

## THE TRAGEDY OF MACBETH IN THE ADAPTATION OF ROMAN POLANSKI

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**ABSTRACT:** ONE OF THE ELEMENTS NECESSARY TO MAKE A WORK OF LITERATURE TRAGIC IS THAT THE AUDIENCE HAS SOME FELLOW SYMPATHY, SOME PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL COMPREHENSION OF THE DILEMMAS AND SUFFERING OF THE PROTAGONISTS. *MACBETH* FAILS AS A TRAGEDY IF THE AUDIENCE SEES THE THANE AND HIS LADY AS UNREDEEMED VILLAINS, DEEMS THEIR SUFFERING AS DESERVED AND NECESSARY PUNISHMENT, AND TAKES PLEASURE IN THEIR AGONIES. BUT THIS IS NOT THE RESPONSE OF MOST READERS OR SPECTATORS.

THE SPECTACLE OF THE NOBLE MACBETH, DRIVEN BY AMBITION AND THE WILL TO POWER TO THE MOST HEINOUS OF ACTS, SUFFERING THE MOST INTENSE PANGS OF GUILT AND REMORSE, AROUSES, PERHAPS AGAINST THEIR WILL, THE PITY OF THE READERS OR SPECTATORS. THERE IS ALSO IN THE AUDIENCE A SENSE OF FEAR THAT THE EVIL THAT CONTAMINATED MACBETH AND LADY MACBETH CAN POISON ANYONE. ROMAN POLANSKI'S ADAPTATION IS A REALISTIC APPROACH OF THE SHAKESPEAREAN TEXT. IT CREATES PROFOUND CHARACTERS, ESTABLISHING A HIGH DEGREE OF ORIGINALITY OF THE ADAPTATION.

**KEYWORDS:** REPRESENTATION, PLAY, CINEMA, ADAPTATION

Shakespeare is without doubt the author of theater the most adapted to the cinema, either in faithful transpositions of its plays or in adaptations to other settings in time and space. The first question that opens this chapter is: why does the Shakespearean drama transfer so easy to the screen? A possible answer to this mystery could be related to the similarities, but moreover to the differences between the structure of the Elizabethan theatre and the cinematic productions. Intertextuality is the factor that leads to the development of this permanent process of recreation. The opinion of Roland Barthes according to which any written text is nothing else than the result of all its inspiration sources, extended to the level of theater performance, opens the exploration of this study. The list of Shakespearean stage adaptations shows from the starting point of this analysis that the writings of this complex author arouse the interest of writers from all cultural spheres. The chronological factor is the proof that Shakespeare has built an entire history in the domain of artistic creations all over the world.

At the age of the Bard, theatre was directly connected to the spectators who were implicated in the development of the plot, participating with their reactions to the actions of the actors. This way, there was a lack of control of the play producer, who could not always send a clear, unique message beyond the stage, as those in front of it had the possibility to view the dramatic act from different angles, whereas in the case of a cinema performance, the person standing in front of the screen has only the possibility of watching the action from a single angle. This apparent disturbing detail, gives the screen producer a unique possibility to transfer

his personal perception to the audience, without having to face the danger of being misunderstood. Sarah Hatchuel expressed her opinion regarding this validity of the Shakespearean drama on the screen in her work *Shakespeare, from stage to screen*:

“Elizabethan drama, therefore, played with the spectators and their permanent awareness of theatrical illusion. *Mises-en-abyme* (i.e. embedded structures) – which could take the form of masques or plays within plays – added a second level of dramatic action, while a Chorus, a Prologue or an Epilogue could directly call out the spectators and alienate them from the action. The actors’ soliloquies and asides were conventions that established intimacy with the public while signalling the devices of theatre. The spectators intervened regularly during the performance, participating in the action with their own reactions. Fiction was thus designated as such. The deceit and trickery that are part of acting were pointed out by the *mise-en-scène* itself. A comparison between cinema and the Elizabethan stage reveals minor common points and major differences. In the cinema, as in the Renaissance theatre, scenes move on with great rapidity and fluidity. A film, like a theatre production in Shakespeare’s time, can go quickly from a battle scene to a discussion behind closed doors inside a palace.” (Sarah Hatchuel, 2004: 4)

Comparing the two sections of dramatic performance, Sarah Hatchuel detects an inevitable intersection between these: “While the first film productions imported techniques from the stage, theatre productions are now sometimes influenced by realistic cinema.” (Sarah Hatchuel, 2004: 14) Therefore we can state before giving the examples chosen for this chapter that film and theatre are in a permanent process of influence, and in the particular case of Shakespeare, this juncture underlines the adaptability of his works in all medium of development.

We began our study naturally, from the written play and films, but also using works of literary or theatrical analysis. The analysis of the film by Polanski is less documented and more personal in nature.

In his adaptation of the play, Roman Polanski takes the opposite view of the approach of Orson Welles by opting for realism and fidelity to the text of Shakespeare. This paragraph can nevertheless provide some tracks to understand the motivations of Polanski in his search for realism. In 1970, the magazine *Play Boy* announced to the general surprise that he created a production house to finance a film about *Macbeth* scripted by Kenneth Tynan, who had produced the erotic show *Oh! Calcutta!*, and directed by Roman Polanski, whose wife had just been murdered. *Play Boy* founder Hugh Hefner promised lots of violence and many nude scenes. Rumors were that the cast of the three witches would be among the *Play Boy* models, and that the script for Polanski would contain so much sex and violence that it would revolutionize the interpretation of the play. We see therefore how the project seemed sour at the time.

