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## Recurring Elements of The *Macbeth* Mythos<sup>2</sup>

**Abstract:** *This article starts off from a distinction between an Aristotelian and a semiotic understanding of art to analyse the lines of continuity between a sourcetext and its adaptations. Thus, it contrasts Shakespeare's Macbeth to Ángel-Luis Pujante's Spanish translation of the play, to Welcome Msomi's stage adaptation (uMabatha), and to two film adaptations by Akira Kurosawa (Kumonos jô) and Billy Morrissette (Scotland, PA), to examine the persistence of the mythos (or Aristotelian plot) in the adaptation process and question the extent to which the Shakespearean play is still available if the sourcetext is effaced. It explores the mechanisms of repetition/reproduction and difference/transformation of the adaptation process, and defends a relationship of cultural co-dependency between sourcetext and adaptation.*

**Key words:** Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Adaptation, Translation, Performance, Film

The identification art/reality is rooted in the Aristotelian conception of art as mimesis, as “imitation of nature” or “representation of life”, which extends to Aristotle’s classification of the “constituent parts” of tragedy (Hamilton Fyfe 5). Its four main elements — since for Aristotle music (*melos*), and visual effects (*opsis*) merely “enrich” the tragic genre (29) — are plot (*mythos*), character (*ethos*), diction (*lexis*) and thought (*dianoia*). Instead, if Aristotle’s mimetic approach to art is discarded in favour of a semiotic definition, that is, art as constructed within sets of sign-systems, those four Aristotelian elements of tragedy are reduced to one, *lexis*, since the rest — plot, character and thought — are all constructions, created through the interacting languages of drama, namely, *melos* (the language of music and sounds), *opsis* (understood as the visual semiotics of drama) and *lexis*.

Of Shakespeare’s treatment of *opsis* little is recorded, apart from the potential evidence provided by the Peacham or the De Witt’s drawings. Regarding Shakespeare’s dramatic treatment of *melos*, the text indicates the use of snatches, songs and certain diegetic sounds at certain points in performance, whereas the use of extradiegetic music is much debated<sup>3</sup>. Still, some of the music scores used in Shakespearean performance are available, and it is *melos*, but mostly, Shakespeare’s *lexis* what has survived and what constitutes a Shakespeare play. Paradoxically, adaptations of Shakespeare are able to activate

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<sup>3</sup> Nosworthy 1969, Gurr 1982 and Lindley 2005.

Shakespeare's plays without reproducing Shakespeare's *lexis* (nor *melos*). As Fischlin and Fortier argue, adaptations "radically alter the shape and significance of another work so as to invoke that work and yet be different from it — so that any adaptation is, and is not, Shakespeare" (4). In that way, although Shakespeare's *lexis* — the text — is absent, these hybrid objects manage to rearticulate elements from Shakespeare's linguistic network. Thus, this paper sets off to discuss those elements which remain in adaptation through a selection of different circulations of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and determine the extent to which the Shakespearean play is available if the sourcetext is effaced.

Before going into adaptations<sup>4</sup>, there is another object which 'is, and is not' Shakespeare, 'is, and is not' an adaptation:

FIRST WITCH Where have you been, sister?

SECOND WITCH Killing pigs.

THIRD WITCH And you, sister, where?

FIRST WITCH With chestnuts on the skirt, the wife of a sailor

chewed and chewed. 'Give me', I say.

'Back off, you witch!', screams the dirty big-ass.

This extract resembles the beginning of act one, scene three from *Macbeth*, when in fact it is a back-translation from a foreign edition of the text (Pujante in Shakespeare *The Tempest* 47). Translation is one of the cultural objects that, without reproducing the sourcetext, manages to rearticulate the play. Still, just as certain elements from the sourcetext are absent, other elements can be missing too. Compared to its English equivalent:

FIRST WITCH Where hast thou been, sister?

SECOND WITCH Killing swine.

THIRD WITCH Sister, where thou?

