



# MACBETH

A **STUDYGUIDE** BY BRIAN MCFARLANE

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*I am in blood  
Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.*

**THOSE ARE THE LINES THAT SPRING TO MY MIND WHENEVER I THINK OF MACBETH. FOR ONE THING, 'BLOOD' IS PERHAPS THE MOTIF WHICH COLOURS THE WHOLE PLAY FOR ME, AND, FOR ANOTHER, IN THE WEARY SELF-KNOWLEDGE OF THAT DREADFUL IMAGE SPEAKS A MAN WHO IS VERY FAR FROM BEING THE 'BUTCHER' MALCOLM CALLS HIM AT THE END.**

**T**HE MAN WHO APPRAISES his life in that metaphor is one whose imaginative capacities have proved greater than he has reckoned on and they now offer him no comfort; he is one who grasps the full horror of all he has done, knows how far he has come from the 'golden opinions' he once won, and knows with bleak certainty that there can never now be any return to innocence. In a word, he is, not a butcher, but a tragic hero whose ruin has for five centuries inspired those Aristotelean tragic requirements (and responses) of 'pity and terror', rather than the satisfaction of seeing a villain get what's coming to him.

It is hard to be certain about how

many film versions of *Macbeth* there have been, but the number, including television productions, seems likely to be between 50 and 60 (and that's not counting versions of Verdi's opera). These range from French and Italian silent versions in 1909, and several British silent ones starting with actor-manager Sir Frank Benson's 1911 brief (about 20-minute) version to Orson Welles's famous fog- and brogue-shrouded 1948 adaptation, Roman Polanski's 1971 big-screen, blood-spattered Technicolor exploration of the tragedy – and now Geoffrey Wright's relocation of *Macbeth* to Melbourne's ganglands. Not only have there been an immense number of stabs (as it were) at this swiftest of Shakespearean tragedies but it has

attracted the attention of filmmakers in many countries: apart from those already mentioned, there have been Russian, Hungarian, Finnish, Yugoslavian, South African, Japanese and Polish productions.<sup>1</sup> The point of adducing these lists of dates and countries of production is just to indicate the enduring fascination the play has exerted on filmmakers over a hundred-year period and to reflect on why this should be so.

However distinguished the film director may be (Olivier, Welles, Kurosawa, Polanski *et al*), Shakespeare represents perhaps the most daunting challenge of all in the matter of adaptation. Partly this is due to the prestige attached to Shakespeare's name. Not



for nothing did the Victorian poet Matthew Arnold write in the sonnet simply entitled 'Shakespeare':

*Others abide our question. Thou art free.  
We ask and ask: Thou smilest and art still,  
Out-topping knowledge.*

It is not that the plays are always necessarily well-known, but that 'Shakespeare' is so monumental an element of the Western cultural landscape. The plays – and *Macbeth* probably as much as any – are studied in schools and universities, written about by scholars and critics, constantly incarnated in new stage productions. All of this points to the unending diversity of interpretation to which the plays, especially the great tragedies, are subject. No filmmaker's interpretation is likely to give universal satisfaction, but the idea of 'fidelity' to the original, one of the most unrewarding approaches to the phenomenon of adaptation, is nowhere less useful than in regard to Shakespeare.

The other huge problem confronting the filmmaker who aspires to 'capture' Shakespeare on screen is that the plays belong to a non-realist category of drama. They are highly stylised in language, artificial in construction, and not intended for naturalistic settings. Now film, more than any other art form, has developed the concept of mimesis to a striking degree: that is, offering the most exact 'imitation, or reflection, or representation of the world and human life'.<sup>2</sup> Film has accustomed us to a level of realistic depiction of the actual world that it demands quite a lot of its audience to accept characters speaking in iambic pentameters.<sup>3</sup> Matters of setting are more easily accommodated to the screen's naturalism: one accepts the limits of the stage in this matter, but the screen has habituated us to images of 'real' palaces and fields, not just a few suggestive, symbolic gestures of 'scenery'. As to structure, a film, if it is not to attract the derogatory epithet 'stagy', will need to, and is perfectly well *able* to, render a play's central action in a continuous narrative that elides the breaks between acts

and scenes. Of the three 'non-filmic' characteristics referred to above, the blank verse in which most of Shakespeare is unfolded is the most intransigently tied to the more obviously artificial mode of the theatre. If you set your film of *Macbeth* among warring twenty-first century Melbourne gangs, the challenge is considerable.

