth is Thane of Cawdor; he just has yet to hear about it. So when Ross, later in 1.3, announces that Macbeth has been named Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth readily believes (but not the reader/viewer of the play) in the witches’ ability to see, and possibly influence, his future. This hinders our ability to determine who the agent is in the play: this scene undermines the credibility of the witches, but if they are not really super-natural beings who influence or predict the future, then what is their purpose?

Examining how the different adaptations handle these scenes is crucial to understanding their interpretation of agency in the film. Kurosawa manipulates these scenes to support his interpretation of the action in the play as being fated. In *Throne of Blood*, Kurosawa recasts Shakespeare’s play in civil war-torn feudal Japan. Using none of Shakespeare’s original language, Kurosawa instead uses visual images to convey the same meaning as the poetry of Shakespeare’s words (Crowe 44). So instead of Banquo, Macbeth, and Lord Duncan, we have the samurai Miki, Washizu, and Lord Tsuzuki. Washizu and Miki come upon the forest spirit in a clearing, after wandering, lost in the forest (in Kurosawa’s film, there is a single androgynous forest spirit, rather than three witches). When the forest spirit prophesies that Washizu will be named Master of the North Castle (i.e. Kurosawa’s equivalent of Thane of Cawdor), it is the first time we hear about this in *Throne of Blood*. Kurosawa completely cuts out the scene in the play where Macbeth is named Thane of Cawdor before hearing the prophecy. So when Washizu is named Master of the North Castle following the prophecy, the prophet gains credibility in our eyes, as well as Washizu’s. The rest of the film follows this same vein of agency. As John Gerlach points out, all of the long moments of introspection and soul-searching are removed in

Throne of Blood; from this point on it, it is a world of cause and effect where “acts are performed in mitigating circumstances” (Davies 155); where, as Anthony Davies points out, the inevitable fate of ambitious men is sung about by the chorus to begin and end the film (155).

Another interesting way Kurosawa makes it known that the action of the play is fated is by the behavior of the forest at the beginning of the film. Before Washizu has given any thought or made any move toward killing Lord Tsuzuki — before the seed of ambition has even begun to flower in his mind — Kurosawa shows us that Washizu is an enemy to the castle. This is evident in the fact that the forest knows Washizu is the castle’s foe before he does. We later learn that the forest causes enemies of the castle to become lost and confused; and Washizu and Miki are the very picture of confusion when we meet them in the rainy forest as they gallop wildly in circles, completely lost. Miki laughs, and jests that the forest protects the castle against its foes. “Though perilous to our foes, surely we know the forest well,” replies Washizu. The fact that they wandered the forest they knew so well for two hours would seem to suggest that the forest was protecting the castle from them. Washizu then shoots an arrow into the air, as if attempting to bring down the clouds producing rain. This is met by a shrill, mocking laughter from an unseen voice, in response either to Washizu’s statement about the forest, or his vain attempt to slay nature. Miki and Washizu then hurry through the forest, Miki thrusting his spear and Washizu shooting arrows into the trees, as the disembodied voice continues to laugh. The laughter ceases as they arrive at the clearing of the forest spirit. It appears the forest and the forest spirit are either working together or are one in the same, and both know Washizu’s fate.

Goold handles these scenes very differently in his rendition of *Macbeth* in order to support an exact opposite interpretation from Kurosawa’s in *Throne of Blood*. Goold interprets the action as being controlled by the character Macebth, and uses these scenes to undermine the

witches' supernatural credibility even further than does Shakespeare. In the scene prior to the prophecy, one of Goold's witches enters the frame just as Duncan tells Ross that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor. That scene in particular undermines the witches' credibility as agents in the play, as the audience discovers that they are not actually predicting that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor, but are merely reporting information that they have already overheard. This sequence lines up well with the rest of the film; when the witches' supernatural credibility is debunked in this way, it makes more sense that Macbeth himself is the main agent of the play, an idea that makes itself felt throughout the film, and culminates when blood falls on Macbeth's shoulders when he and Lady Macbeth are shown traveling in an elevator after they have died.

Now that we have determined Kurosawa's interpretation of agency, it is time to look at the aspects of Japanese culture that informed it. I will be focusing on the song the forest spirit sings as Miki and Banquo approach in wonder, which I believe is one of the most important aspects of the film to investigate in order to understand Kurosawa's interpretation of agency from a cultural standpoint. Most people in Japan practice a mixture of Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism, and other religions, while identifying themselves as Buddhists. Buddhism was the primary religion in Japan, both during the time *Throne of Blood* was produced, and in the 15th or 16th century where the film is set (Prince 124). Buddhism makes its presence felt in the film through the use of the Buddhist-influenced Noh theatre, but also in several themes, most of which are alluded to in the forest spirit's song. These themes concern adherence to the Buddhist ethical code, karma, and the vanity of human struggle.

Towards the end of the forest spirit's long song, it mentions "Fate's Five Calamities," singing:

“Humanity strives

All its days

To sear its own flesh

In the flames of base desire

Exposing itself

To Fate's Five Calamities.”

There does not seem to be any criticism of Kurosawa’s film that examines what is meant by the phrase “Fate’s Five Calamities.” Besides obviously reinforcing the message of predetermination by including the word “fate,” this passage may have even more meaning with regard to agency and Japanese culture. The phrase “Fate’s Five Calamities” apparently does not directly come from Buddhist teachings, or the teachings of any other Eastern religion, as far as I can tell.