FIRST WITCH A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,

And munched, and munched, and munched: 'Give

me,' quoth I;

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<sup>4</sup> The difficulty of finding labels to accurately typify these hybrid texts is manifest in Fischlin and Fortier's apologetic introduction to their *Adaptations of Shakespeare* ("adaptation is not the right name for the work represented in this anthology, because there is no right name" [2]). Fischlin and Fortier also criticise attempts to classify adaptations according to their formal characteristics, like Ruby Cohn's account (1976). In this paper, the word 'adaptation' stands for the different varieties of (inter)texts that are connected to Shakespeare's plays.

‘Aroynt thee, witch’ the rump-fed ronyon cries.

the translation shows isolated semantic differences at word-level and variations in word and phrase order within the sentence, yet other changes include the lyrical attributes of Shakespeare’s poetry (rhythm, tone, word-play, etc.). Nevertheless, the translator attempts to arrive at the best available rendering of the sourcetext, providing a target text that maintains the initial number of characters, the order of dialogue, its (closest available) content and, subsequently, the narratological structure of the text. Also, by rendering the sourcetext’s stage directions, the translator ensures that a potential performance of the text maintains the characters’ entrances and exists, the use of props or diegetic sounds<sup>5</sup>. Although translations cannot sidestep the alteration of the text’s formal features or the transformation of word-to-word meaning due to the unavoidable differences between the different linguistic systems, in Aristotelian terms, a translation of *Macbeth* still provides the exact same *mythos*. On the other hand, the linguistic construction of character — which includes both the Aristotelian notions of *ethos* and *dianoia* — is also transformed in translation due to the asymmetrical correspondence between languages. Nevertheless, by attempting the closest possible rendering of the sourcetext, the translator aims to provide the closest linguistic representation of these elements too.

Contrary to translations, adaptations of Shakespeare do not necessarily rely on the narratological structure of the English text, for the adaptor is not bound to provide a linguistic equivalent. Without the strictures of fidelity and equivalence, the adaptor is only interested in taking those elements which are relevant for the adaptation. Still, in *uMabatha*, Welcome Msomi continuously provides close equivalents to the sourcetext’s narratological structure:

BHANGHANE Hai! My son, it is dark.

The lights of heaven have all died.

Have been swallowed by the dark.

FOLOSE Yes, father, it is dark.

The lights of heaven have all died.

BHANGANE The day’s fires are burnt out

Even the lingering sparks in the night sky

Have been swallowed by the dark.

FOLOSE Truly the darkness has crept into every corner.

BHANGANE Hawu! Hold my shield and assegai,

I have stood on a thorn.

*Enter MABATHA*

Give me my assegai! Who is that?

MABATHA Do not be so fierce, my friend,

It is I, Mabatha.

BHANGANE Oh! Are you not resting yet?

BANQUO How goes the night, boy?

FLEANCE The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.

BANQUO And she goes down at twelve.

FLEANCE I take’t, ’tis later, Sir.

BANQUO Hold, take my sword.—There’s husbandry in Heaven,

Their candles are all out.—Take thee that too.—

A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,

And yet I would not sleep; merciful powers,

Restrain in me the cursèd thoughts that nature

Gives way to in response.

*Enter MACBETH and a servant with a torch*

—Give me my sword.

Who’s there?

MACBETH A friend.

BANQUO What sir, not yet at rest? The King’s abed.

<sup>5</sup> Concerning dialogue and stage directions, editors of Shakespeare provide different variations; thus, translations are also affected by the choice of sourcetext(s).

King Mdangazeli is sleep. He asked me  
To bring you these gifts, which speak of his joy  
At being received like a father into your kraal.  
[...] (Fletcher and Fortier 174-175)

He hath been in unusual pleasure,  
And sent forth great largess to your offices.  
This diamond he greets your wife withal  
By the name of most kind hostess, and shut up  
In measureless content.  
[...]  
(Shakespeare *Macbeth* 1990 122-123)

In this way, *Macbeth's mythos* is not only reproduced through the repetition of the main narratological elements, but also through a parallel articulation of the character's lines, its order, and part of its content (even duration at times). A comparison between *uMabatha* and *Macbeth's* dramatis personae provides an almost exact parallel in the number of characters, while some of the characters' names even preserve a linguistic echo from the sourcetext (Macbeth/Mabatha, Banquo/Bhangane, Macduff/Mafudu etc.) The slight reduction in *uMabatha's* number of characters does not differ from some stage productions of *Macbeth* that have repeatedly reduced the text's cast by condensing or merging the shorter roles<sup>6</sup>. Thus, the order of the events, that is, the narratological succession of conflicts and actions in *uMabatha*, parallel those in *Macbeth*, and Msomi provides a spectacle which resembles those productions that relocate Shakespeare's plays in different cultural contexts through costume and scenery, and maintain the sourcetext<sup>7</sup>.

