

## 74. Trauma and motivation in Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth*

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### Abstract

Film adaptations of Shakespeare's works face the unique challenge of interpreting the texts in a manner that would propel the unique qualities of the medium that allows it to convey multiple layers of meaning through the cinematic language of editing. The wealth of available interpretations from the timelessness of Shakespeare's works is especially applicable to the cinematic medium as the methods of conveying meaning and expression increase exponentially with the camera as a free-moving entity around time, spaces, and characters. With the exception of Kenneth Branagh's full-text adaptation of *Hamlet*, most directors make additions and subtractions to the original plays in order to convey their specific interpretive vision. Australian film director Justin Kurzel's 2015 adaptation of *Macbeth* is one that, while being set physically in the historical past of the original play, presents relatively modern psychological concepts with regard to war and its traumatic consequences, as well as the trauma of loss and melancholia. This study analyzes Kurzel's additions and subtractions to the source material, as well as the cinematic language utilized to convey how the trauma of loss, post-traumatic stress disorder, and the death drive work as motivational narrative thrusts for the actions Macbeth and Lady Macbeth undertake.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, Macbeth, Trauma, Psychoanalysis, Justin Kurzel

### Justin Kurzel'in *Macbeth* filminde travma ve motivasyon

#### Öz

Shakespeare'in tiyatro oyunlarının film uyarlamaları, sinema sanatının türü geređi oluřan bir takım imtihanlarla karřılařır. Bir yönetmenin başarıyla asırlar önce yazılmıř bu zamansız oyunları metnin ve sahnenin sınırlarından çıkarması ve türüne has olan sinematik dil yani montajı kullanarak orijinal metinlere anlam katmanları eklemesi de bu imtihanlardan biridir. Sinematik kameranın zaman, yer ve karakterler etrafında özgürce hareket eden bir etken olması, sinema sanatını Shakespeare'in oyunlarının zamansızlıđına ideal bir uyarlama aracı yapar. Kenneth Branagh'ın tam metin *Hamlet* uyarlaması istisnası dıřında, Shakespeare uyarlamaları çeken çođu yönetmen orijinal metinlere kendi vizyonları yönünde eklentiler ve çıkarmalar yapar. Avustralyalı yönetmen Justin Kurzel'in 2015 yapımı *Macbeth* uyarlaması, orijinal oyunun tarihi bağlamını korumasına rađmen izleyiciye savařın ve kaybın travması ve melankoli gibi nispeten çağdař psikolojik konseptler sunar. Bu çalıřmanın amacı Justin Kurzel'in yaptıđı eklentileri, çıkartmaları ve kullandıđı sinematik dili inceleyerek, filmin travmayı, travma sonrası stres bozukluđunu ve ölümlerini, Macbeth ve Lady Macbeth'in merkezi motivasyon unsuru olmalarını göstermektir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Shakespeare, Macbeth, Travma, Psikanaliz, Justin Kurzel

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From the very onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the media and popular forms of artistic production as global economic entities have shifted modern political and social discourse towards the devastating aspects of current existence, and their equally devastating consequences. This century is one that is overwhelmingly dominated by the presence of war, climate change, exacerbating conditions of life and the existential void into which millennia of human progress is cast into the abyss of exploitation and greed. During these times of crisis, it becomes clearer that there is a collective discursive drift towards the impossibility of achieving peace, equilibrium of ecological life, and equitable material conditions of existence. Whether this news media or artistic drift towards hopelessness occurs through intentional design or an opportunistic attempt to seek relevance accompanying the zeitgeist, the general cultural forces at play seem to indicate a generation that was birthed into trauma and exploitation. It is within this current contextual cultural production that canonical works deemed timeless reappear, adapted according to the sense and sensibilities of the new era that summons them to the forefront of artistic discourse. Shakespeare's plays have achieved that sense of mythical timelessness, and regardless of the specificity of their historically contextual dealings, have been adapted in ways, on stage and film, to appeal to the contexts they are produced.

