

Three UK based Film-Adaptations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT: *Film adaptations open up new possibilities of self-discovery for a film director as they provide him a chance to transmute his own creativity with that of the source text. The same case is with Shakespearean film adaptations. While exploring Shakespeare's multiverse, each filmmaker voyages towards self-fulfillment. Since Shakespeare himself was an important part of popular culture right from his own time and till now, there could be significant differences in the films based on a single play. Macbeth was one of the plays that make Shakespeare fascinating and is distinguished by the generosity of its literary insight. Macbeth is one of the ideal examples of Shakespeare's classical tales which have great influence on masses belong to any age. The present paper seeks to offer a comparative study of three acclaimed UK based films inspired from Macbeth. The point, here, is that the directors of these three films belong to the same culture- but they have translated the play in their own way while making certain additions and omissions. They have updated the 16th century's play in the contemporary scenario. However, in spite of such diversity of approach, there is ultimately a basic unity in the directors' response to Shakespeare. The films have chosen for the comparative analysis are- Macbeth (1978) by Trevor Nunn, Macbeth (1997) by Jeremy Freeston and, Rupert Goold's Macbeth (2010).*

Introduction

In 1978 Trevor Nunn directed a *Macbeth* film that is often considered the definitive *Macbeth* film. This film stars Ian McKellen and Judi Dench. It was adapted from a Royal Shakespeare Company stage production of *Macbeth* that was wildly successful. Nunn stays very true to the text and its language - the interplay of light and dark is more than obvious in his *Macbeth*. The stage itself is dark. But Duncan and Malcolm are dressed in stark white, standing out in glaring contrast both to the background and to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (the latter who is almost continuously dressed in black, almost like a nun).

In this production we would have regarded such a recantation as simply "natural" to the order of things (Duncan being after all, portrayed as if he were a martyr/savior/saint-like figure). The possibility of Macbeth's impotence and the sexual taunts and temptations of his wife thus

play a large role in defining the production of Nunn's *Macbeth*. The language of manliness and manhood played such a powerful role in the depictions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and the chemistry and passion between the actors and their characters was so overwhelming that it was clear that Nunn was attempting to play up Lady Macbeth's role in driving (even taunting) her husband to prove himself a man and not impotent that we can clearly see the truth in Lady Macbeth's statement that her husband's nature was too generous and kindly to carry out the dark deed that might occurred to him and can clearly understand her decision to be his strength and in pursuit of that "unsex" herself (Hatchuel 2005:32).

Jeremy Freeston's 1997 *Macbeth* is much more realistic in style and displays more visual elements by creating parallel or interior - mental dimensions. The film starts with a bloody, realistic, medieval battle that ends as Macbeth kills the Norwegian king in slow motion, thus emphasizing from the beginning his status as a hero. As Banquo (Graham McTavish) and Macbeth (Jason Connery) ride through the wood, the film offers a romantic vision of Scotland, highlighting the wild, fine-looking nature around the characters with romantic shots of greenery, little streams, and other idyllic landscapes. This film projects another reality - a parallel dimension created through color filters or an interior dimension created through subjective visions and voice-over. The act of showing seems to call for (or go together with) an absence of objective reality. There are shots of beautiful Scottish landscapes, of clear, unpolluted brooks and hills with peaceful fauna, perhaps to highlight what will be "lost and [not] won" henceforth, not so much as a result of the evil designs of powerful forces beyond comprehension, but as the consequence of human inability to break away from the cycles of blood— more specifically, of a flaw identified in the film as *Scottish* (Arkai 1999:4-5). From a wholly different vantage point with regard to its driving forces, Freeston's film may be located politically within the Scottish nationalists' movement and aesthetically within the British tradition of the heritage film. It is the type of film that belongs in the "period" genre (ibid.).

In 2010 Rupert Goold presented his film on *Macbeth* with the eponymous name. The actors were Patrick Stewart as Macbeth, Kate Fleetwood as Lady Macbeth, Paul Shelley as Duncan, and Martin Turner as Banquo. While staying faithful to the text of the play he makes good use of the camera and its tricks. Goold chose to tell the story with Macbeth as a dictator cultivating a cult of personality in the 1940's. A Stalinist dictatorship fit the story fairly well, and using the typical tropes of fascism and Stalinism served to illustrate the degeneration of the country as Macbeth rose to power. Goold has taken all the best ideas from the earlier film adaptations, added all the latest technical innovations, combined the most brilliant original ideas, and synthesized all into a visually stunning and dramatically devastating presentation of Shakespeare's poetry. Goold's take on of *Macbeth* is to make it even more horrific, freely mixing bone-chilling supernatural shivers with vicious warmongering, Machiavellian politics, and psychological unease and technological intrusions.

Macbeth's relationship with Lady Macbeth is showed not a relationship based on love, but, as Stewart himself said "complete enthrallment". She was much younger than him and possessed a very powerful sexual vitality. He was obsessed with her, almost dependent on her

and completely incapable of standing up to her. As Macbeth rose to power in Scotland, he also gained power in their relationship, until she was under his control by the end, watching as he executed the murders of Banquo and Lady Macduff without her. Her descent into madness was beautifully done, but again, didn't elicit much sympathy. As with Macbeth, the power came not from sympathy, but from the entrancing power of depravity.

