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Kurosawa and the Shakespearean Moral Vision

Andrew M. McLean

Coming to terms with a film such as Kurosawa's **Throne of Blood** (1957) is crucial to the whole question of Shakespeare on film. It not only involves the study of a particular text and film and how the film director has handled Shakespeare's plot, character, and meaning, but it also focuses on larger cinematic issues concerning acting, visual image, and metaphor on film, and the manner in which complex ideas can be expressed visually. Peter Brook has observed that **Throne of Blood** is "perhaps the only true masterpiece inspired by Shakespeare, but it cannot properly be considered Shakespeare because it doesn't use the text."¹ Michael Mullin has put it succinctly by suggesting that Kurosawa's film "is a thing in itself."²

It is commonplace to remark about Kurosawa's transposition of Shakespeare's plot to a radically different Japanese feudal setting, to observe how he has left out the murder of Macduff's family, made Lady Asaji pregnant, and had Washizu killed by his own men. But Kurosawa has done more than this. In his bold cultural translation Kurosawa has left both the intent and effect of Shakespeare's **Macbeth** far behind. The very core of the work has shifted, providing parallel plot situations with new contexts and dramatic implications. If in **Macbeth** Shakespeare explores "man's capacity to commit the acts which violate his essential being,"³ in **Throne of Blood** Kurosawa explores man's capacity to commit acts which define his being. Kurosawa's film, although set in medieval times, explores the moral inaction of modern man who lives in an ethically vacuous world. Unlike Macbeth, whose actions exist within a discernible world view or moral vision generally shared by society, Washizu creates his own values because for him reality is a process of becoming rather than a state of being. The story of Washizu is the story of modern man's quest for meaning in a meaningless universe.

The world of Shakespeare's **Macbeth** is a moral one. Commenting on the violence inherent in Elizabethan tragedy, E.M.W. Tillyard observed how this "has nothing to do with a dissolution of moral standards, on the contrary, it can afford to indulge itself just because those standards were so powerful."⁴ Shakespeare's **Macbeth** clearly exists in a world divided between the forces of good and evil, light and darkness, harmony and chaos, peace and violence, Christian views and pagan views. Regardless of how such opposing forces shape their way through Shakespeare's play, it is essentially a moral exercise we are witnessing. If **Macbeth** is to mean anything to us, we must acknowledge a moral sense which informs the action of the play and by which our sense of the tragic becomes meaningful. The very intensity of the play has encouraged critics to view it as a study in evil or ambition, or fear, or as a morality play. Robert Ornstein rightly comments that the central moral truth of **Macbeth** is "that only a murderer can play a murderer's role successfully."⁵

Kurosawa has deftly removed the play's moral foundation. He retains much of the original chronology and plot but changes the nature of human relations in the film as well as the significance of the supernatural. It is not so much that Kurosawa has given us an oriental interpretation of the **Macbeth** theme (which

he has) as that in the process of transmutation from one culture to another, he has also replaced that theme and placed it in a new context. There is an existential sense of emptiness in Washizu's world which is unknown to Macbeth. Several twists in the plot and critical omissions demonstrate this shift in meaning. Asaji's miscarriage, Kuniharu/Duncan's alleged murder of his master to achieve his position, Miki/Banquo's refusal of entry to Kunimaru/Malcolm, and the murder of Washizu by his own men are significant changes in the plot, while missing are the murder of Macduff's family, the ominous preparation for the final battle (V. iii-v), and the lengthy scenes in England built around Malcolm. Parallel and often transposed scenes and actions take on a new meaning in Kurosawa's context.

The murder of a king or lord in **Throne of Blood** is less horrendous an act when the lord is morally no better than his murderer. The witch's prophecy becomes less meaningful when removed from Shakespeare's Christian-pagan context, and even the whole course of Washizu's murderous act from inception to his own death must be viewed in different light. Washizu's existence can, like the ubiquitous mist of the film, float along in emptiness and despair or grasp onto some part of the world he experiences as desperately as Washizu clutches the bloody murder weapon in his trembling hand. Washizu, like many a modern man, stakes his life on the chances of this earth and against immortality. He must be despoiled of his illusions, fight off despair, and carry his hell within him. In a world which has lost its unity and no longer has a moral vision shared by men, Washizu's world becomes denuded of meaning and value; his isolated existence remains surrounded by hostile and enigmatic forces.