*Macbeth* is a play that overtly deals with a grandiose sense of morality, and how the clash of actionable human will with fate interacts with notions of morality. Historically, it is a play that celebrates the ascendance of James VI to the English crown as James I. The subtextual elements of violence, war, and murder exist to supplement the grander themes of agency and action, fate, and morality. What is lost among the grander themes, at least on a purely textual basis, arguably is the psychological depth of the characters involved. The readers, dealing with nothing but the text of the play, are at a loss for the source of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's ambition for the crown; and in a facetious, overt reading of the text, are led to believe in the omnipotence of the prophecy told by the weird sisters. The loss of the more human elements in the face of grandiose themes, however, is compensated for in the various adaptations of the play that have changed throughout the centuries as the directors and actors assumed control of the text. Subtle changes, whether they are additions or subtractions, have added a significant degree of human character and psychological depth to the text of the play.

On that note, film as a medium, through various techniques that have developed over the decades, operates in a more liberated sense with regard to playing adaptations compared to theater. As opposed to the emphasis on the presence of the stage, with an omniscient audience observing all, film directs the viewer's gaze to specific aspects through the filmic language of editing and the art of its cinematography, with shifts in camera angles that have implied meanings, as well as tactful editing and cuts. While it is possible for a stage director to assign specific actions that align with speech lines to actors, it is another thing to shift the object-focus of the viewer's gaze. Director Justin Kurzel's recent film adaptation of *Macbeth* (2015) makes changes to the text that might be considered simultaneously subtle and shocking, and adds layers of depth to the characters that might not overtly appear on an initial reading of the play.

The play opens with the lines "When shall we three meet again?/In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" (Shakespeare 1623/2013, 1.1.1-2), spoken by the first of the weird sisters. The opening scene of the film, and notably, Justin Kurzel's most shocking addition to the text, involves a funeral procession. The scene opens with a high-angle shot of a dead child, pale with marks of disease on his skin, and cuts to a mid-shot of Lady Macbeth (played by Marion Cotillard) and Macbeth (played by Michael Fassbender) standing in the middle of a crowd, all dressed in funeral garments. The two approach the child's body, and Lady Macbeth sheds tears while Macbeth looks stoically despondent. The child's body is set on fire, presumably following the customs of the time, and the camera cuts to a medium close-up of the two

characters giving each other support. Justin Kurzel, in a complementarily bold gesture, initiates his film adaptation with the Macbeths' loss of their sole heir. There is a sudden cut from the funeral procession to the weird sisters overseeing the town under Macbeth's domain, and only then do we encounter the first lines of the play. The text's opening with the weird sisters, which implies their overarching control over the fate of the characters involved at the expense of individual choice and reasonable motivation, is undermined, and replaced by a sense of loss that will hauntingly resonate throughout the adaptation.

The following scene after the Weird Sisters speak their lines and vanish into the mist focuses on Macbeth, whose face is covered in scars and war-paint (scars which will remain conspicuous throughout the film) leading an army through a misty battleground. The camera focuses separately on older, experienced soldiers as well as armed youth barely out of their teenage years. The scene is set up in a way that creates an oppressive ambience, mirroring the final lines of the first scene "Fair is foul, and foul is fair;/ Hover through the fog and filthy air" (Shakespeare 1623/2013, 1.1.12-13). The older, experienced soldiers begin assisting the young ones by arming them in preparation for the upcoming conflict, and the camera shows specific attention to Macbeth carefully fixing a youth's hand to his sword with a bandage. The ensuing conflict, shown in all its gritty splendor, is extremely visceral, violent, and brings viewers to bear the sickening savagery of battle. During the heat of battle, Macbeth aids the traumatized youth that he helped arm earlier and notices the weird sisters in the horizon. There are no lines exchanged, yet the battle in the background happens in slow-motion, as the camera cuts between Macbeth, the observer, and the Sisters, the object of his gaze. After a brief pause, the slow-motion breaks, and instead of the Sisters, we see Macdonwald on the horizon with two guards. It is at that moment when we are introduced to Duncan and the captain, as the scenes cross-cut between Macbeth fighting and the bloody captain describing the slaughter to Duncan. Duncan himself seems shocked by the violent descriptions, almost matching the reactions of the viewer to the battle they are simultaneously being subjected to. The scene ends with the beheading of Macdonwald and Duncan himself carrying out the execution of the traitorous Thane of Cawdor.