### THE PLAY'S THE THING ...

**W**ELL, what sort of 'thing' is it? It is not the aim of this study to offer any definitive interpretation of so complex a play as *Macbeth*, but, rather, to draw attention to a number of key elements which may be helpful to have in mind as you work towards your own understanding of the play. The mechanics of the plot in *Macbeth* – witches, ghosts, sleep-walking, sword fights, and finally the traitor's head on a pole – may suggest a melodrama of a particularly gory, sensational nature. Shakespeare takes these materials and fashions them into a tragic drama, the power of language working to illuminate the contrasts



and conflicts that are central to its structure. Above all, I want to suggest that the overarching conflict of the play – as basic as that between good and evil – is most vividly situated in Macbeth himself. There are of course external conflicts: the play opens with Duncan at war with rebel forces and it ends with clashes between Malcolm's forces and Macbeth's: the real battlefield, though, is within. What is good and what is evil are by no means clear-cut in *Macbeth*.

### Structural patterning

In terms of what happens, on a level of 'events', we can view the play's action in this way:

- (1) Macbeth's fortunes are in the ascendant, leading to his being crowned king;
- (2) Macbeth in the role of king, attempting to secure his position; and
- (3) The marshalling of forces against Macbeth, leading to his collapse and death.

In such a bald summary, you can at least see how the key events dramatise a process of success/unease/overthrow. In the first of these stages, following the murder of Duncan and the flight of his sons, thus throwing suspicion on them, the gallant warrior Macbeth is crowned king; he has achieved what he wants but at a cost he does not reckon on. The second stage, in which he is living as king, brings happiness to neither him nor his wife. His increasing concern for security plunges him into dreadful killings, and leads to a distancing between him and the wife whose ambition has earlier urged him on. In the last stage, Macbeth and his wife descend towards despair and death, she wracked with suppressed guilt which culminate in the sleepwalking scene and suicide, he desolate at all he has lost and denuded of all but the soldier's brute courage, surrounded by those who 'move only in command,/Nothing in love.' His death at Macduff's sword and Malcolm's easy taking of the castle ('The tyrant's people on both sides do fight') give promise of a new régime in Scotland.

However, such an account, true as it is in its bald way, doesn't take us far. At this point, I'd stress that the killing of Duncan is crucial to the play on many levels. On a structural level, it represents the culmination of Macbeth's aspirations, the fulfilling of the witches' prophecies; it is a turning-point in the relationship between husband and wife; it is symbolic of the overthrow of constituted order in the land; psychologically, it releases dark forces in Macbeth that he will less and less care about keeping under control; and imagistically it yokes together certain key motifs of the play, such as the crown, sleep, blood and murder.

### ACTIVITY

- Consider what the concept of kingship stands for in the play, and what sort of universal significance it might have – in, say, a republic, where a king is not a figurehead.

### Oppositions and images

We may think we know the difference between, say, good and evil,



order and chaos, darkness and light, allegiance and treachery, but it is one of the disturbing aspects of *Macbeth* that it calls such seeming oppositions to account, suggesting that there may be something equivocal about such apparently, straightforwardly, contrasting concepts. And, indeed, the idea of 'equivocation' (blurring the truth by use of ambiguous words) is central to the play and announces itself in the opening scene ('Fair is foul and foul is fair') and is there implicitly at the end when the severed bloody head of Macbeth is present as Malcolm's speech is supposedly ushering in a new era of peace.

Take, as example, the apparent opposition of order and chaos as the play enacts it. A very superficial reading may suggest that the order symbolized by Duncan's reign is plunged into chaos by Macbeth's murdering him and that order is only restored when the forces of Duncan's legitimate heir overthrow Macbeth's violent rule. But this reductive account is utterly unequal to explaining the play's tragic power. On one level,

kingship as symbolised by the crown ('the golden round') does suggest something complete and valuable, but just look at how the play begins. The opening scene with the witches is hardly suggestive of order, at once introducing the prospect of chaos when supposed oppositions lose their clarity. The idea of the battle's being both 'lost and won' resonates into the next scene in which blood, violence and treachery are presented from the start as components of the rule of 'the gracious Duncan', whose first words are 'What bloody man is that?' Blood is from the outset a key image and the account the bleeding captain gives cues us in to a society in the grip of civil war. 'Brave Macbeth' is 'brave' in the context of terrible slaughter and chaos as his sword 'smoked with bloody execution'. As he describes how Macbeth 'unseamed him [the traitor Macdonwald] from the navel to the chops', Duncan interrupts with 'O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!': that is, the king, emblem of constituted authority, applauds acts of hideous violation and reinforces our sense of a kingdom in which *dis*order is the rule.