This is the world Kurosawa envisions. He replaces the moral quandary of Macbeth, who after all, acknowledges wrongdoing and that his life has no meaning, not with a Pascalian anguish, but with the acceptance of a destiny that condemns men to death. An existential view, perhaps with oriental parallels, but a view we also find well expressed, in different yet more familiar terms, by Hemingway or Camus or by Ivan Karamasov in Dostoevski's "Grand Inquisitor." The characters in **Throne of Blood** do not react in response to opposing forces that can be discerned; instead, the forces governing the world are seen as arbitrary, even capricious, and void of significance. Donald Richie observes that the world of **Throne of Blood** is governed ruthlessly by cause and effect,⁶ but were this so, then even cause and effect would give life some discernible meaning. In the opening scene of the film we see a wooden gravestone around which mist swirls and about which a chorus chants — the opening sequence, as Mullin suggests, "defines the metaphysics of a strange world in which nothing is but what is not."⁷ This frame device allows us to stop in time to view a past action which, as the chorus comments, is still with us today:

Vain pride then as now
Will lead ambition to the kills.

While the chanting which opens and closes the film may invoke for the oriental audience the traditional theme of medieval battle literature that all is transitory, the choral commentary further suggests the Buddhist belief in the impermanence of all things which can be found in "the same theme of man's vain struggles after transitory pleasure and the knowledge that this is a cyclic struggle which will be repeated endlessly through generations."⁸ Kurosawa adapts this traditional perspective of cyclic history to **Macbeth** by alteration of plot and manipulation of visual themes.

Several of the altered plot lines from **Macbeth** are of critical importance in determining the ambiguity and uncertainty of Washizu's lack of moral vision. Kuniharu's murder of his own master and Miki's refusal to open the gates for the rightful heir suggest that Kurosawa's characters are not as clearly defined in terms of goodness or nobility as are Shakespeare's Banquo or Duncan. While such changes are "gauged to increase our sympathy for Macbeth so as to involve the viewer in an experience more psychologically acceptable," as John Gerlach suggests,⁹ it is more important to recognize how they confuse the issue and obfuscate the alternatives open to Washizu. His choice of action in one sense is more complex and real than Macbeth's because he must first decide what *is* before he can decide what *should be* or what *should be done*. In this sense, Kurosawa gives us "a fresh revelation of the prolonged experience in the manner of Hamlet."¹⁰ Macbeth is a moral creature who, like Shakespeare and his Elizabethan audience, takes the existence of good and evil for granted. When Macbeth chooses evil he is aware of it and accepts the consequences of his decision. Washizu, however, cannot determine what *is*; action for him is always ill-considered.

Good and evil are often measured for Kurosawa's characters in terms of personal sensations and feelings. In modern literature, for example, we have learned to recognize how natural man and the displaced hero are intensely aware of their setting. In a similar way, the setting of **Throne of Blood** is used to objectify the subjective state of Washizu. The forest becomes emblematic of Washizu's mind and further suggests a cosmic attitude in which he lives. J. Blumenthal observes how in this film Kurosawa creates meaning "by the manipulation of reality," and how for Washizu, his first encounter with the forest "is nothing less than a headlong plunge into the self." Washizu fights to leave the forest in the opening scene, threatens to paint it with blood, returns to it when his war council fails to give advice, and is defeated when it moves. The confusion and self-contradictory nature of the forest trails — the labyrinth, as Kurosawa calls it — become for Blumenthal the objectification of Washizu's mind.¹¹ When Macduff leads the avenging army through the forest, he orders them to walk straight ahead: "Do not let these trails deceive you," he warns. Both the forest and Washizu's mental state — his sanity, his order, his meaning — are tangled, dark and twisted. As long as they remain intact, he is indestructible. Washizu's error is to assume that he cannot lose his identity with the forest — his limited sense of self. When Noriyasu's men chop down the forest for camouflage, Washizu's final defense — literally and metaphorically — expires.