These two initial scenes of the film are interpretative shifts to the text explicitly made by the director himself and serve to highlight aspects of the play that aren't immediately, or ever visible to the readers of the text. Instead of the implied, seemingly omnipotent control the Sisters have over the play with their opening lines and eventual prophecy, we are introduced to situations which would add layers of psychological depth to the characters themselves. The first operative psychological level is that of loss, mourning, potential melancholia, and trauma occurring from the loss of a child for Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. The psychological distress upon Macbeth is then doubled by the extremely visceral nature of the battle scene. The ease by which Macbeth violently dispatches his foes on the battlefield implies that he is a highly skilled and experienced warrior who has seen many battles. The director Justin Kurzel has stated in interviews that he wanted to create a Macbeth who was haunted by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and the violent battle which suddenly comes to a halt as it enters slow-motion with Macbeth staring at the distance (despondently, again), is strongly indicative of that. The Sisters' appearances in both scenes associate the events happening in them with their position as textual overseers of fate. Yet instead of a grander conceptual narrative of fate, the viewers are left with realistically human underlying notions of loss leading to melancholia, hysteria, manic-depressive states and post-traumatic stress disorder leading to obsessive repetition and the overriding subconscious control of the death drive as the psychological stimulants upon which the rest of the actions of the play are predicated.

Lady Macbeth, as a character purely based on the text of the play, appears to be a kind of demonic individual, with no motivational reason to inspire Macbeth to the regicide which will initiate their grim

downfall into further violence, isolation, and their eventual deaths. Kurzel's insertion of a dead child that presupposes the actions of the play, however, manages to shine a more psychologically believable light to her character. The viewer's introduction to her lines happens in a small chapel, and her reading of Macbeth's letter. She stares at the cross fixed on the altar as she chants "Come, you spirits/ That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,/ And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full/ Of direst cruelty" (Shakespeare 1623/2013, 1.5.47-49). It is important to note that this segment is filmed with a high angle, implying an appeal to a higher power, which in this case, is the audience's judgment as well as the contextual God being appealed to in the scene. Kurzel presents an awareness of a widespread, conventional presumption towards the character of Lady Macbeth, and is calling attention to that presumption and sense of viewer/reader judgment in this scene. Her desire to be "unsexed" not only stems from the preset loss of her child, but from a grander patriarchal discourse that defines her recently-failed role as a mother as she appeals to both a cross and to the viewer's judgment.

Lady Macbeth's speech at the start of Scene 5 is then shifted from the chapel to after she meets Macbeth. She states "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be/ What thou art promised. Yet do I fear they nature;/ It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (Shakespeare 1623/2013, 1.5.15-17) directly to Macbeth, with a tone of voice and scene blocking that implies seductiveness. She kneels down and looks up, as the camera angles shift in a way that intentionally places Macbeth in a more dominant position, as well as Lady Macbeth's manipulation of that position of dominance. The preparations for murder in the film show Macbeth contemplating his task alone while Lady Macbeth prepares drugs for the drinks, all with a children's choir singing in the background track. The scene then cuts to the feast with Duncan and shows the children singing the track which began in the previous scene; an example of diegetic music that acts as the connective tissue between scenes. Lady Macbeth's appearance in the scene appears to be very maternal, creating a stark contrast between her appeal to God/audience to be "unsexed". It is this maternal appearance that conjures the haunting subconscious existence of her dead child in every scene in which we can observe other children, whether it is Banquo's son Fleance, or Macduff's family. In this sense, the observation of King Duncan exchanging glances with the maternal- looking Lady Macbeth gains another layer of meaning, as Lady Macbeth who has assumed the image of an idealized woman/mother acts as a reminder of what King Duncan lacks by his side. Kurzel's direction in this episode appears to be in line with Mark Thornton Burnett's reading of Lady Macbeth as a woman "trying to realize herself by using the dominant discourses of patriarchy as she lacks an effectively powerful counter-language" (Burnett 1993, p. 2). Lady Macbeth in the film plays into highly masculine expectations, while it is the light seductiveness which is the first appeal to Macbeth, or the maternal image that seems to pacify Duncan, yet subverts them as they are done for the purposes of manipulation in her goals.

