What Awaits Man: A Closer Look at the Deeper, Darker Macbeth

When Throne of Blood premiered in 1957, it received mixed reviews from American film critics. This may be since it is based upon William Shakespeare’s Macbeth, a work that has been looked at from many, many angles over the years. The problem was that Throne of Blood is not a retelling of Macbeth, it is a completely new story, born out of the old. The film critics tried to review it as a visual representation of Macbeth, but this completely overlooks the extreme detail Akira Kurosawa put into transforming Macbeth through his film direction. Throne of Blood draws from Macbeth but stands alone because it modifies the central themes of the power of fate, the value of life, and the nature of power.

A powerful cornerstone of Throne of Blood’s message is that fate controls the lives of men, unlike in Macbeth, where free will and human influence are much stronger components. For instance, Macbeth refuses to murder Duncan for most of the time up until he caves into his wife’s wishes, telling himself “I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent…” (I.vii.25-26). After he talks to his wife however, “[Macbeth] is settled, and [bends] up / each corporal agent to this terrible feat.” (I.vii.79-80). Macbeth is not forced by any circumstance to decide on Duncan’s murder. Rather, he merely convinces himself based on Lady Macbeth’s advice that the throne is worth the risk, and acts on his belief that this action will benefit him in the future. Macbeth even doubts himself just before he kills Duncan when he dismisses his prophetic dagger of the mind as a “fatal vision, preceding from [his] heat-oppresssé brain” (II.i.39), while still
choosing to follow it to murder Duncan, a situation where Macbeth could have easily backed off based on his thoughts but made the free decision to keep going. While Macbeth is pressed by Lady Macbeth’s argument, it is not threatening or creating any circumstance that would befall him should he refuse. This is vastly different from the *Throne of Blood* scenario where Washizu is essentially given a choice by Asaji between taking the throne and his betrayal by his loyal friend Miki, followed by his murder at the hands of Kuniharu. Washizu is not given a choice and must kill his own lord to protect his life and honor. Washizu acts defensively, protecting his own position, while Macbeth acts offensively, attacking for the sole purpose of taking the throne.

Another instance in Macbeth where he demonstrates his ability to choose his own destiny is when he decides to go to battle versus the army of Siward and Macduff even after he receives the report that Birnam Wood has, in fact, advanced on Dunsinane Castle. Macbeth exclaims, “Blow, wind! Come, wrack! / At least we’ll die with harness on our back.” (V.v.50-51). Macbeth’s fate is not sealed by the completion of the prophecy. Rather, it is his poor decision to give up and charge the enemy that is his downfall. If he heeded the first two apparition’s prophecies, Macbeth could have fought his way out the side of the fight and escaped with his life instead of encountering Macduff. Washizu is never given the chance to debate his options like Macbeth has, but squanders. Washizu’s tragic death at the hands of his own soldiers is unavoidable. Each arrow that pierces him is a blow from fate, securing it’s all powerful hold on the mortal world, and no choice Washizu could have made in that moment would have saved him from the army waiting for him. The prophecy serves Macbeth as food for thought and influences his decisions, but Washizu’s prophecy fully drives his life to the last arrow.

*Macbeth* puts much worth in human existence, while *Throne of Blood* emphasizes its insignificance. One of the movie’s most important scenes, the demon hag’s song, perfectly sets
up this theme for the rest of the play. One of its lines reads “Men’s lives are as meaningless as the lives of insects.” Washizu hears this song just before the action of the play begins, and it stays true as no matter what he does or what throne he sits on, it does not give him any solace in the end. Conversely, in *Macbeth*, the titular character ponders the great worth of the life of Duncan before his murder, explaining:

```
this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels… (I.vii.16-19).
```

Duncan’s life is clearly of great worth to the world of *Macbeth* that his legacy will live on long after his passing. No insect will ever have the worth of Duncan. Kurosawa’s direction also translates the idea of characters’ worthlessness through film technique. As Erin Suzuki puts in her article “Lost in Translation: Reconsidering Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*” regarding the fog scene after Washizu and Miki leave the forest, “…all movement seems to be so overdetermined as to be completely static, but it also becomes aligned to the riders’ frustrated desire to continue moving even when movement itself appears to be pointless.” The scene uses cinematic technique in place of Shakespeare’s words to convey his thoughts and feelings to the watcher, creating the idea that Washizu is utterly insignificant in his world. In *Macbeth*, characters are held in high honor and value. In act 1 scene 2, “Brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name)” (I.ii.18) is honored greatly by the Captain. Through his valiant fighting and defeat of the treacherous Macdonwald, Macbeth will earn himself a place in all the court’s minds, and in history, definitely a prospect of worth. Macbeth’s struggle earns him a place in the
ages, while Washizu is swept up and forgotten in the endless cycle of usurpers, just as his lord before him was.

*Macbeth* presents a position of power as meant to be earned righteously and ruled fairly, while *Throne of Blood* presents it as corrupted and evil in all respects. A major deviation from *Macbeth* in *Throne of Blood* that illustrates this theme is that Kuniharu obtained his position by killing his previous lord, unlike Duncan. In the world of *Throne of Blood* power changing hands by war is commonplace. Occupying a position of power warrants, if not encourages bloodshed. In *Macbeth*, the murder of Duncan is so unexpected and overwhelming that nature itself responds to it, as Duncan’s horses “eat each other” (II.iv.23-24) and in the night sky, “[the] candles are all out” (II.i.7). In *Throne of Blood*, only one horse belonging to Miki, not Kuniharu escapes, and never cannibalizes. This change indicates that the unnatural event is not symbolizing something is amiss, but is a warning to Miki about events to come. Another demonstration of the normal practice of murder in *Throne of Blood* compared to *Macbeth* is the opening song. This scene opens and closes the movie, and no equivalent of it exists in *Macbeth*. Through its ominous and mysterious tone combined with lyrics like “Born of consuming desire / Never changing,” (Kurosawa) the song suggests that the lust for power has, and always will spur men to murder, and that is the way it will always be. This is reinforced by the fact that the song plays both at the beginning and end of the film, furthering that this cycle of vassal to lord will only continue. *Macbeth* is concluded with Malcolm being restored to his rightful place at the throne, setting right all Macbeth’s wrongs. This provides a catharsis not seen in *Throne of Blood*, where Kuniharu’s castle is destroyed and it is unclear who takes his place. The negativity in *Throne of Blood* is placed on the position, while in Macbeth it is put on the ruler himself. Throne
of Blood leaves a lasting impression that those in power are all doomed to commit horrendous acts, while Macbeth shows an example of a bad ruler, an exception in a line of positive kings.

Before even putting together an argument, it is apparent that Throne of Blood has a much different feel than Macbeth. Washizu’s story leaves a bad taste in the mouth of the viewer, his life ending with nothing accomplished combined with the powerful imagery provided by the foggy mountaintop. The demon hag’s song is always playing in the back of the viewer’s mind as they watch it prove true. The final message of Throne of Blood is what sets it apart from Macbeth the most; human life is meaningless, humans are doomed to a cycle of killing and death. A very dark and nihilistic view, but a view with great worth for thought and analysis, rivaling that of Macbeth. Macbeth has plenty of room to ponder on its many points about humanity, but it never gets as cynical as Throne of Blood.
Works Cited

