



Signifying the Abstract: The Male Gaze, Maternal Power, and Homosocial Bonds in Geoffrey Wright's Film Adaptation of *Macbeth*

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Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has always been a favorite work for directors and screenwriters to adapt into film. It has everything a filmmaker could ask for: battles, murder, witchcraft, domestic drama, dark humor, and it is much shorter in comparison to longer tragedies like *Hamlet*. If you combine these attributes with the fact that no one has to pay Shakespeare royalties, *Macbeth*'s popularity for film adaptation is easy to understand. And yet, as Linda Hutcheon reminds us, adaptation is not just about copying a text; it also involves "...both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation" (*A Theory of Adaptation* 8). Certainly, Geoffrey Wright's 2006 film adaptation of *Macbeth* fulfills these criteria. Displaying sexual acts and nudity in the scenes where *Macbeth* and the Weird Sisters interact, viewers are treated to what, on the surface, appears to be a puerile and obvious attempt at drumming up ticket sales by objectifying women's bodies. The nubile and sexually aggressive witches seem to provide little more than vicarious sexual pleasure for heterosexual men in the audience, dumbing Shakespeare down for a knuckle-dragging patriarchal audience. A cursory examination of these scenes invites the conclusion that the film is yet another case of an unreflective use of the male gaze. However, the

film's juxtaposition of the male gaze in scenes involving the Weird Sisters with scenes in which *Macduff* and *Fleance* reject feminine images entirely indicate a more subtle approach in the narrative. This approach successfully signifies, for a contemporary audience, very abstract Early Modern problems with *Macbeth*'s performance of masculinity. These problems stem from what Janet Adelman describes as "...fears about male identity and autonomy of the self, about those loose female presences who threaten to control one's actions and one's mind..." (*Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* 131). These fears and *Macbeth*'s entrapment in Adelman's "matrix" are articulated through deliberate and conscious use of the male gaze: "...cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect" (*Visual Pleasure* 1). But instead of the audience being treated to an unconscious voyeurism, the audience witnesses and participates in *Macbeth*'s use of the male gaze in the film, combining his dialogue from the play with his sexual fantasies of the Weird Sisters. This is in contrast to Wright's depiction of *Macduff* and *Fleance*; their homosocial relationships are portrayed as right and proper

through both words and visual images that lack the male gaze. Wright signifies Macbeth's weakness through his increased sexual appetite for the Weird Sisters as fewer and fewer thanes support his rule. The film consciously utilizes the male gaze of the camera to portray Macbeth as trapped by his own sexual solipsism; because that gaze is attached to scenes between Macbeth and the Weird Sisters, not Macduff and Fleance, the film adequately signifies abstract concepts relating to Early Modern masculinity, imparting to the audience the wrongness of Macbeth's dependence on the Weird Sisters.

Macbeth seems like an unlikely character to suffer from problems relating to masculinity and feminine power. He is a successful military leader. The play leaves no doubt on that subject at all:

Sergeant: ...But the Norwyen lord,
surveying vantage,/With furbish'd arms
and new supplies of men, began a fresh
assault.

Duncan: Dismay'd not out captains,
Macbeth and Banquo?

Sergeant: Yes./ As sparrows eagles; or the
hare the lion./ If I say sooth, I must report
they were as cannons overcharg'd with
double cracks, so they/ double redoubled
strokes upon the foe. Except they meant to
bathe in reeking wounds,/ Or memorize
another Golgotha, I cannot tell... (1.1.31-
41)

Compare this with Caesar's account of Antony's campaign when he "Was beaten from Modena, where thou slew'st/ Hirtius and Pansa, consuls at thy heel/ Did famine follow, whom thou fought against/ (Though daintily brought up) with patience more than savages could suffer" (Antony and Cleopatra 5.4.56-60). Macbeth also compares favorably with a figure like Coriolanus; while Macbeth has only

defeated an army, he saves Scotland from defeat in war even as Coriolanus saves Rome by defeating her enemies. Macbeth is not just a competent warrior; like Antony, he shares the hardship of his soldiers, bathing in the blood flowing from wounds and witnessing more death than the place where Christ was executed. The fact that both Banquo and Macbeth share the credit for this victory (note the use of plural pronouns on the part of the sergeant) indicates that, whatever else we might say of Macbeth, he shares strong homosocial bonds with both his soldiers, who are his socio-political inferiors, and his socio-political equals, like Banquo.

