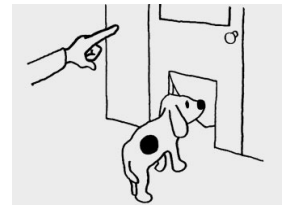


Film: *Macbeth*

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# The Play's the Thing



“**H**OW many children had Lady Macbeth?” In his 1933 essay of that title, the critic L.C. Knights argued that it is a fruitless question asked by commentators like A.C. Bradley who see Shakespeare pre-eminently as a great creator of characters. For Knights, the plays are essentially dramatic poems which explore themes and values. While I think that Knights is basically correct, the dramatist is nevertheless also concerned with psychological motivation. So, for example, if Macbeth becomes ‘evil’, then it seems reasonable to ask why.

Justin Kurzel’s visually impressive new film of the play opens with Macbeth and his wife at the burial of a dead child, presumably theirs. This speculation is not new but it is worth considering. We know that Lady Macbeth says she has ‘given suck’ and he himself refers to a ‘fruitless crown’, a ‘barren sceptre’ and ‘no son of mine succeeding’. All the main male characters, apart from Macbeth, have sons. So grief and envy are indeed possible motivations, as well vaulting ambition. Indeed, he seems to suffer from several of the Seven Deadly Sins.

On the other hand, Shakespeare arguably makes his tyrant childless to indicate that he is the destroyer of life and therefore cannot be portrayed as its creator. Moreover, when Michael Fassbender, who plays Macbeth, tells the Cannes film festival that Shakespeare’s villain suffers from PTSD, there is a danger that grief and battle fatigue become more central to his downward spiral than the lust for power itself.

There is another likely reason why Shakespeare makes Macbeth childless, namely to avoid any suggestion that he desires power so that he can pass on the Crown. He wants to stress that his overriding motive is power-madness. The clue to this intention is found in Francis Bacon’s essay *Of Great Place*, where he writes: “It is a strange desire to seek power and to lose liberty; or to seek



Fassbender: full of sound and fury

power over others, and to lose power over a man’s self”. Macbeth seeks and maintains power for its own sake, whereas “power to do good is the true and lawful end of aspiring”.

Of course, we should not judge a film by a play. Kurzel’s psychological and physical opening up has both advantages and disadvantages. The claustrophobic nature of the drama is largely lost, but we can enjoy the spectacle. Thus the burial of the child is followed by the battle in which Macbeth proves his valour to King Duncan (David Thewlis). Whereas the play relies on reports by a couple of witnesses, the cinema lays it on in all its gore, with ultra slow motion shots of roaring men in black war-paint charging through Scottish mists to a clash of mud, blood and clanking swords (was it an ad for Scotland’s team in the rugby World Cup, I asked myself).

Yet, again, this only serves to lessen the impact of the words which are, after all, what Shakespeare is all about. This is not helped by the fact that the text is pared down more than Polanski’s 1971 film, which had a screenplay by Kenneth Tynan that largely followed the original text and which, despite its bloodletting, is the best adaptation (I also have an affection for Orson Welles’s nightmarish 1948 black and white *film noir* version). Nor is Fassbender a classical actor: although he looks the part, he generally delivers the lines in a soporific monotone. The scorpions in his mind and the sound and fury in his eyes seem unable to reach down to his mouth. Only in the banquet scene does he really come alive.

To be fair to Fassbender, it seems to be a general strategy to create intimacy by having the protagonists whisper and mumble their words (and in most cases in phoney Scottish accents!). Alas, it has the opposite effect of alienating the audience through the drab, unbroken rhythm of its presentation of Shakespeare’s language.

Lady Macbeth is also initially a disappointment. Marion Cotillard doesn’t play her as the usual scheming, conniving wife, and here we see how Kurzel’s dead child ploy distorts the dramatist’s primary purpose to demonstrate the effects rather than the causes of power lust. This Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband, not out of an appetite for the trappings of power but to fill a void created by her lost son. However, her descent into madness is well conveyed, notably in her famous scene at the beginning of Act 5: “out, damned spot”, “hell is murky”, “what’s done, cannot be undone”, etc; though here she doesn’t actually sleepwalk, which is another letdown.

The same applies to the three witches. Kurzel’s desire for realism persuades him to present them naturally as young women rather than old hags and cut their contribution: there is no “double, double, toil and trouble”; and there is little humour generally in this bleak film – the porter scene disappears altogether.

Shakespeare included the witches as a sop to James I, who had written *Daemonology* (1599), arguing that witches wielded hellish powers. More significantly, he also made Banquo, believed to be the first of James’s line, a good and innocent man where Holinshed and others had him as an accomplice of Macbeth in the murder of Duncan. But these concessions enabled Shakespeare to expose the weakness of James’s theory of the divine right of kings in his treatise on *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598). What if the king is a paranoid mass murderer like Macbeth? Is it not right to remove him? A daring ploy, and Shakespeare got away with it. □