Macbeth himself is created as part of the already existing chaos, so that we can never, later, see him as simply as an agent of evil who brings order into chaos. The distinction was blurred from the outset as the language of the play makes clear.

There is obviously not space here to go through the whole play in this sort of detail, but it is perhaps enough to note that Duncan, whose 'silver skin' will later be 'laced with his golden blood', has presided over a kingdom violent and riven with treachery. When he arrives at Macbeth's castle, he remarks that it 'hath a pleasant seat' and there is an exchange of courtesies between Duncan and Lady Macbeth that epitomizes the orderly, ceremonious surface and the chaos of murderous impulses that lie just beneath it. When Macbeth has done the murder, he is aware of the monstrousness of the act. He has 'murder[ed] sleep', that 'chief nourisher in life's feast', essential to the natural round of human life, and in an image of great power and resonance (it will be picked up later by Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking



scene) he asks in anguish:

*Will all great Neptune's ocean wash  
this blood  
Clean from my hand? No, this my  
hand will rather  
The tumultuous seas incarnadine,  
Making the green one red. (ii:2)*

He has the imaginative insight (lacking in Lady Macbeth who'd believed 'A little water clears us of this deed') to grasp that his act has destroyed the natural order, frail as it may have been, and brought chaos in its wake. In the speech he makes after the discovery of the murder ('Had I but died an hour before this chance/I had lived a blessed time') is on the one hand hypocritical, aimed at deflecting suspicion from himself, but on the other it renders with fearful clarity to him a true awareness of what he has done. Ambiguities, equivocal meanings, proliferate and clear distinctions evaporate here and throughout. And certainly, though he doesn't know it yet, he will never again know a 'blessèd time'. He descends into further murders, creates a sense of general horror and

discord in the kingdom, and dies with nothing left but his physical courage. Lady Macbeth, who had unimaginatively believed that killing Duncan was only a matter of screwing one's 'courage to the sticking point', spirals into sleepwalking, madness and suicide.

When we turn to the kind of new order which seems intended to offer a spectacle for some hope at the end of the play, it is hard to feel sanguine. What do we know of Malcolm and Macduff that gives us cause for confidence, though they are the nominal figures of 'good' with whom the play leaves us? Remember how Malcolm, in his testing of Macduff in the English scene, reveals for so young a man, 'as yet unknown to woman', an extraordinary grasp of evil, of – for example – 'staunchless avarice', and this knowledge of evil stays with me at least as hauntingly as his later protestation of virtue. And of Macduff himself: 'Why in that rawness left you wife and child?' asks Malcolm of Macduff's presence in England. It is a question Macduff does not – perhaps *cannot* – answer. Certainly Lady Macduff does

not know: 'He loves us not. / He wants the natural touch.' Can anything in his loyalty to Scotland provide answer to his wife's outraged feelings? Chaos has officially become embodied in Macbeth and order in the final promises of Malcolm, but we should consider whether chaos is *all* we associate with Macbeth and whether Malcolm's last speech satisfies us about the prospects of a new order.