Lady Macbeth's motivation, as configured by the death of her child in the beginning, is one that is tied up in classical, and arguably dated, notions of hysteria, mourning and its connection to melancholia as well as the manic-depressive state. Earlier readings and depictions of Lady Macbeth certainly seem to be in line with the equally ancient connection of "hysteria" with the "possessed woman." Notably, it wasn't until Freud that conceptions of hysteria changed from being a symptom of the inability to conceive a child and achieve motherhood to a "lack of libidinal evolution and the failure of conception is the result not the cause of the disease" (Tasca 2012). The concept is further elaborated upon, as the main symptom of hysteria according to psychoanalysis is the "expression of the impossibility of the fulfillment of the sexual drive" (Tasca 2012). This symptom of hysteria has a primary benefit, and a side benefit, which allows the patient "to manipulate the environment to his/her needs...The woman has no power but "handling," trying to use the other in subtle ways to achieve hidden objectives" (Tasca 2012).

This reading of Lady Macbeth seems to be more applicable to the pure text of the play where we don't have the knowledge of a child that was already conceived and died, yet the "side benefit" that aligns perfectly with her actions in Act I are indicative of regression into hysteria. Macbeth's soliloquy that starts with "if it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well/ It were done quickly" (Shakespeare, 1623/2013, 1.7.1-2) is delivered outside the feast near the chapel, during which there are cuts to a drunk Duncan showing his sword to the choir children. This cross-cutting between Macbeth and Duncan's presence as a King who has benefited from violence and war in his display of arms to the purity of the choir boys could be interpreted as Macbeth's internal justification of the regicide he is about to commit. Following this, the viewers encounter Lady Macbeth's second confrontation with her husband, which happens as she drags him from his contemplations and into the chapel. Macbeth caresses her face as he says "I dare do all that may become a man./ Who dares do more is none" (Shakespeare, 1623/2013, 1.7.51-52), yet lets go upon her inquisitive response: "What beast was't,/then,/ That made you break this enterprise to me?/ When you durst do it, then you were a man" (Shakespeare, 1623/2013, 1.7.53-56). She begins by questioning his manhood while bringing her face closer to his. The blocking in this scene works to emphasize the seductiveness that was displayed in their first discussion as Lady Macbeth fully embraces the condition of being "unsexed" from her maternal femininity and utilizes her extrinsic sexuality. She achieves her intended seduction, and discloses the rest of her plan during the sex act, upon which Macbeth climaxes and proclaims "I am settled" (Shakespeare, 1623/2013, 1.7. 92) not only indicating the completion of sex but the acquiescence to Lady Macbeth's plan. It is imperative to note that the scene overtly displays that the orgasm isn't a shared one, and while problematic, is arguably indicative of Lady Macbeth's inability to reach the "fulfillment of the sexual drive."

The main motivation behind the eventual regicide might remain overtly unanswered, yet it lies in the psychic shifts between mourning, melancholia, and manic depression. Freud has associated the manic state with the melancholic one, something further elaborated on by Melanie Klein. He writes that "melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradiction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious" (Freud, 1917, p. 245). While the initial loss of the Macbeths is a very physical one that isn't stemming from the consciousness, Lady Macbeth's claim of "plucking" from her nipple an imaginary infant's "boneless gums" and dashing his "brains out" seems to be one that is withdrawn from consciousness. The manic state, on the other hand, is shown on two levels, as the "manic subject plainly demonstrates his(her) liberation from the object which was the cause of his(her) suffering, by seeking like a ravenously hungry man(woman) for new object-cathexes" (Freud, 1917, p. 255). The prophecy of the Three Sisters is settled conveniently upon the loss of a child, and the new "object-cathexes" becomes the position of Kingship. Klein elaborates on Freud's association of melancholia with the manic state, the most applicable of which is the notion of manic defenses summarized by Hanna Segal as "a triad of feelings—control, triumph and contempt" (Segal, 1998, p. 70). Klein claims that the internalized feelings of "being persecuted and watched by internal 'bad' objects, with the consequent necessity for constantly watching them, leads to a kind of dependence which reinforces the manic defenses. These defenses, in so far as they are used predominantly against persecutory feelings, are of a very sadistic and forceful nature" (Klein, 1940, p. 143). Kurzel's film presents an awareness of these psychoanalytical concepts not only with the additions he makes to the text, but with the bolstering of already existing subtexts.

