

“Bloody instructions ... return to plague the instructor”

A new film version of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

By George Marlowe and David Walsh
19 December 2015

Australian director Justin Kurzel, a relative filmmaking newcomer, has brought to the screen a new version of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The production, starring Michael Fassbender as Macbeth and Marion Cotillard as Lady Macbeth, is engrossing and disturbing, if uneven.

Kurzel’s version eliminates certain sequences, rearranges others (a few, questionably) and makes much of the Scottish countryside and weather, but remains faithful to the contours of Shakespeare’s drama.

The story takes place at a time of upheaval and civil war in Scotland, with rival nobles and their supporters, along with foreign powers such as England and Norway, fighting for the upper hand. (The historical Macbeth reigned for 17 years as “King of the Scots” in the mid-11th century.) Macbeth is kin to the king, Duncan (David Thewlis), but, along with his wife, aspires to much more.

After Macbeth and a fellow noble, Banquo (Paddy Considine), lead their troops—including child soldiers—to victory against a rebel army backed by Norway, Duncan plans to reward Macbeth with the title of Thane [one of the king’s barons] of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo encounter the famed “weird sisters,” played here like poor, outcast women, who predict Macbeth’s rise, even to the kingship, but the eventual crowning of Banquo’s heirs.

Macbeth is spurred on by desire and ambition, but vacillates as he thinks to himself, “Stars hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires.” He writes to Lady Macbeth and tells her of his present success and future prospects. She is concerned, however, that he is “too full o’th’ milk of human kindness” to be sufficiently ruthless. Cotillard chillingly prays in front of a church altar: “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. Make thick my blood / Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse.”

When Macbeth vacillates (“I dare do all that may become a man”), in the face of assassinating the king, Lady Macbeth convinces him, through a combination of taunts, allurements and bravado (“We fail? But screw your courage to the sticking-place, and we’ll not fail.”) Assisted by his wife, Macbeth murders the king in the middle of the night and places the blame on Duncan’s guards. The dead king’s son, Malcolm (Jack Reynor), flees Scotland and Macbeth ascends to the throne.

As Kurzel’s film unfolds, the logic and consequences of Macbeth’s initial murderous act oblige him to commit one crime

after another to protect his rule, including the murder of women and children (“Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill. ... [T]hey say, blood will have blood”). Lady Macbeth meanwhile falls away, in bitterness and remorse (“Nought’s had, all’s spent, Where our desire is got without content”).

The action proceeds with harrowing intensity. Macbeth’s tyranny and megalomania rally his enemies and, ultimately, a large army—including English forces—forms against him. His mental state disintegrates to the point of madness, self-destruction and acute nihilism. After his wife’s death, possibly by suicide, life becomes for Macbeth, in the famed soliloquy, “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

The acting of the two leads, Fassbender and Cotillard, in particular is very affecting and moving. The entire cast seems deeply sincere and committed. Certain scenes—of battle, the death of children and the psychological breakdown of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—are powerfully presented.

Cotillard’s hallucinatory turn as Lady Macbeth attempting to wash the imaginary blood off her hands is riveting (“Out, damned spot! ... All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. ... What’s done cannot be undone”). She represents Lady Macbeth’s tragic fate with an unusual degree of sympathy. When Fassbender half-smilingly proclaims, “O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife,” it is sinister and unnerving. The scene of Banquo’s ghost appearing at Macbeth’s banquet also stands out.

The moody cinematography and desolate-beautiful Scottish landscape add an eerie quality and match the overall tone of the performances. There are striking images and inspired moments in this *Macbeth* that linger in one’s mind with a dreamlike force. There is much that is commendable here—although there are significant problems too, which we will discuss below.

Literary historians suggest that *Macbeth* was written in 1606 or so. There appear to be references in the play to the Gunpowder Plot (a conspiracy by a group of English Catholics to blow up Parliament and murder King James I of England and VI of Scotland) of 1605.

The play is the shortest of Shakespeare’s tragedies, only a little more than half as long as *Hamlet*. It is a frightening work, as every critic (and audience member) has attested to. In the early 19th century, British commentator William Hazlitt observed that Macbeth is “driven along by the violence of his fate like a vessel drifting before a storm.” He is “hurried on with daring impatience to verify” the predictions of the witches, “and with impious and

bloody hand to tear aside the veil which hides the uncertainty of the future.”