### Macbeth himself

THE oppositions, the paradoxes, the contrary pulls which are so pervasive in this play receive their fullest, most intense expression in Macbeth himself. When Malcolm calls him 'this dead butcher' at the play's end, he is offering both a superficial judgment of Macbeth and failing to acknowledge how much a part of the world of Duncan's Scotland Macbeth has been. He has been praised for butchery in the circumstances with which the play opens. Macbeth does the worst things in the play: he kills his king, his friend, hapless grooms and other unnamed people, and Macduff's



family. However, it is in Macbeth that we also get the most powerful sense of the possibilities of goodness. If he will have to ‘look like the innocent flower/ But be the serpent under’t’, as Lady Macbeth urges him, his own insights and language constantly confront us with a man in whom such dualities are possible. His is a nature at war with itself and when the darker, more evil side overthrows the other it is at a terrible cost of which he is always aware. I don’t just mean that he is a tragic hero with what A.C. Bradley thinks of as a fatal flaw<sup>4</sup> that brings a great man low. One might say that Macbeth never *is* a great man in the usual sense. He’s just a successful soldier whose victories chime with the king’s needs: he mentions ‘vaulting ambition’ as the ‘spur to prick the sides of my intent’, but only once and almost as an afterthought. Some part of himself will, he must believe, be fulfilled by the kingship and his imagination has certainly been stirred by the witches’ words. But it’s almost as though Shakespeare were less interested in the motive for killing Duncan than in examining the kind of

nature that would do it and suffer for it. Macbeth overcomes what is best in his own nature and does this terrible act, but never loses sight of that side of himself that he has suppressed.

To support my notion of Macbeth as himself offering our sharpest images of what goodness might be, consider the soliloquy in Act 1 Scene 7, just after Duncan’s arrival. There may be something commonplace in the anxiety that opens the speech, ‘If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well/ It were done quickly ...’: he would like to be king but without the consequences he can so easily imagine. It is not just that he appreciates Duncan’s virtues (we have to take these more or less on trust), but his imagination and his sense of goodness defiled by an act such as the one he contemplates are most vividly felt in these lines:

*And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubim,  
horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every  
eye,*

*That tears shall drown the wind. (i:7)*

The man whose mind works as Macbeth’s does here is far from being given over to evil. He has in fact a remarkably clear grasp of what goodness is, what trust, and honest outrage at its violation, and pity are, and he goes unerringly to a symbol of absolute innocence in a potentially terrifying situation. It is hard to imagine Duncan or Macduff or Malcolm coming up with a speech that so goes to the heart of the human apprehension of goodness.

I am not wanting to make a case for Macbeth as a nice man who is misunderstood but, rather, as a man who has a sharper apprehension of goodness than anyone else in the play. When he later speaks so poignantly of what his life has become and what he ‘must not look to have’ – ‘honour, love, obedience, troops of friends’ – it is clear that he is aware of what he has lost, that he has drained his life of significance but still *knows* what that significance was. He is a man who has committed himself to evil but without



losing awareness of the good. It is in such a duality that his tragedy lies: a man simply consumed with 'vaulting ambition' will not be overcome by the 'horrid imaginings' that have wracked him. When he warns Macduff 'But get thee back; / My soul is too much charged with blood of thine already', he *still* knows it was appalling to have killed Macduff's family.

### Poetic drama: blood and darkness

**T**HE essence of poetic drama is that the drama is created *in* the language, in those images that pervade the play. Blood and darkness dominate the play. The bloody captain, the blood-stained daggers, Duncan's blood, the hands that will never be clean but could turn the sea red, 'blood-boltered Banquo' at the feast, Lady Macbeth's feverish hand-washing ('Out damned spot!') and her appalling question – 'Who would have thought the old man [Duncan] to have had so much blood in him?': all these, and more, carry through the image of blood-letting which is at the play's

heart and culminate in the horrifying image, quoted at the top of this essay, which evokes Macbeth's own sense of what his life has become since the murder of Duncan. For Macbeth himself, blood – which sustains life and which he has shed – is the key image; but remember too that this is a society in which the shedding of blood is almost commonplace.

Images of darkness are scarcely less potent. The divided nature of Macbeth, in which the evil side seeks to assert itself, must constantly cleave to the dark in the forlorn hope of rendering invisible those instincts and actions which the better side of his nature would resist. Banquo warns Macbeth against 'the instruments of darkness' which may seduce and betray them. Macbeth himself, yielding to temptation, bids the stars, 'hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires.' Lady Macbeth can only 'strike' in darkness:

*Come thick night, ...  
That my keen knife see not the wound  
it makes*

*Nor heaven peep through the blanket  
of the dark  
To cry, 'Hold, hold!' (i:5)*

When Macbeth tells her that Duncan comes tonight and plans to leave tomorrow, her response is 'O never / Shall sun that morrow see!' And just before Duncan's murder, his son Fleance tells him, 'The moon is down' and Banquo takes up the theme of darkness with: 'There's husbandry in heaven: / Their candles are all out'.

