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Macbeth and Polanski's Theme of Regression*

Virginia Wright Wexman

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is so well known to most people who come to see film adaptations of it that we have difficulty judging what is on the screen as anything more than an interpretation, valid or otherwise, of the original dramatic material. Yet a filmmaker like Roman Polanski is an artist, just as Shakespeare himself was; and, as such, he brings his own sensibility to bear on the movies he makes. There is more of Polanski in *Macbeth* than might be surmised by looking at the script; for the director has expressed his point of view in this film primarily through visual rather than verbal means. By looking at *Macbeth* not as an attempt to interpret Shakespeare, but in terms of how it repeats and elaborates themes and motifs that have recurred in Polanski's work throughout his career, we emerge with a view of the film that emphasizes its differences from the play instead of its similarities to it. From this perspective, some of the film's most striking additions to the dramatic text—the youth of the protagonist and his wife and the graphic violence for instance—form a coherent pattern that has little to do with Shakespeare's original conception.

Polanski's artistic identity has been most strongly influenced by two modernist trends: Absurdism and Surrealism. His more Absurdist works, such as *Cul-de-Sac*, *The Fearless Vampire Killers*, *What?*, and *Knife in the Water*, tend to be cast in a comic vein, dealing with tensions between groups of people in the context of a barren, uncaring world that trivializes all human activity. By contrast, Polanski's more Surrealistic films are serious studies in terror centered on a single individual. *Repulsion*, *The Tenant*, *Chinatown*, and *Rosemary's Baby* would be included in this class.

All of the films, whether Absurdist or Surrealist in emphasis, show us a world where events occur in never-ending cycles that force the protagonists into positions of infantile powerlessness. This image of a universe grows out of an Absurdist mentality, and it is expressed in circular plot patterns. In the more Absurdist works, the hero's powerlessness is normally expressed through external images: Donald Pleasence crouching fetally on a rock at the end of *Cul-de-Sac*; Leon Niemczyk immobilized at the wheel of his car in *Knife in the Water*. In other films, however, Polanski exploits the potential of Surrealistic techniques to express his heroes' conflicts more subjectively. *Repulsion*, *Rosemary's Baby*, and *The Tenant* force us to see the world as their protagonists do, distorted or fantastic as it may appear. Though we may perceive the threatening quality of this world as the product of madness, it is nonetheless a madness we come to share intimately. In *Repulsion*, for instance, our horror at the sight of the catatonic Carol lying under the bed at the movie's conclusion is experienced in the context of our sympathetic response to her hallucinations and sexual disgust earlier in the film: we participate in her anguish. By contrast, Rosemary Woodhouse's paranoid conjectures are ultimately validated; but we are still moved by the way the spectre of witchcraft forces her to

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look and behave more and more like a child until at last she meekly submits her adult will to the authoritarian control of a group of Satanists.

Polanski's horror films invariably focus on a young person whose attempts to achieve maturity are painfully thwarted so that he or she is beaten back to progressively more infantile patterns of behavior. In these films the external world is important only insofar as it reflects and comments on this internal conflict: whether the protagonist's view of his or her environment is accurate or distorted is unimportant so long as this view accounts for the increasing sense of helplessness and hostility he or she feels.

This same pattern is followed in Polanski's adaptation of *Macbeth*. Here we find a visual style that is not primarily realistic as has often been claimed, but one that focuses on the hallucinatory imagery of dreams and visions as well as on the grotesque distortion of objects that characterize the director's other Surreal films. And Polanski further encourages us to see the events he portrays as projections of his hero's mental state by repeatedly showing Macbeth watching the action in profile at the side of the screen and by presenting his hero's soliloquies as the voiceover narration of an authorial presence. We identify closely with Macbeth's point of view, and the film renders his internal life by including material from his unconscious. For these reasons, a psycho-analytic reading of Macbeth's progressive psychological deterioration is necessary in order to make the visual strategy of the film intelligible. There are three distinct stages involved in this deterioration, each stage manifesting itself through groups of motifs and images that recur throughout the film.

Like Rosemary, Trelkovsky, and Carol, Polanski's Macbeth is a young person in search of a mature identity. And, like them, his inability to achieve this goal is the result of internal conflicts that are primarily sexual. Though we first see him as part of a sombre and repulsive world of male brutality, he soon gains respite from it by returning to his castle, which initially appears to us as a vision in a fairytale, and to his wife, who, with her fair hair and sky-blue gown, seems the ideal princess to inhabit this haven. We are introduced to Lady Macbeth as she is stroking her dogs; and it is only later, when she shrieks with delight as the dogs set upon a shackled bear, that we begin to recognize the amoral perversity beneath her facade of childish high spirits. She unleashes her enthralled husband on Duncan with an equal lack of compunction; to her, regicide seems just another adventure, and she cajoles and whimpers until it is accomplished. Earlier she dances unconcernedly with their intended victim and allows him to kiss her, tacitly reminding Macbeth that her affection is a prize to be bestowed on whomever she deems most worthy.