Regarding the construction of the dramatic persona, that is, the linguistic and visual elements that sequentially accumulate to shape the audience's perception of a character — the Aristotelian level of *ethos* and *dianoia* — *uMabatha* and *Macbeth* have parallels and divergences. Following *Macbeth's* outline, characters in *uMabatha's* maintain their family, social and political status. Thus, Mabatha is presented as married to Kamadonsela (Lady Macbeth), while starting out as Dangane's subordinate and Bhangane's superior. In terms of characterisation, Mabatha's initial hesitation to kill Dangane ("Let us think about this further" versus Macbeth's "We will speak further"), or Kamadonsela's doubts about his resolution to do so ("But yet I fear / The gentle dove that nestles in your heart" versus "yet do I fear thy nature, / It is too full o'th' milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way") present Mabatha's motivations as a mirror of Macbeth's (Fischlin and Fortier 173, 172; Brooke in Shakespeare *Macbeth* 114, 111). But the linguistic distance that separates these speeches provides differentiated modes of characterisation, as Msomi consistently provides part of the sourcetext's semantic content yet reformulated through utterances that reconstruct the characterisation of the dramatic personae. This is achieved by cultural relocation; thus, the speech of *uMabatha's* characters is articulated through references to African nature, animals, agriculture, deities, utensils, and reinforced by the use of tribal costumes, music and dance in performance. In *uMabatha*, it is not only Shakespeare's language that is absent but, to a large extent, Shakespeare's culture<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Cast transformations from Davenant on are shown in Brook (Brook in Shakespeare *Macbeth* 34-49).

<sup>7</sup> See Tim Albery's 1996 production at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre, or the recent 2007 production directed by Connall Morrison at the Swan.

<sup>8</sup> Culture-specific elements are reshaped in Msomi's play. For example, in the extracts provided above, the reference to a clock in *Macbeth* is transformed into the natural perception of time

This is also the case in Akira Kurosawa's *Kumonos jô (Throne of Blood)* where, in spite of the different transformations in structure and characterisation, and the relocation to medieval Japan, traces of *Macbeth* are still recognisable. By preserving the stature and hierarchy of the characters in *Macbeth*, the film, as Msomi's play, presents the "doings of fine men", maintaining one of the Aristotelian requirements for tragedy — as opposed to the depiction of the "actions of inferior men" attributed to comedy (Hamilton Fyfe 15). *Throne of Blood* sets off with the messenger's accounts of the war against Fujimaki and Inui and omits *Macbeth's* initial scene with the witches; still, the prophetic elements of *Macbeth's* plot are rearticulated in the next sequence. Unlike Msomi, who maintains the number of witches (the three Songomas), Kurosawa departs from the sourcetext by offering one spirit. Without the possibility of dialogue among the witches, the prophetic ghost initially functions as the chorus by reflecting on the contrast between earthly ambition and the inexorable coming of death. After the spirit's song, Captain Washizu (*Macbeth*) and Miki (*Banquo*) finally depart with the spirit and the film re-enacts *Macbeth's* act one, scene three, rearticulating the narratological anticipatory elements that drive the narration. Thus, the function of the three witches in *Macbeth* is compensated by the film's opening voice-over and the ghost's song.