Washizu is tied to the physical world he inhabits, and consequently Kurosawa's characters become relative to one another. This is not to suggest, as John Gerlach does, that Miki is simply a double of Macbeth who fails to take advantage of his situation by accident or "smaller physical size."¹² The distinction between Miki and Washizu is suggested by comparing their *mon* or emblem-crests: a centipede for Washizu and a rabbit for Miki. The many legged centipede epitomizes movement and unceasing action while the rabbit, traditionally inoffensive, good natured, and prolific, is meek but startlingly clever. The appropriateness of these emblems and the identification of character with the natural world are visually apparent in the facial expressions of Miki and Washizu as they receive their honors from Kuniharu. Washizu's face is racked with doubt and future schemes (i.e. unceasing action)

while Miki's face is serene, calm, and as expressionless as a Noh mask. Miki always takes the path of least resistance, even to the point of attending Washizu's banquet which turns into his own funeral. The centipede takes a long time to span the leap of the rabbit; perhaps Miki the victim emerges as an alternative to Washizu's violent death. In the course of time, it is Banquo's children who become kings.¹³

The women in the film, Lady Asaji and the old woman of the forest, with whom Washizu is intimately involved, suggest cosmic attitudes between which the hero fails to find a balance. The two women are linked together visually by the eerie light which surrounds them, by their white complexions, and by their similar formal, almost ceremonial, speech, posture, and movement. Even their blackened teeth make their rare smiles appear horribly malevolent. Donald Richie closely associates both women with the formal, closed, ritual, and limited quality of the Noh theatre. While both women are evil characters in the film, the nature of their malevolence is quite different. Lady Asaji, according to Richie, represents a form of supreme rationality in her determination for self-realization which may make life impossible for others and which sacrifices compassion, understanding, and love itself; "Asaji has made up her mind. She knows what she wants. Consequently she denies herself the freedom to change her mind. . . . She gives herself over to cause and effect because she believes in it."¹⁴ The witch, on the other hand, represents a form of supra-rationality through her prophecies. By associating the women with the Noh tradition, Kurosawa is suggesting that "the rite, the ritual, man's idea of the world, the rigid, the formal, the pattern of life endlessly the same — that this is the opposite of the free, the human."¹⁵

Both women encourage Washizu to act unmercifully and they are, by turns, the real instigators of action. And as such they are visually identified in two short sequences when Asaji, disappearing into the blackness of an inner room to retrieve the drugged wine, reappears out of the blackness with a clearly supernatural aura. Or, again, in Washizu's last visit to the forest, the witch appears running down a path above him in a manner strikingly reminiscent of Asaji's running down the passageway and through the courtyard immediately following Kuniharu's murder. Asaji, on first appearance, holds her hands in a formal position. They are, like the witch's hands, excessively large and distinct from her smooth whiteness. One is relaxed and held in a conventional manner, while the other is tightly clenched, as if already involved in action. This image is next repeated in the scene after the murder when Asaji's hands pry loose Washizu's fingers from the blood-stained halberd he has used to kill his lord. It is, remember, with outstretched hand that Asaji, in the sequence just before this, reached out to touch the blood-stained floor and wall of her chamber. Later, in the banquet scene, as Asaji leaves the room after the report of Yoshiteru's escape, she slides open the door and for a moment rests her white hands in a formal position. They are, like the witch's hands, excessively large and distinct from her smooth whiteness. One is relaxed and held in a conventional manner, while the other is tightly clenched, as if already involved in action. This image is next repeated in the scene after the murder when Asaji's hands pry loose Washizu's fingers from the blood-stained halberd he has used to kill his lord. It is, remember, with out-stretched hand that Asaji, in the sequence just before this, reached out to touch the blood-stained floor and wall of her chamber. Later, in the banquet scene, as Asaji leaves the room after the report of Yoshiteru's

escape, she slides open the door and for a moment rests her white hand exposed against the dark panelling. Again, our attention is drawn to her hands, the agents of action. Finally her madness is expressed by a desire to cleanse those hands and to return them to an inactive and untainted state. It is in her madness, a supra-rational state, that Asaji's final and total identification with the witch of the forest is made.