Macbeth's character is doubly affected by trauma—he has lost his only heir, and his life is one that is steeped in the constant terror of violence. Freud lists the symptoms of melancholia as:

A profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feeling to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (Freud, 1917, p. 244)

Though *Macbeth* doesn't overtly express these symptoms until the end of the play/film, Michael Fassbender's performance of him is certainly marked by several of the listed symptoms. Kurzel's representation of *Macbeth* seems to go along with Burnett's reading, and the loss of his son and heir at the beginning of the film emphasizes the "conflict between the fertile Banquo who produces a line of kings and *Macbeth* who has none, who is left with the empty symbols of royalty and who smoulders in isolation, brooding upon the imminent disappearance of his name" (Burnett, 1993, p. 5). While the text doesn't present *Macbeth* in a way that calls for readerly presumption, the film's visceral battle scene before which there is a specific focus placed on *Macbeth* helping a young soldier and the latter's consequent death in the violence, places *Macbeth* in a kind of manic condition. His "ravenous" search for new object-cathexes manifests itself in his role as the leader of an army and soldiers under him keep becoming new objects of his mental focus. The expansiveness of this manic thrust would result in his ambition to unlawfully promote himself from the position of a leader of an army to the leader of a country—a fixation that would eventually turn him into a tyrant in the film. The trauma that *Macbeth* endures in the film is one that is steeped in constant loss as he witnesses countless of his men die and is shown to be carrying their corpses to a mass funeral pyre with Banquo. It is during the clean-up after the battle that the Sisters approach them and proclaim their prophecy. His initial reaction is one of ridicule, yet we can clearly see his envious gaze as they arrive in town and Banquo is greeted by his son, Fleance. The constant repetition of killing is the source of *Macbeth*'s mental state, as well as his alienation and isolation. It is upon deciding to kill Duncan that a "turning away from reality takes place and a clinging to the object through the medium of a hallucinatory wishful psychosis" (Freud, 1917, p. 244) happens.

On the night of the murder *Macbeth* flashes back to scenes of the battle, and sees the ghost of the dead young soldier at the door, holding up a dagger, initiating his "Is this a dagger which I see before me" (Shakespeare, 1623/2013, 2.1.44) soliloquy. At his mention of "fatal vision," he caresses the youth's face with his hands, who then leaves the room and disappears in front of Duncan's tent. The murder itself is displayed in full brutality, with repeated dagger stabs and blood gushing from multiple wounds. The camera work in the scene is increasingly erratic, cross-cutting between the murder as it happens in rapid dagger strikes and *Macbeth* looking at Duncan's body in the reflection. According to Kevin Curran, the murder is a "sensible crime, not because it's practical or judicious (it's neither), but because it's born of the senses and experienced as sensation. This is not to say that *Macbeth* does not think himself into the criminal event, but that the thinking he does he does with his body" (Curran, 2012, p. 391). The "thinking he does with his body" aligns with Kurzel's representation of him as someone suffering from PTSD as well as his explicit inclusion of the battle in which we are presented with images of *Macbeth* as a mechanical killer. The day following the murder after Macduff discovers the body, he calmly murders the two pages who were unconscious at the time, which is another alteration Kurzel makes to the text.