In more recent times, A.C. Bradley noted that “Darkness ... broods over this tragedy.” It is difficult, Bradley wrote, “to be sure of [Macbeth’s] customary demeanour, for in the play we see him either in what appears to be an exceptional relation to his wife, or else in the throes of remorse and desperation.” Harold Goddard described the play as a “Descent into hell.” For G. Wilson Knight, “Fear is predominant. Everyone is afraid. ... The impact of the play is analogous to nightmare. ... The central act of the play is a hideous murder of sleep.” Polish-born critic Jan Kott, in the postwar period, observed: “Everyone in the play is steeped in blood: victims as well as murderers. The whole world is stained with blood.” American critic Harold Bloom described Macbeth as “a great killing machine” and “the bloodiest of all Shakespearean tyrant-villains.”

The play is frightening, not only because of the events, but because of the insight we obtain into Macbeth’s bloody and restless imagination. Among the perpetrators of crime or murder in Shakespeare, including Richard III, Iago, even Brutus and others, Macbeth is unique in his ability to envision his misdeeds and their possible consequences and to constantly anticipate and later relive them. They are always present with him and with us. Much of the drama takes place in his evolving consciousness (which may, in fact, contain the ghosts and spirits). A villain by any objective standard, Macbeth is endowed with perhaps the most unrelenting, corrosive conscience in world literature.

Shakespeare, with his customary thoroughness and psychological insight, took on the problem of political ambition, usurpation and tyranny. The play was written at a time of considerable instability and insecurity: the last years of the reign of Elizabeth I and the first years of James I’s rule. Conspiracies abounded, and repression was severe and cruel. However, it is worth bearing in mind that *Macbeth* is a *historical* play, set nearly five centuries before its writing. Shakespeare may well have had in mind aspects of contemporary life, the behavior of rival factions in his own time, but if his play had been perceived as a direct commentary on England’s ruling circles, he would have been clapped in jail.

One of the difficulties with much of the commentary, and Kurzel’s film itself, is the lack of historical perspective. Macbeth’s world, often with references to Hitler and Stalin, is gloomily proclaimed to be identical with ours. Bloom, who freely cites Nietzsche in his essay, goes so far as to assert that “Shakespeare rather dreadfully sees to it that *we are* Macbeth, our identification with him is involuntary but inescapable.” This is one of those, “Speak for yourself!” moments.

Kott writes that “There is only one theme in Macbeth: murder. History has been reduced to its simplest form, to one image and one division: those who kill and those who are killed.” Macbeth’s supposed recognition that “a man is he who kills, and only he,” the Polish critic terms the “Auschwitz experience.”

Kurzel’s *Macbeth*, of course, does not go so far or presume so much. However, the occasionally jittery and often close-in camera work, especially during the battle scenes, which suggests video footage, somehow draws in the spectator and implicates him or

her. We are meant to see this as “our world,” in some fashion. So too Kurzel’s ending, with Banquo’s son practicing with a sword and running into the murk, suggests too easily that the “cycle of violence” will continue.

However, neither 11th-century Scotland nor Shakespeare’s era of royal absolutism is our world. Things have changed and historically progressed in many ways. Of course, we have bloodiness today, but it is not feudal or even pre-feudal bloodiness. Class society still exists, but there are great differences. Whether they are conscious of it or not, the filmmakers’ ahistorical and somewhat bleak approach has the effect of resigning the viewer to his or her supposedly unalterable fate (“You see, things have always been like this—and always will be”).

Associated with that, there is simply too much bloodiness. We get the point after two or three throat-slashings and such, which in the play largely occur offstage.

The artistic method is somewhat simplistic as well: to suggest the brutality of the period, *Macbeth* has to look and feel just as “brutal.” One is disinclined to agree with that. The bloodiness is too close, too immediate to provide any intellectual-aesthetic distance. The brutality at times seems to overcharge the performance with the suggestion, again, that everyone is implicated in the monstrousness.

There are other issues. The filmmakers make too much of an effort, too self-consciously, at times to impress with a visual splash. Also, occasionally, the overemphasis on the authentic Scottish accents tends to obscure the play’s incredible language. The direction of the actors, in the interest presumably of realism, sometimes reduces them almost to a whisper and mumble in a number of scenes. Certainly, avoiding heavy-handedness or pompous declaiming is a legitimate goal, but the lines still need to be heard and understood.

The tone is somewhat “one-note” throughout. This *Macbeth* is missing some of the emotional-intellectual texture of the play and some of its earthier, healthier figures.

These are real issues, and we raise them, not to pick points, but because Kurzel’s film as a whole is such a serious effort. The performances and the dramatic tension leave a distinct imprint. Even if it stumbles somewhat over its historical appreciation of Shakespeare’s drama, this *Macbeth*, at its best, conveys a genuine sense of the corruption and barbarism of our own times.

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