### ACTIVITY

- Trace such imagistic patterns through the play: there are many more images of blood and darkness than indicated here: explore, too, how motifs such as sleep and clothing are made to bear the weight of the play's drama.

There is a great deal more that one might say about such a play – for instance, the use of the supernatural; the political context; the function of the soliloquys; the shifting relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.



I suggest that study of all such matters will involve closest attention to the workings of the verse itself.

### AN AUSTRALIAN MACBETH

**M**ACBETH has been frequently, and sometimes memorably, performed on Australian stages, but not until 2006 has there been a feature film version to add to the already long international list of such adaptations. Director Geoffrey Wright, best known till now for *Romper Stomper* (1992), a violent study of skinheads and racism, has adapted the play to contemporary Melbourne gang wars and has this to say about what he sees as its central drama: ‘The themes of the story are timeless, murder breeds murder, blood will have blood. Once you start killing it’s hard to stop, like a nuclear reaction, and that’s pretty much what we’ve seen at the height of the Melbourne gangland wars.’<sup>15</sup>

### ACTIVITY

- Since you are viewing this film as an accompaniment to the study of the play, it is important to come to terms with the play first, then to consider how far the new film version illuminates aspects of it for you. What follows draws attention to some key areas in which you might examine how Wright has approached *Macbeth*, rather than a full-scale analysis of the film.

### Transfer in time and place

There is no reason why any production of *Macbeth*, or any famous play, has to be confined to a particular period setting. Richard Loncraine’s exciting 1995 film version of *Richard III*, starring Ian McKellen, relocated the action from fifteenth-century England to the 1930s and the rise of fascism. What is no doubt essential if the film is to be seen as derived from *Macbeth*, let alone drawing almost entirely on it for its dialogue, is to establish some kind of set-up in which hierarchical ambitions and conflict leading to treachery can

be convincingly played out. It is easy to see how the publicity surrounding the assassinations in Melbourne’s underworld and the jockeying for places there might have suggested an ambience for relocating Shakespeare’s tragic drama. In my view, for most of the time Wright’s decision in this matter is vindicated, though I have reservations about two key episodes which one might have expected film to handle with greater fluency and excitement than the stage can.

These two sequences are the very early night scene on the river which leads to a shoot-out between rival gangs and the taking of Macbeth’s house and his life in the near-final episode. Neither of these, despite all that an insistent musical score (by John Clifford White) and frantic hand-held camera work (by Will Gibson) can do to create the mayhem of open conflict’s erupting in violent action, is clear about what is happening from moment to moment. The former stands in for the ‘battle’ in which Macbeth has distinguished himself as Duncan’s general, and the bleeding Captain’s



report in the play is infinitely more vivid and graphic than this flurry of rapidly edited shots unaccompanied by any dialogue. A similar confusion results from the montage of invasion, with laser beams, much shouting, smoke bombs and bodies falling, with White's wholly apt score again in evidence. Perhaps Wright's aim here is in fact to suggest just the sort of confusion that such a raid might involve, but even so the viewer will generally want more guidance as to who is doing what to whom and where. This is especially true of the early sequence where those unfamiliar with the play – and those who know it well – may well feel the action is obscured.

The Macbeths' house, that 'pleasant seat', is convincingly set at some remove from the gangsters' milieu of clubs and poolrooms and alleys, and the Macduff house, 'surprised' by Macbeth's thugs is a light and airy place set in wooded hills. The physical setting (locations include various suburbs of Melbourne and Mt Macedon), with the river twice making its presence felt as a site of machinations,

offers no obstacle to the relocation of the drama. Nor, on the whole, does the contemporary period. This aspect of the transfer from Shakespeare was always going to be the trickiest: would the cast opt for some sort of uniform 'stage English'? how would the verse survive the transmission from unaffected Australian lips? The answer is, perhaps surprisingly, that it makes for few problems. Sometimes, the remaining references to 'My lord' may jar, spoken as they are without irony; but generally the adaptation compresses the verse to its purpose without doing violence to the original.