The culmination of murder and violence leading to *Macbeth*'s eventual mental breakdown appears in the form of the overtaking of the death drive over his life drive, along with a manic-depressive state in which we are brought to bear the trio of mental states of "control, triumph and contempt" (Mills, 2006, p. 7). The death drive is something that "impregnates repressed schemata that find expression in repeating the unconscious material itself as it is happening at the moment rather than remembering what had been an occurrence of the past" (Mills, 2006, p. 7). It is through that schema within which

Macbeth faces both the loss of his son, the loss of his "sons" in the army, and the endless killing he achieves on the battlefield, and "when repressed events take the form of 'fresh experiences' rather than properly ascribing to them the reproduction of the past, the reality is clouded with negativity, affective contagion, paranoid fantasy, and subsequently, qualitative suffering" (Mills, 7). Kurzel's film shows us Macbeth's blending of repressed events taking the form of "fresh experiences" in the form of flashbacks that happen with relevance to the real-time event of the film, hence the ghost of the dead youth who shows him the dagger and disappears in front of Duncan's tent. It is also expressed in the frantic blurring of linear temporality in the act of the murder itself in which the language of the film acquires a chaotic tone, and the murder of a king and the divinity he represents causes a break in the natural order.

The boiling point of the psychological tensions of the play (and the film) is when Macbeth orders the death of Macduff's family in his mental breakdown into monstrous authoritarianism. The film greatly emphasizes Macbeth's tyrannical state, as Kurzel changes the private order of the three murderers from the text of the play to a very public exclamation of execution. It isn't just the murderers who bear witness to the order to kill an innocent family, but his ministers and Lady Macbeth as well. The film shows the family being captured and transitions to a public execution where Lady Macduff and her three children are tied to stakes, with Macbeth wielding the torch himself. This presents a manifestation of the peak of Macbeth's manic state, in his exhibition of the three feelings of "control, triumph and contempt." Seeing the children being burned at the stake also forces Lady Macbeth to recall the memory of her lost son, whose body was also burned in a funeral rite, and pushes her into having her own mental breakdown which precedes her sleepwalking speech. The additional murders is not just a manifestation of Macbeth's manic state, but also that of his death drive, since "before the will to murder exists an insidious self-implosion, namely, suicidal desire. here the banality of death is not just something that happens to us, it is us" (Mills, 2006, p. 1). The resonance of the death drive in Macbeth implies the notion that he subconsciously understands that the initial prophecy of the Three Sisters also spells his death from the very beginning, and is not just a result of his lack of an heir to the throne.

Lady Macbeth's death is when Macbeth finally falls into a mental state between mourning and melancholia, as opposed to simplistic pathological melancholia and manic depression. The symptoms Freud ascribes to melancholia are present in Fassbender's portrayal of the scene. The "lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches" (Freud, 1917, p. 244), however, is not directed to Macbeth's self, but imposed upon humanity as a whole, as Freud explains how in mourning "it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (Freud, 1917, p. 246). Justin Kurzel's ending to the film shows Macbeth actually acquiring the upper hand in his duel against Macduff. Macbeth has his dagger over Macduff's throat, yet when the latter exclaims "Despair thy charm,/ And let the angel whom thou still hast served/ Tell thee Macduff was from his mother's womb/ Untimely ripped" (Shakespeare, 1623/2013, 5.8.17-20), he lowers his dagger, and gives fully into the aforementioned death drive that accompanied the subconscious internalization of the Sisters' prophecy. Justin Kurzel spares Macbeth the inhumane beheading and the glorification of his death in the crowning of Malcolm. Instead, we are presented with a match cut between an isolated Malcolm leaving the throne room with a sword in his hand, and Fleance who goes to the battlefield to Macbeth's corpse and retrieves his sword, leaving the battlefield with a sword in his hand. Kurzel's suggestion seems to be one that leaves us with the continuation of violence as the reigning discourse of the times as well as the times thereafter, leaving victims both guilty and innocent on the sidelines. While Shakespeare's play ends on the celebratory note of Malcolm's crowning and the punishment of tyranny, the film ends in a dreary isolation that matches the contemporary nihilism and desensitization towards global violence in contemporary cultural discourse. Justin Kurzel not only manages to add psychological

depth to the tragic couple, but also manages to make Shakespeare's text relevant to the sentiments of our time, even though the setting itself is historical Scotland. In many ways, it is a much more modern film adaptation of the bard's works than the ones that contain a superficially modern setting.

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