To insure the love of this woman, Macbeth will go to any length; but ironically, she insists upon a proof of his devotion that will alienate him from her irrevocably. After he has murdered the King, Macbeth cannot bring himself to touch his wife; and thereafter they lie silently next to one another in bed. Later, as she sobs brokenly to herself over what has happened, she bears a striking resemblance to one of the Weird Sisters, whose visible nudity has already documented their sexual repulsiveness. And still later, in the sleep-walking scene, Lady Macbeth herself appears nude, and the absence of erotic charge in the display attests to the indifference her husband has come to feel for her. (Ironically, this very absence of eroticism led most of the film's early reviewers to praise the "tastefulness" of Polanski's use of nudity.)

Failing in his attempt to establish a mature sexual rapport with his wife, Macbeth turns back to the world of men. There he finds appearances equally deceptive: the "noble" Macduff looks like a villain, while the Machiavellian Ross possesses a face as open and guileless as that of a baby. In this world erotic impulses are masked by violence, and Macbeth steps irrevocably into its shrill perversity by his murder of Duncan. Gently pulling back the coverlet to reveal the King's nakedness, Macbeth kneels astride his victim, and his repeated thrusts of the knife are punctuated by Duncan's crown clattering to the floor. Later, after Macbeth has claimed the crown as his own, he dreams that Fleance snatches it from him in a similarly sexual manner, again preceding the act of taking the crown by pulling back the coverlet.

Though women may surround him, Macbeth dreams only of men. Later, in the womblike witches' cave, he has visions of Fleance and Banquo, and of Malcolm and Donalbain mocking him. An armoured figure appears, which, with no body to support it, crumbles pathetically; a snake crawls out of its vacant helmet.

Finding the world around him increasingly chaotic and threatening, Macbeth begins to be haunted by a sense of the vulnerability of his body. Fearing contamination from the outside, he is unable to eat at the banquet preceding Duncan's murder, though his insouciant wife gobbles her food voraciously. But after Macbeth has given in to his libidinous yearnings for unbridled violence, he eats meat carelessly, and when the Weird Sisters offer him their disgusting brew, he gulps it down as though welcoming its corrupting potency.

Having surrendered his power over his body, Macbeth becomes obsessed with his ability to retain his physical wholeness; at the same time his sense of what that wholeness means is shaken and images of mutilation become ever more prevalent. During the final battle sequence, Macbeth viciously slashes at the bodies of his adversaries, stabbing one in the throat, another in the face, a third in the groin. Meanwhile, the corpse of his dead wife lies pitifully mangled in the courtyard below, only partly covered by a carelessly thrown blanket.

The tenuous connection between the body and the head repeatedly reasserts itself. Macbeth first appears with three hanging men in the background. The first Thane of Cawdor is killed by means of an iron collar placed around his neck. Increasingly incapable of identifying himself with his body as a whole, Macbeth grows ever-more concerned about his head. His slow, clumsy movements during his final battle with Macduff are juxtaposed to the possessiveness he feels about his crown. When given an option, he chooses to keep the crown rather than regain his sword; it is as if he felt that he would die without it. Finally decapitated, he is literally reduced to a head, and in this state he is swept through a jeering crowd on the end of a stick.

The battle preceding this catastrophe has been played as an infantile fantasy in which the world behaves in accordance with one's own wishes and fears. Macbeth first appears tiny and alone on his throne at the end of a cavernous vista. But his belief in his own inviolability is magical. Effortlessly he kills all the soldiers who surround him, and he even has it in his power to kill Macduff—until his mistake in trusting the witches' deceptive rhetoric becomes clear to him. Then his superhuman command of the situation vanishes. With the shattering of this last, most immature attempt to establish a relationship with the life around him, he surrenders the single remaining token of his identity: his physical integrity. By so doing, he forfeits his life. And finally we witness

the cycle begin again at the cave of the Weird Sisters, this time with a hero whose body is maimed at the outset.

Seen in these terms, Polanski's film has little in common with Shakespeare's play. While Shakespeare argues for the possibility of human dignity and social order, Polanski presents a cynical view of a depraved society that erodes the individual psyche. Polanski's interpretation of *Macbeth* may be less sanguine and more relativistic than Shakespeare's original conception; but the vision it offers of a personality retreating into its past in the face of a world that provides nothing to nurture its growth has a validity of its own.

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