There are minor changes to the verse to accommodate both the scene and the time: Macbeth now threatens 'The house [my italics] of Macduff I will surprise', rather than Shakespeare's 'castle' and for good reasons of credibility; with less justification 'Never shake thy gory locks at me' changes 'locks' to 'head' with a consequent loss of visual suggestiveness.

Nevertheless, it was an audacious decision to retain the verse: the old Brit-

ish film, *Joe Macbeth* (1955), set the story in the American underworld but used a modern idiom for the dialogue. (A reviewer at the time wrote about it: 'The idea of a gangster *Macbeth* is not in itself an unworkable one...' before going on to savage the way it was handled there.)<sup>6</sup> The adaptation of the verse by Wright and Victoria Hill (also co-producer and Lady Macbeth) is in the interests of clarity. This means that a good deal is cut: film surely can do some things without, or with reduced, dialogue whereas the stage requires virtually non-stop dialogue. The matter of a range of Australian accents, it could be argued, merely underlines the universality of the play's preoccupations.

## ACTIVITY

- Examine some of the longer speeches or exchanges of dialogue in the play and compare them with the ways in which these are presented in the film. To what extent are the resources of cinema – mise-en-scène (including matters such as actors' facial expressions



and body language, settings, camera movement, angle and distance, effects of lighting) called on to do the work of dialogue?

Momentarily I wondered if the gangland milieu was going to allow enough scope for our sympathies. Why should we feel any more or less sympathy for, say, this Malcolm, Macduff or Banquo than for this Macbeth? Aren't they all criminals? There are at least two ways of dealing with this matter. First, even among the criminal class there are no doubt shades of villainy. I was reminded of a line by the great English novelist, Ivy Compton-Burnett: 'The wrong is never the only thing a wrong-doer has done ... That is the pathos of criminals. No class has a greater.'<sup>17</sup> Second, as one ponders this, one is reminded that Shakespeare has not given us clear-cut distinctions between good and evil. I have, for instance, argued above that it is in Macbeth himself that one finds the most eloquent understanding of what innocence and goodness might be. Wright's gangsters no more fall into cut-and-dried categories than Shake-

spere's kings and lords.

### What has been transferred?

In terms of the main events of the play it could be said that the film has adhered closely to the underlying Shakespearean narrative. After a gangland war from which Duncan has emerged victorious, he publicly anoints his son Malcolm as his successor. Macbeth, who has been a valued henchman to Duncan, has been tempted by the idea, put to him by three schoolgirl 'witches', that he might himself one day occupy Duncan's position. Lady Macbeth, ambitious for her husband, spurs him into killing Duncan when the latter comes to stay. Suspicion falls on Malcolm who flees; Macbeth assumes leadership; he murders Banquo who, he fears, suspects him and whose son Fleance has been foretold as future leader; he has Macduff's family killed as an act of irrational cruelty because Macduff has not accepted his leadership; he and Lady Macbeth become estranged and she suicides; and Macduff and Malcolm plot to

bring Macbeth down, and, in the final, shoot-out, do so. I quote this sequence of events merely to indicate that the film does not, in its basic plot, play fast and loose with Shakespeare, though in less centrally important matters in the narrative chain it is prepared to take its own line.

The main characters are, as this outline makes clear, all retained, and their key functions in the narrative remain recognizably what Shakespeare attributed to them. In less important cases there are some changes of emphasis, which may excite interest along the way without distorting the play's narrative. Some examples. The rebel MacDonwald (Shakespeare's 'Thane of Cawdor') who is merely mentioned in the play is executed in the Cumberland penthouse, which Malcolm (Shakespeare's 'Prince of Cumberland') is to 'inherit'. The minor character of Angus (played by Rel Hunt) is given more prominence than in the play and his long blond hair means that he is more noticeable than some of the others. Fleance, Banquo's son who escapes the assassination at-



tempt by Macbeth's thugs, is there in the final attack on Macbeth's property, and leaves the house with Macduff at the end. To establish Macduff as a loving family man, the film invents a brief scene of his saying goodbye to his sleeping wife and child, taking a painting by the latter with him, as he goes off to get his orders from Duncan. And so on. None of these additions or changes affects the onward rush of the narrative of blood and darkness.