The film, as an independent, autonomous cultural object, provides other discrepancies with Shakespeare's play: if compared to the sourcetext, in the initial scene Lord Tsuzuki's (Duncan's) desperate situation is prolonged and, thus, the heroic effect of Washizu and Miki's final victory is underlined; also, Washizu explicitly considers the importance of loyalty and obedience when discussing with Lady Washizu the murder of Lord Tsuzuki; the Lady Macduff subplot is omitted; and, in the final scene, it is not the enemy but Washizu's own people that kill him. Still, *Throne of Blood* preserves a number of narratological elements that suffice to re-enact the *Macbeth mythos*. First, the trajectory of the tragedy's hero — the rise and fall of Captain Washizu — follows the prophetic sequence anticipated by a supernatural character. The hero's female partner (Lady Washizu) acts as a primary instigator in the usurping murder and is later haunted by imaginary bloodstains caused by her guilty conscience. The tragic hero's male companion, Miki, is also murdered and appears as a supernatural entity, accentuating the hero's remorse and initiating his downfall.

On the other hand, there are elements that seem to fade in adaptation. For example, the porter scene in *Macbeth* that, although reshaped, is maintained in *uMabatha* through the character Msibithi, is omitted altogether in *Throne of Blood*. Since the porter scene does not affect the narrative development of the play, it seems that its comic effect is not indispensable to the rearticulation of the *Macbeth mythos*. But then, the last of the witches' prophecies, which does affect the narratological resolution of the play, also seems to be fading in its transformation as adaptation. *uMabatha* maintains the first of the predictions<sup>9</sup>,

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through the sky's light in *uMabatha*. Also, in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth's* arrival to his castle is communicated to Lady Macbeth by letter, whereas Kamadonsela hears the message through the sound of a "*distant drumbeat*" (Fischlin and Fortier 172).

<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare provides: "Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsin Hill / Shall come against him" (Brooke in Shakespeare *Macbeth* 174), whereas Msomi rephrases as: "The lionhearted Mbathazeli will be / the only chief to reign / Until the leaves of the forest become impis and approach his kraal" (Fischlin and Fortier 182). Again, the culture-specific

but it reshapes the second riddle. The lines “Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn / The power of man; for none of woman born / shall harm Macbeth” (Fischlin and Fortier 174) are transformed into “Beware of someone. I warn you, / Beware of someone / Who is of unnatural birth” (181). By this transformation, Msomi eliminates part of the play’s suspense by effacing one of the plot’s final twists, while *Throne of Blood* provides a similar variation. On the one hand, the parallel reference to the Birnam Wood is maintained. Kurosawa is in this way able to include the final scene where the Cobweb Forest attacks the castle. On the other hand, there is no reference to the second riddle that, in narrative terms, allows the hero to be killed by his own people. Thus, Kurosawa eliminates one of the characterising elements of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to provide his own interpretation of the play.

In the Aristotelian sense, *Scotland, PA* (Billy Morrissette’s 2001 film adaptation) should not be considered a tragedy, since, for example, its characters are anything but “a representation of men better than ourselves” (Hamilton Fyfe 57). The film transposes *Macbeth* to a fictitious American town in the 1970s, and focuses on Mac and Pat’s (the McBeths’) plan to steal money from a fast-food restaurant owned by Norm Duncan — Mac’s boss. The robbery leads to Duncan’s accidental death after passing out and eventually his head ends up in the restaurant’s frier. The hot oil from the frier spills over Pat’s hand, and thus Macbeth’s parody is further developed until Mac eventually fights detective McDuff and dies, while Pat bleeds to death after chopping her own hand off with a butcher’s knife. The roles in *Scotland, PA* are re-characterised through a newly scripted *mythos* that presents Mac as an anti-hero with a tendency to alcohol and drugs, Donald Duncan (Donalbain) as a teenager with repressed homoerotic desires, or the witches as three stoned hippies.

Among the adaptations presented so far, *Scotland, PA* constitutes the most distant variation of *Macbeth* in terms of characterisation and plot. Of the many omissions, additions and emendations to the narrative structure of the sourcetext or the visual and linguistic reshaping of the characters, the treatment of the witches exemplifies the departure from Shakespeare’s text. In the film, the witches alert Mac of the possibility of improving his position at the restaurant, whereas they do not mention Banko, who does not play a role in the witches’ prophecy. In their last intervention, the witches do not trick Mac into believing he is invincible, nor do they mention any parallel reference to the Birnam Wood. Instead, the witches discuss how Mac should avoid the police investigation:

SECOND WITCH I’ve got it. Mac should kill McDuff’s entire family. That’ll stop him.