If we accept the suggestion that the forest is the objectification of Washizu's mind, it is important to remember that the witch inhabits this forest as much as Asaji inhabits Washizu's castle. A central polarity in **Throne of Blood**, Jorgens reminds us, is between the forest and the castle.¹⁶ Our initial introduction to the forest is in association with the swirling mist and heavy fog which obscure the trails which guide men. The fog concretely represents the ethically insulatory universe Washizu inhabits, and it dramatically sustains the action of the film much like the movement or non-movement of the women. The witch, sitting at a spinning wheel, offers a visual example. The important element of the spinning scene is precisely that *nothing* is happening. There is no cloth and no thread is produced. We see only the wheels turning slowly around and around and the same thread passing from the first wheel to the second and back again. The camera focuses on the witch's hands. Such action may metaphorically suggest the oriental cyclic view of history, or the occidental concept of fate or the wheel of fortune. In either case, it is indicative of the meaninglessness of any action initiated by Washizu. The increasing motion of the witch's hands and the spinning wheel find their parallel in the constant motions of the protagonist, who is as active as the many-legged centipede of his emblem crest; he is a man whose movements are without substance or direction. Washizu and the witch portray meaningless action. He is like the fog which enshrouds the forest, floating along with no discernible objective, existing in an obscure and undefined reality.

Washizu lives in an agonized awareness of the burden of one's individual existence to oneself. The tragedy in **Throne of Blood** is not realized as it is in **Macbeth** when the hero, perhaps too late, experiences a moment of moral regeneration, acknowledging his folly but unable to stop the forces of retribution his action has initiated. **Throne of Blood**, rather, is a tragedy of limitation and the failure of Washizu to realize the self; the film's "story" exists amid a sense of nihilistic despair in a world where the protagonist fails to create his own values. This sense of Washizu's alienation is heightened by Kurosawa's technique of moving the camera back. There are almost no close ups in this film. "All of the characters are filmed with icy detachment," Jorgens observes, "almost exclusively in medium and long shot."¹⁷ The camera, in fact, "is always furthest away from its characters when they are undergoing the most strain."¹⁸ The camera angle enlarges Washizu's place in time and space within the frame and silently comments on his mistaken ambition. Coached by Asaji, he takes ambition for self-realization. He attempts to make order from his chaotic world through action (murder and plunder), but such a path is limited by the very self it hopes to free. Washizu first realizes that action is arbitrary and capricious when Asaji miscarries; the rational or controlled approach she has advocated contrasts sharply with Washizu's realization of the futility to plan or to hope for things in this finite world. "Fool! Fool!" he cries out.

The visual context for this assertion is important because ever present with Washizu in his moment of insight is his warrior's helmet, a visual objectification of his violent action. Before the old woman informs Washizu that his child was stillborn ("It had been dead within her"), a group of Washizu's soldiers talk among themselves about impending events and rumors circulating among the men. With a strong wind and swirling mist in the background, they comment how the whole castle is shaking, how "the foundations have long been rotting," and how the rats have begun to leave, all signs of impending defeat. The next scene cuts to closed doors which are opened by an old hand to reveal Washizu sitting pensively awaiting news of his wife's condition. The only objects in the room are his helmet on the right, elevated on a table, and in the left background, his sword. The sword remains in the frame until Washizu rushes out to see his wife, prevented only by the crying of the old woman. He then returns to his room, stands before his helmet (elevated on a desk atop a small platform), and cries "Fool!" several times. Then messengers bring news that Fort One and Fort Two have turned against him and that Fort Three is under siege. Cut to the war council which gives no advice, to the flock of birds which invades the council meeting and which Washizu interprets as a good omen. It is at this point that in desperation he turns to the supra-rational hope offered by the witch and goes to the forest for the final time.