### So what is new?

Unlike Neil Armfield's *Twelfth Night* (1987), which seems to be the only other Australian adaptation of Shakespeare to screen, Wright's film is not a record of a stage production, as Armfield's film essentially was (of his own production<sup>8</sup>). Wright's film reminds one of Orson Welles's dictum<sup>9</sup> about the adaptation of a literary text to film: if the filmmaker hasn't got something new to say about the original, he should leave it alone. The examples I have given above are comparatively minor in the over-all pattern of the film: it doesn't matter that Malcolm flees

Macbeth's house, after his father's murder, not with brother Donalbain (omitted from the film), but with his girlfriend. One registers that this is not the Malcolm that Shakespeare allows to say: 'I am as yet unknown to woman', as Wright's Malcolm and his girl are in bed when the news of the murder breaks. At the very end, the film doesn't allow Malcolm the final words, as though Wright hadn't confidence in Malcolm's capacity to deliver what he claims in the play, and has more in whatever Macduff and Fleance represent.

If, however, Welles is right, as I believe him to be, what can this film version of one of the most famous, most produced plays in the world offer us that is a genuinely new emphasis? For me – and I'm aware that this may not seem so new to some, but that is part of the fascination of adapting famous works; they have always said and meant different things to different people – it is the motif announced in the film's opening scene set in the Melbourne cemetery. Macbeth standing inscrutably in the bleakness,

having just watched the schoolgirl witches leave, turns to where a weeping woman (Lady Macbeth we at once assume) is laying white roses on a grave where the inscription reads 'BELOVED SON', and her face is raw with grief. The film is subtle enough not to linger over the gravestone and the camera doesn't reveal the child's dates or parents' names. There was a famously anthologised essay by Shakespearean scholar L.C. Knights entitled 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?'<sup>10</sup> in which the author derided Shakespearean criticism which treated the characters as if they were real people. But the *title* of this essay comes inescapably to mind here in this opening sequence. The film retains her later lines: 'I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me', this providing motivation for the graveyard scene, but I want to claim more than this for its significance.

What the scene really sets off is our sense of Macbeth's childlessness, more specifically his *sonlessness*. Wright and Hill's adaptation fore-



grounds the pattern of fathers and sons which threads its way through the play but which I have not seen so explicitly developed before. The other main male characters are all seen in relation to their sons. Duncan, as noted above, publicly makes over 'The Cumberland' enterprise to Malcolm. Macduff, in the moment created for the film, kisses his sleeping son and the last image after the murder of his wife and child is of a family snapshot of the three. Banquo is seen exercising paternal vigilance by restraining the youthful Fleance from drinking, and they hurtle round the countryside together on motorcycles. Fleance, who escapes murder as in the play, returns at the end (as he does *not* in the play) as part of the avenging forces led by Malcolm and Macduff, the latter having taken Fleance, son of his dead comrade, under his wing, perhaps in part as replacement for the loss of his own son at Macbeth's instigation, and the film ends with their leaving together, as though this film version has more confidence in what they might offer than in the play's final words for Malcolm. (Given the persistence of

this motif, for which warranty exists in Shakespeare's play, I am surprised that Wright omits that stoic acceptance of Old Siward's when he hears of his son's death: 'Had he his hurts before?', and hearing that the son died bravely he calls him 'God's soldier'.) In the light of the emphasis the film gives to this father-son chain, it is not I think fanciful to suggest that the film wants us to see Macbeth's deprivation in this matter as being of serious importance in his motivation. All he can offer, by contrast, is a cupboard full of sporting trophies in the guest bedroom where Duncan will die – and his dead child's empty swing, swaying gently in the early morning breeze. The emphasis seems to me both 'new' and wholly justified in terms of the antecedent text, if that's what purists want.

### CONCLUSION

**T**HERE are plenty of other important aspects of the film one might, with unlimited space, consider. How is our response to the Macbeth-Lady Macbeth relationship affected by the opening graveyard

scene? The film characteristically shows them in moments of tension in tight close-ups which works particularly well to signify the kind of pressure she is putting on him or, later, the way in which he slyly keeps information from her ('Be innocent of the knowledge ...'). Her derangement in the sleepwalking scene is done with a passionate realism that is far from some of the more 'poetic' treatments one has seen, and the dead body, in a bath of blood, is genuinely shocking – as is Macbeth's reaction in these circumstances ('She should have died hereafter ...').