THIRD WITCH Oh! That would work ... a thousand years ago!

SECOND WITCH What’s that’s supposed to mean.

THIRD WITCH These are modern times. You can’t go around killing everybody.

FIRST WITCH *To Mac.* Can’t you?

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elements from *Macbeth* are elicited, yet the narratological construction of the sourcetext is maintained.

The witches' last prophetic appearance anticipates the final battle between Mac and McDuff, but it also includes what can be read as a meta-dramatic complaint about the source text's resolution, unable to live up to the conventions of 'modern times'.

Still, although Shakespeare's text is reshaped, debunked and even ridiculed, the film maintains certain elements that evoke the tragedy of *Macbeth*. As in Shakespeare's play, the hero kills his superior, Duncan — although he is succeeded by McDuff, and not by Malcolm. Pat (Lady Macbeth) continues to be presented as the instigator of Duncan's murder — although she does not show a trace of remorse — and suffers delusions involving the (oil) stain on her hand. Anthony Bonconi (Banquo) — although presented as a single young man without descendants — is murdered by Mac and haunts him at Mac's promotion party. And finally, the witches — although to a limited extent — act as a driving force in the development of the film's action.

As has been shown, the cultural circulation of Shakespeare's plays is achieved, in various degrees, both by reproduction and by transformation. Through translation, Shakespeare's plays are reshaped through the semantic and lyrical possibilities of each target language, whereas, on the stage, directors present a version of the source text that is communicated through the theatrical elements of performance. Once Shakespeare's plays enter the field of adaptation where the appropriator defines the means and rules of representation, the source text can be reproduced closely or manipulated to the extent where it is barely recognisable. *uMabatha* relocates *Macbeth* to Zulu culture while it still denotes a theatrical, narrative and even linguistic dependence on Shakespeare's play. On the other hand, departing from Shakespeare's rhetoric devices, Kurosawa selects parts of the play's narrative structure to rewrite *Macbeth* into a tragic study on loyalty. Finally, Billy Morrissette, barely touching on a handful of narrative elements from *Macbeth*, does away with any trace of Shakespeare's poetry to turn the tragedy upside down.

In this same way, Shakespeare transformed material from Holinshed's *Chronicles* to construct his *Macbeth*, while Holinshed's *Chronicles* are also a "free rendering" of a Scottish translation of Boethius' Latin *Chronicle of Scotland*; together with that, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth has been argued to include elements from Seneca's *Medea* and *Clymenestra* (Brooke in Shakespeare *Macbeth* 67, 77). In fact, the origins of tragedy are rooted in the reproduction of myths, untraceable ancient stories of Gods and Heroes which made up the cultural and religious background of the Athenians, and which were adapted to address the concerns of a society with determinate civic, moral, political and religious needs. Like all transformations of previous material, Shakespeare's tragedies and their adaptations can be studied within this double perspective, that is, as dramas transformed from previous sources, and as cultural objects produced within and for a definite historical scenario. Thus, Shakespeare's plays have themselves become cultural myths, malleable cultural objects available for subsequent consumption and adaptation to new circumstances.

Adaptations of Shakespeare's plays rely on Shakespearean material while they also transform it, for they simultaneously incorporate reproduction and renewal. In this process, variation or absence of the source text results in the reshaping of the Shakespearean play into something different, since, while maintaining links and parallels with the source, adaptations establish their own autonomous representational system. In this way, adaptation involves reproduction, but also alteration in the same inexorable way that translation, performance and even editing influences the transformation of the already unstable

Shakespearean text. Furthermore, there is a relationship of co-dependence between Shakespeare's texts and its adaptations. On the one hand, adaptors have repeatedly taken advantage of Shakespeare's plays as a (re)creative source, while, on the other, adaptations have promoted the plays 'cultural survival' by making Shakespeare available to other languages, contexts and interests.

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