The final scene of the film, in which Washizu is killed by his own men, is the climactic visual representation of the thematic concerns of the film. Washizu, stripped of his purpose (Asaji and progeny) and self (the forest which now moves against him), is besieged with arrows by his own men. He becomes a virtual pin-cushion full of arrows; they assault his body from every angle, point in all directions, and suggest the disordered world in which he lives. Unlike the marvellous harmony of the rack of arrows which screens Washizu's discussion with Asaji earlier, these arrows which mark his end are the arrows of outrageous fortune. They hit and move, quivering like the legs of the centipede, but do not kill Washizu, at least not immediately. Even when the last arrow pierces his neck he refuses to die. He remains conscious long enough to stumble down several flights of stairs and walk into the courtyard where his men flee from him. Here is a man unlike other men. It is not just his brute endurance, we recognize, but here is a man who has transcended those "slings and arrows" which define the universe we inhabit.

Washizu's final act is to reach for his sword. Whether this is an act of defiance or a reflex action does not matter. What does matter is that Washizu could not be Washizu without drawing his sword: he is one with that sword and with the way of life it represents. He attempts to draw the sword in a courageous affirmation of existence; it is his own act of being. In the face of despair which he has come to accept, Washizu's final act defines his selfhood and asserts his place in a meaningless universe. Washizu lives in a modern world which lacks moral vision or a sense of unity. He learns to stake his life on the chances of this earth but learns also to fight off the despair and the illusions we create. He is, in the end, a solitary person. He is cut off from nature, severed from human relationships, and exists through an isolated act of being while surrounded by hostile and enigmatic forces. Kurosawa's **Throne of Blood** is the story of modern man's search for meaning in a meaningless world.

Notes

¹As quoted by Geoffrey Reeves, "Finding Shakespeare on Film: From an Interview with Peter Brooks," *Tulane Drama Review*, 33 (Fall 1966), 117, and reprinted in Charles Eckert, ed. *Focus on Shakespearean Films* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1972), p. 37.

²Michael Mullin, "Macbeth on Film," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1 (Fall 1973), 340.

³Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 231.

⁴E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London, 1943) as quoted by Ornstein, p. 277, who adds, "The question is whether the tragedians believed that these [moral] principles did in fact govern the conduct of men or express the reality of human conduct."

⁵Ornstein, p. 230. Examples of other views mentioned can be found in Lily B. Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (1930), E. E. Stoll, *Art and Artifice in Shakespeare* (1949), and Willard Farnham, *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier* (1950).

⁶Donald Richie, "Throne of Blood" in *The Films of Akira Kurosawa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965), pp. 115-124.

⁷Mullin, p. 339.

⁸Ana Laura Zambrano, "Throne of Blood: Kurosawa's *Macbeth*", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 2 (Summer 1974), 270. This essay explores how the film "evolves not in the traditions of Elizabethan theatre but in a purely Japanese context."

⁹John Gerlach, "Shakespeare, Kurosawa, and *Macbeth*: A response to J. Blumenthal," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1 (Fall 1973), 357.

¹⁰Roger Manvell, "Shakespeare on the Screen," *Humanist*, 85 (May 1970), 136.

¹¹J. Blumenthal, "Macbeth into *Throne of Blood*," *Sight and Sound*, 34 (Autumn 1965), 190-95. Reprinted in T.J. Ross's *Film and the Liberal Arts* (N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1970), pp. 122-33.

¹²Gerlach, p. 355

¹³Jack Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 159, comments that the natural world of the film is neither benign nor harmonious. "One can obey the demands of honor and kingship," he notes, "or one can obey nature, as the banners on the backs of Washizu and Miki indicate — the scorpion preys, fights, is devoured by the female, and the rabbit multiplies, then becomes prey. Either way nature triumphs in the end, reducing individuals into heaps of bones and obliterating the mightiest of fortresses with an endless succession of 'tomorrows.'"

¹⁴Richie, p. 119

¹⁵Richie, p. 119. He also observes that the static is negative, and the only positive "is that which chooses faith, which chooses to believe and does so in the face of reason, history, experience, and the world as it seems."

¹⁶Jorgens, p. 157.

¹⁷Jorgens, p. 158.

¹⁸Richie, p. 121.