### DISCUSS

- How far do this Macbeth and Lady Macbeth deserve Malcolm's summing up as 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen'? How important is the grief at the death of their child to your understanding of their relationship as the film presents it? The filmmakers believe this made Lady Macbeth both more vulnerable and more desperate: does this seem to be the case? How does it



square with your response to her in the play?

## DISCUSS

What, too, does one make of the presentation of the play's supernatural elements? The film makes them a trio of sexy schoolgirls, first seen desecrating statues in the cemetery as the play's opening words about the equivocal nature of good and evil are retained while they go about their work of defacement, eyeing Macbeth suggestively as they leave. When they reappear, they cling about him seductively, the camera whirling around him as if to enact the turmoil in his mind. Their final appearance is in a dream of Macbeth's, recalling how he has previously asked 'Are you fantastical?' In this sequence, in which his gnawing insecurity in the position he has sold his soul for is at stake, the witches, naked, prepare potions with repellent ingredients shown in literal realism, and there is a mocking ring to their apparently reassuring words about Birnam Wood's coming to Dunsinane (a logging-truck, in one of the film's inventive touches).

- What is the effect of not having Banquo privy to the witches' prophecies? Does this allow us to wonder if they are entirely a figment of Macbeth's drug-assisted imagination? How does it modify our response to Banquo, whom Shakespeare shows to have been tempted by the witches?

To end with Macbeth himself, his great soliloquies are all there, if sometimes in truncated form. It is a measure of the film's intelligent re-imagining of the play that these are presented in ways that do not merely interrupt the flow of the narrative but are seen to be part of this. The soliloquy is an intensely theatrical device which can work potentially in the artificiality of the stage but which is less easy to accept in the more fluid realism of the film. It is also the occasion when, since the speaker is alone on stage, that we may come nearest to his inmost thoughts. Consider the soliloquy beginning 'If it were done when 'tis done': in Wright's film it

is heard on the soundtrack as Macbeth picks his way through his guests, his eye lighting briefly on Banquo and Fleance. Here the film creates the sense of a limited, not fundamentally evil man, battling with his own dark thoughts, as he makes his way to tell Lady Macbeth that 'We will proceed no further in this business', subtly enough also leaving open the possibility that he may just *want* her to persuade him. In Sam Worthington's low-key performance as Macbeth, one may sometimes feel he lacks tragic stature but he seems always aware of the man's emotional complexity and moral ambiguity..

A police investigation complete with computers and Macbeth's own security system, whereby screens monitor the approach of anyone arriving at his stronghold, are mere frills, entertaining enough and part of the paraphernalia of creating a realist effect in the transposition of the play to a remote time and place. What matters more is how far the film works on its own terms and how far – and in what ways – it offers insight and increased understanding

of its great original.

Brian McFarlane is an Honorary Associate Professor at Monash University. His *Encyclopedia of British Film* will appear in its 3rd edition in 2007. He is currently co-authoring a book on director Michael Winterbottom.

#### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Check out these websites for more details: <http://ftvdb.sigmer.net/search/Titles> and <http://www.imdb.com/find?s=tt&q=macbeth>
- <sup>2</sup> M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Liter-*

*ary Terms*. Fourth Edition. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York et al, 1981, p.36.

- <sup>3</sup> Sally Potter's recent film, *Yes* (2005), in which the characters converse in rhyming couplets is an oddity indeed.
- <sup>4</sup> A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, Macmillan, London, 1950.
- <sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Wright, 'Director's Statement', *Production Notes: Macbeth*, 2006.
- <sup>6</sup> P.H., *Monthly Film Bulletin*, December 1955, p.175.
- <sup>7</sup> Ivy Compton-Burnett, *A House and*

*Its Head* (1955), Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1958, p.228.

- <sup>8</sup> See James Wattes' account of this film in Scott Murray (ed), *Australian Film 1978-1994*. Melbourne: OUP, 1995, p.234.
- <sup>9</sup> I can no longer find the exact source of this remark, made I think to director Peter Bogdanovich, not later than the early 1980s.
- <sup>10</sup> L.C. Knights, 'How many children had Lady Macbeth?' (1933). Republished by Haskell House, New York, 1982, in a volume with the essay's title.



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