What, then, could go wrong for such a masculine figure whose homosocial credentials seem impeccable? Macbeth's problems with masculinity are detailed extensively by Adelman. Like Coriolanus, Macbeth "...constructs his exaggerated and blood-thirsty masculinity as an attempt to ward off vulnerability to the mother" (Adelman 130). Macbeth is, in fact, trapped in a matrix of feminine power, as revealed by his dialog:

When Macbeth's first words echo those we have already heard the witches speak— "So foul and fair a day I have not seen"; "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" — we are in a realm that questions the very possibility of autonomous identity. As with Richard III, the maternal constitutes the suffocating matrix from which he must break free... (Adelman 131).

Masculinity, for Macbeth and other Shakespearean military figures, is never permanent or separate from the feminine. Adelman argues that masculinity is constructed against maternal power; what makes Macbeth different from Coriolanus or Antony and Cleopatra is feminine power is not lodged strictly in the body a single emasculating feminine character. For Coriolanus, it is his mother. For Antony, his Roman soldiers never stop blaming

Cleopatra for their general's masculine failures. But for Macbeth, "... it is diffused throughout the play, evoked primarily by the figures of the witches and Lady Mabeth" (Adelman 131). Rather than follow a strict Freudian formula, Macbeth must wrestle with feminine power vested in four different characters, none of whom are his mother. This contrasts him significantly with his nemesis: Macduff. Famously, Macduff was "...from his mother's womb/ untimely ripp'd" (5.9.15-16). He is not born of a woman, allowing him to fulfill the Weird Sister's prophecy that "none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.80-81). But perhaps even more significant than the loophole in the Weird Sister's prophecy is Macduff's marital status. Macduff's wife and children are murdered in the failed attempt on his life; when he receives the news, Malcolm admonishes his genuine grief at the loss of his whole family with the simple sentence, "Dispute it like a man" (4.3.219). It is a vengeful Macduff, one who has lost all connections to feminine figures in his life, who confronts and kills Macbeth at the end of the play. While Macduff loses connections to feminine power throughout the play, Macbeth relies more and more upon connections to feminine power. At the opening of the play, we have seen how he triumphs over Scotland's enemies with the help of his masculine equal, Banquo. But as the play progresses, he depends on the prophecies of the witches. Yet, for all the truth found in their prophecies, they render him vulnerable to military attack in ways which he was not vulnerable in the play's opening scene. Macbeth's enemies gain strength from their metaphorical escape from feminine presence and power while he remains enmeshed inside the matrix.

I will add a wrinkle to Adelman's excellent chapter and point out that Macbeth substitutes bonds with women for homosocial bonds with men, a critical flaw in male characters found

throughout Shakespeare's canon. The substitution of female bonds for male bonds is decried in several plays. Philo opens *Antony and Cleopatra* with his complaint that:

Nay, but this dotage of our general's/
O'erflows the measure. Those his goodly
eyes,/ That o'er the files and musters of the
war/ Have glow'd like plated Mars, now
bend, now turn/ The office and devotion of
their view/ Upon a tawny front; his
captain's heart/ Which in the scuffles or
great fights hath burst/ The buckles on his
breast, reneges all temper,/ And has
become the bellow and the fan/ To cool a
gipsy's lust. (1.1.1-9)

As for Coriolanus, the man who sacked an entire city by himself, he is thwarted thus: "The ladies have prevailed,/ The Volscians are dislodg'd, and Martius [Coriolanus] gone" (5.4.41-42). Even Othello, the valiant Moor who is the only general capable of defeating the Ottoman Turks, finds confusion when he dotes upon his wife, a confusion exploited by honest Iago: "Excellent wretch! Perdition catch my soul/ But I do love thee! And when I love thee not,/ Chaos is come again" (3.3.90-92). Each of these Shakespearean men is competent and publicly honored military figures. They are undefeatable on the battlefield under normal conditions. They embody Early Modern masculine virtues like courage. Yet, like Macbeth, each of these characters finds themselves in dire straits that are related to their privileging of their relationships with women, a problem not shared by any of their nemeses. The fact that all of them are protagonists in tragedies speaks volumes to the importance of homosocial bonds in Shakespeare's drama.

If Shakespeare were to only be read by aging scholars with years of education that allow them to decode the linguistic and cultural significs attached to abstract concepts, then there would

be no need to use visual images to communicate them. But film is, if nothing else, a visual media that controls the gaze of its viewer in ways that drama does not. In "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Laura Mulvey reminds us that the camera is not androgynous or asexual:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness. (10)

The camera, then, is not neutral. It encodes gender and sexuality just by looking. And this encoding is not emotionally neutral: "The cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking itself is a source of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is pleasure in being looked at" (Mulvey 9). The gaze is pleasurable, enjoyable. And while the gaze normally involves the audience, characters in film can indulge in the gaze, too: "In Hitchcock, by contrast, the male hero does see precisely what the audience sees" (Mulvey 13). Male characters in the film can gaze just as the audience does, with all of the implications to power and gender you might expect.