At the view of the film these expectations were deceived: Polanski signed a film faithful to Shakespeare, without sex, and whose violence is a concern for realism rather than a willingness of provocation.

The film, despite its quality, was poorly received by critics as by the public and has remained nowadays still relatively unnoticed. The main problem of its creation at the time was the violence of some scenes regarded as unsustainable. Polanski attributes the failure of his film to his search for realism. Polanski strives to meet the most possible the original text, which also earned him the admiration of the avid readers of Shakespeare's work. For example, in Act 5, scene 5, he removes only nine lines and does only a few changes of words, primarily to modernize an archaic language.

Roman Polanski felt the previous adaptations of Macbeth, that of Welles, unsatisfactory and decides to adopt a completely opposite approach, confessing in his autobiography his old dream to film one of Shakespeare's plays. He takes the opposite view of the old versions and usual stereotypes of the historical film to replace them with a sometimes harrowing naturalism. He strives to reach a maximum historical authenticity: Shakespeare's play takes place in the middle ages, at a bloody and violent time, and the Macbeth that Polanski shows us is the image of this period.

Decorations, accessories, costumes, fighting and common life scenes are described so realistically that they tend to look so plausible that, if they had been inspired by real facts, wouldn't have been less magnified than the poetry of Shakespeare. Realistic and dramatic: Polanski has an undeniable sense of image and photography, especially when he tries to express violence. Murders, massacres, mutilation, executions, blood and crisis catapult between the expected tirades.

The famous cursed couple is by the will of Polanski, performed by a couple of young, almost anonymous actors. John Finch returned revealed one side almost ordinary, deeply human of Macbeth. It no longer appears as a tragic hero driven by obscure forces, but as a brave but gullible one, ambitious and confused, cruel, but without malice.

One of the greatest successes of the film lies in the dimension that Polanski gives to the character of Lady Macbeth. Despite his concern to respect the text of the original writer, in the scene 5 of Act 5 Polanski gives her a more important role than did the original piece. At the beginning of the sequence he filmed her crying bitterly about reading aloud the letter of the first act in which Macbeth revealed the three witches prediction. This addition has a considerable effect on the viewer by recalling him how the infernal action began. Showing Lady Macbeth sob to this reading, Polanski actually brings to light a character torn with remorse and therefore much more human.

In addition to this added sequence, Polanski continues to deepen the awfulness of events keeping this Lady Macbeth in the whole scene. The original text mentions her only after the announcement of her death by Seyton and the long quote from Macbeth that follows can be taken as a statement about life in general on the death of his wife. Polanski takes another direction. He uses the voice of John Finch to enunciate the monologue while filming the latter getting down the stairs to see the body distorted of his deceased wife, and then looking at the top of the tower, suggesting that she committed suicide.

All in all, in this scene the famous Polanski seems to overwhelm Macbeth and unload his wife. Lady Macbeth loses a bit the disturbing fascination that she exerts on the reader and gains humanity. One has the impression that her influence on Macbeth derives from her beauty and her youth and not from her ascending mystical psychological quality. As to the cruelty demonstrated at the beginning of the story, it seems more due to a fiery and inordinate ambition as to a cold and Machiavellian plan.

The respect for the original text and the realism of the film create together somehow a disturbing effect. Polanski shows us in a delicate manner what happens usually behind the scenes during theatrical performances without the use of verb and of theatricality. We touch here on an essential point in the study of our problem: a play is compatible with a realistic adaptation? We understand therefore how the challenge given by Roman Polanski is ambitious, because its objective seems to be contradictory.

Polanski adopted the approach opposite to that of Welles. He creates a natural environment, with a deep attention to the detail of the costumes and of the time sets. He uses original cinema special effects to film the prophetic hallucinations of Macbeth, the Sabbath of witches, the realistic scenes of ultra-violence. If he stays more faithful to the text than Welles,

he uses more than his suggestions and omissions of it. Polanski's film contains many silent moments, which are not prohibited by the text of Shakespeare but which still express the interpretation of the director. In addition to the previously described 5 of Act 5 scene, we can also consider the moment preceding the murder of the King, in which Prince Duncan casts a wry smile to Macbeth who still hesitates on the murder and asks him to serve him to drink. We can also evoke the hallucinations of Macbeth, who insists on the guilt of the latter towards Banquo or meditate on the last image of the film, which shows the three witches' hut, suggesting that they have played a decisive role in the drama to which we attend.

In conclusion, Polanski built a realistic frame around the text of Shakespeare, unlike Orson Welles who focused on it. He reached this way his objective, to create deeply human characters and almost give the impression of a historical reconstruction. It is this success that arises precisely the malaise that we have described: this rough realism contrasts with the texts of Shakespeare unsuitable to such naturalistic treatment. A play is composed only of dialogues. It must therefore convey emotions only in this way, this is why the texts are often bombastic. Why a play can, regardless of its content, always escape this constraint of realism? The reason is the following: do not forget that before anything else, a play is written to be performed. Or representation always gives the play a deeply practical, human, realistic character. The movie screen doesn't have such an impact on the viewer: actually seeing actors on stage has a more profound impact than any image displayed on a white screen. Therefore we understand why realism is not a concern for a theatrical author.

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