However, it is possible that Kurosawa adapted a Buddhist teaching and changed the wording to reinforce its importance. The Five Precepts is the basic Buddhist code of ethics that is expected to be followed by all lay-Buddhists (monks are expected to follow a stricter set of either eight or ten precepts). Upon entering into Buddhism, new Buddhists take a vow to abstain from harming living beings, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and consuming intoxicants (*Encyclopedia of Buddhism*). It is worth noting that Washizu breaks at least four of these five precepts over the course of the film. He harms living beings when he murders numerous people; he steals when he takes the throne via unjust means; he lies when he pins the blame of Lord Tsuzuki’s murder on other samurai; and he becomes drunk the night he sees Miki’s ghost. There is no verifiable sexual misconduct in the play; but it is rather suspicious that Asaji (Washizu’s wife) is suddenly

able to get pregnant when she needed to after Washizu indicated that they were sterile. The five precepts are part of the foundation of the path to obtaining enlightenment in Buddhism, and within the context of the play, straying from this path is fated to end badly (in calamity).

Working together with this ethical code of five precepts to help form Kurosawa's vision of cause-and-effect in *Throne of Blood* is the Buddhist concept of karma, which the forest spirit explicitly mentions, citing humanity's propensity to "heap karma on karma." While we have a loose idea about what karma is in the Western world, Buddhists ascribe to the doctrine of karma; it is not something that might happen; rather, it is a law that is fated to happen. According to this doctrine, the events in a person's life are determined by what they have done earlier in their lives, or in a prior life (*The Encyclopedia of Buddhism*). We don't know when we receive retribution for our karma, but it is certain to happen one day. A person's karma is shaped by how they behave ethically; it follows that deviating from the ethical vow of five precepts mentioned earlier would result in bad karma.

Karma is also largely shaped by how we behave towards others. The results of our actions are not necessarily factored in when calculating out karma, but rather our intentions are. So if we conduct ourselves with good intentions toward others, it is fated that good things will happen to us; and if we do bad things, bad things will happen. This idea is exemplified in *Throne of Blood*. Once Washizu kills Tsuzuki to gain the throne, the action was fated to end badly, as it does for Tsuzuki, who killed his master before him for the wrong reasons. Interestingly, the karma in *Throne of Blood* is all negative. There is not one instance of good intentions being rewarded with positive results; instead, the film portrays an endless cycle of badly-intentioned acts leading to unfortunate consequences.



The overall theme of the forest spirit's song, and of *Throne of Blood* as a whole, is the vanity of human suffering. Buddhism is a religion that teaches that life on earth is a vale of suffering. The goal of Buddhists is to find an end to this suffering. To accomplish this, Buddhism calls for introspection and the contemplation of spiritual matters. At all times, Buddhists try to lessen their dependence on the world — and on existence — in order to come to terms with death. Meditation is a way for Buddhists to conceptualize themselves as independent, not only of the world, but also independent even of their own thoughts. The Forest Spirit sings about harmful influence of “base desire” that humanity so eagerly invites into its life. Ambition and greed are some of the base influences that only strengthen the world's hold on us and increase attachment to the world. Washizu gets too caught up in these earthly pursuits, and when he does, he is fated to fail. *Throne of Blood* illustrates what happens to people who get too caught up in the worldly pursuit of power.

The circles that the forest spirit spins are important to this interpretation, because they are one of many instances of symmetry in the film. The film itself has a certain symmetry. It begins and ends with a view of the ruins of the castle enveloped in fog, and songs warning about the dangers of ambition. The scenery within frames is often symmetrical. All of this symmetry seems to point to the recurring nature of the story being told: There is a cycle in the whole plot of the play. Lord Tsuzuki, who Washizu later kills in order to become ruler, killed the ruler who came before him. This shows the cycle of killing to gain power that repeats itself in the film (which is why Kurosawa's setting of a war-torn feudal Japan is very fitting), while the chorus warns that it will continue beyond the film. It is as if this endless chain of karmic retribution is being symbolized by the wheels that the forest spirit turns. It is important to this interpretation of agency that it is this supernatural creature who is spinning these circles, and controlling the speed of their cycles.

All of the above shows that Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* interprets agency as fated and controlled by supernatural powers, and that this interpretation is shaped by Buddhism. The Kurosawa's film is still receiving critical attention today is a testament to how effectively his massive creativity, blended with and influenced by his culture, created a new work of art independent of Shakespeare's base text, and worthy of being studied in terms of its own culture. *Throne of Blood*'s lofty reputation above all other Shakespearean film adaptations should provide a blueprint for directors about what works when adapting literary works and what does not. Kurosawa showed that questions of fidelity should not be considered in adaptation, because a new work of art should be creative, and not simply do the exact same thing as a source text, just in a different medium. How can there be a new aesthetic experience for the viewer if he or she simply watches the play he or she just read? The new work needs to significantly break away

from its source in at least one way: examples include Kurosawa placing *Macbeth* in feudal Japan, or Taymor placing *Titus Andronicus* outside of time. This significant break does not only have to occur in terms of setting or scenery or characterization, but, like Joe Wright's *Anna Karenina* (2012), an adaptation can stay true to all of those things, and make its break in interpretation, genre, or storytelling conventions. The only sure way for an adaptation to fail is for it to eschew creativity for fidelity at every turn. In *Throne of Blood* Kurosawa made something new and culturally significant, and that is why it is still worth studying 50 years later; it is hard to imagine that the same will be said of some of the more recent, more faithful Shakespearean adaptations that have been produced.

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