Nunn's *Macbeth* did contain an indication at the end of the play that not all would be well after it, by having Macduff carry out two daggers in his hands (after having killed the tyrant Macbeth) in the exact same way Macbeth himself carried them out of Duncan's bedchamber after his murder - an image of history repeating itself over and over, and violence begetting violence. But Goold's production sowed the seeds of doubt and foreboding dread from the very beginning of the play - an impression only reinforced by seeing Malcolm grasp the trophy of Macbeth's bloodied and severed head with unnatural ardor and glee at the very end of the play (Hatchuel 2005:36). Apart from the overall production, however, Nunn's *Macbeth* and Goold's *Macbeth* seemed to differ in their portrayal of the two main characters themselves: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. It's hard to encompass in words the oceans and seas that part the two depictions of the two characters. It must be said that no one will in the foreseeable future ever top Judi Dench's depiction of Lady Macbeth. Her performance of the character was utterly mesmerizing and by the force of her performance she made herself so central to the play that following her it was hard to ever imagine Macbeth doing what he did without the strong influence of his wife - a bar that unfortunately the Lady Macbeth in Goold's *Macbeth*. But it was not so necessary to Goold's *Macbeth* that Lady Macbeth be a strong character and should in fact melt away from the main thrust of the action as the play progressed. For if one thing differed greatly between the two plays it was the supposed motivation driving the downfall of Macbeth himself.

There was less that was noble about Stewart's Macbeth than creepy, cruel, yet powerfully compelling and charismatic; in contrast McKellen's Macbeth seemed to grow in nobility as the play went on - his inner strength and growing acceptance of his fate and consequence of his action marking an inner ascent of the character from the man who came trembling like a leaf out of Duncan's bedroom after the murder to the one who, as he realized that the witches' prophecies have betrayed him and led him to his doom, seemed to accept and welcome it with a quiet strength that seemed to have grown as his wife faded. The contrasting ascent and descent played by McKellen and Stewart in bringing their ideas of Macbeth to the stage was fascinating to note and the play versatility and capacity for so many interpretations of its main character can only be described as subliminal. Unlike most other *Macbeth* movies, however, Jeremy Freeston's *Macbeth* claims, even on the cover of its DVD case, to be "authentically set in eleventh century Scotland" and to "conjure a world of grim battlefields, desolate moors, forbidding castles and haunted caverns". To date still almost totally overlooked by both general and specialized critics, Freeston's *Macbeth* may be viewed on the one hand from a, say, "theoretical-filmic" perspective and very likely found "foul", as well as, on the other, from a broader, more contemporary "cultural" stance whereby it may turn out to be rather "fair". Although we all probably know where *that* leads, it may yet be worth the while to explore both options, since this picture is,

more than a rarity, the one filmic take on *Macbeth* that dared look for ways to relate to Shakespeare's greatest monster strictly from within its site of origin.

Among its characteristics are narrative realism and an emphasis in representing the past in a visually accurate manner—in other words, they “record” the past on film “neutrally”, with photographic “naturalness”, even to the illusion of effacement of the very material signs of filmic production. The moments to which the heritage film returns are generally sites or texts of decisive significance to the British sense of nation: Austen, Forster, World Wars I and II, the Elizabethan era, Shakespeare. As the film turns the past into a site of visual fulfillment, the politics of the original texts may be completely lost or under-stressed—in the case of filming Forster, for example, his incisive class critique; in that of filming the World Wars, their very facts *as wars*—for these films are not interested in history in the same way as a historian might be, but in using history to inform a present version of the nation (Rothwell 1999:86).

Freeston seems intent on transferring a great deal of agency to Lady Macbeth, with a clear agenda to support the weight of the transfer. For example, like Polanski before him, Freeston chooses to show the killing of the King, and does it with a similar choreography: Macbeth looks down on the “unguarded Duncan” until he wakes up between stupor and surprise to recognize the traitor and be stabbed by him. Freeston actually makes us follow *his* Lady Macbeth back to the murder scene. All this was filmed in the context of late 20th century Scotland, a nation at present actively and excitingly in need—and in search—of transformation from what it became not only in the English-friendly chronicles that provided Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with plot and general dramatic input, but in its history and self, mainly since the 11th century: a site of constant struggle between original and incoming powers. Freeston's *Macbeth* is aesthetically and politically closer to films like *Braveheart* than it is to being a ‘faithful’ adaptation of Shakespeare's play; it is probably more interesting for what it deliberately misrepresents than for what it represents. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as we know it- as we *imagine* that we “know” it every time we imagine knowing it -must always remain a matter for “tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow”, otherwise we'd lose all sense of its “nothingness” (Arkai 1999:8). The three witches are also depicted in different ways. For example Nunn's *Macbeth* played them rather traditionally in their garbs as an old hag, a woman and a young girl - and everything about them was as witch-like as one would expect. Goold's production though, surprised and delighted in its depiction of the three witches as three nun-like characters who instead of disappearing for long periods remained essentially constantly on stage as nurses, servants, waitresses and the like. There is so much else that could be said about both productions, of course. Stewart's *Macbeth* seems to possess the seeds of darkness within himself and his descent into tyranny and cruel madness is made clear even from the murder itself, where he stares wildly around him and points, essentially asking his wife if she too can hear the voices that say “sleep no more, Macbeth” (a precursor, so to speak, of his “mad” sighting of Banquo at the banquet).

Conclusions

Macbeth is never “done when it is done”. It is a play of voices originating in private “fears and scruples” violently thrown against a frame of public conflicts and interests —a tale of shaken minds engaging the affairs of state and beyond. The three films discussed above are an ample example of vital diversity in creative appropriations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in UK- his homeland. All the three directors share the same ethnicity but their interpretation and representation is different. With each production different things are brought to attention - different elements of the play that might not have seen before. For national culture is a dominant factor for a translator, he interprets the text in his own style artistically while imposing his own self in his respective film. Every film director has a different view of projecting her image of the story. Hence it is obvious that there can be few or more departures from the source text: personal feelings and experiences may be included to transmute the literary piece for the film. With inevitable irrelevance, updating the 400-years old play, these three films transmit the same themes and feelings of the original texts successfully.

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