Mulvey's seminal essay is primarily concerned with addressing the oppression involved in cinema and its use of visual images: "It is said that analyzing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention of this article. The satisfaction and reinforcement of the ego that represent the high point of film history hitherto must be attacked" (6). Her work assumes that the gaze will be working in support of an

oppressive system, and this is a reasonable assumption at the time it was published. But what if the filmmaker deliberately used the male gaze to signify something to the audience? Could the male character's involvement in the audience's gaze, in the Hitchcockian sense Mulvey describes, be used to signify his gendered relationships with women? It is my argument that Wright deliberately uses the male gaze, and gives the audience access to Macbeth's gazing at the Weird Sisters, in order to signify his increasing reliance on his bonds with them and to signify his separation from proper homosocial bonds. Mulvey's male gaze signifies the abstract concepts of masculine relations to feminine power identified by Adeleman.

Let us turn towards Wright's adaptation of *Macbeth*. Wright produced *Macbeth* in 2006, and cast Sam Worthington as the eponymous Scot before he later became famous in Hollywood for his roles in blockbuster films such as *Avatar* and *Terminator: Salvation*. Geoffrey Wright and Victoria Hall rely strictly on Shakespeare's words in the film adaptation. The play's dialogue is edited for length and breadth, but they do not modernize the words or replace the Bard's dialog with new dialogue. However, the play's setting is radically altered. The thanes of Scotland are drug dealers in Melbourne's criminal underworld, the war with Norway is a drug deal gone sour, and King Duncan is a drug kingpin who relies on Macbeth and Banquo to be his enforcers on the street. The play substitutes gun battles for sword fights, mansions with night-vision security cameras for castles, and the English king and his army become law enforcement and prosecutors for the crown. But since the words are the same, the film must wrestle with how to depict complicated abstract concepts like homosocial bonds and dominating female relationships. Shakespeare's audience would understand the words of the play and their gendered and sexual connotations, but a contemporary audience

cannot do so without footnotes and a copy of the OED.

The film does this throughout, but there are four scenes that stand out in their effective use of visual iconography. The initial encounter Macbeth has with the Weird Sisters indicates the deliberateness of Wright's use of the male gaze. In the play, Macbeth and Banquo encounter them together after the battle with Norway and Cawdor. But in the film, Wright provides an additional scene with no dialogue right after the battle and before the scene with the Sisters. In this initial scene, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are in a cemetery, standing over the grave of their dead son. Lady Macbeth is weeping while Macbeth stands silently. He then looks away and sees the Weird Sisters, dressed in schoolgirl uniforms, walking silently out of the cemetery. The camera jumps between depicting Macbeth and switching to his view of them, giving the audience a clear depiction of Macbeth's gaze. In only a few seconds, Macbeth's gaze clearly complies with Mulvey's theorizing, but the deliberate demonstration of his sexual desire frames practically the entire film.

[\[Scene 1\]](#)

The next appearance of the Weird Sisters is when they appear to Macbeth to give him the prophecy. In the play, Macbeth and Banquo are both present, but Wright excises Banquo from the scene, assigning some of his lines to Macbeth and omitting others. Having consumed copious quantities of alcohol and cocaine in the previous scene while fighting Cawdor and Norway, he meets the Weird Sisters inside an abandoned dance club.

[\[Scene 2\]](#)

The film's camera allows the audience to experience the visual pleasure Mulvey talks about, but the pleasurable experience is troubled by Banquo's indication that he has not seen the

Weird Sisters. Macbeth's experience becomes not only a figment of his imagination, but it is a sexual fantasy that causes him to consider plotting against the other men in the play. Even before Lady Macbeth tells him "But screw your courage to the sticking place," this scene in the film shows Macbeth's privileging of feminine power over proper homosocial bonds with his peers (1.7.60).

But this scene only shows the beginning of Macbeth's break with other men. The next scene depicts Macbeth's second contact with the sisters. In the Folio and most editions of the play, no location is given for the scene. It simply indicates: "Thunder. Enter the three Witches" (4.1.1). The location is vague, giving directors considerable freedom in how to stage Macbeth's second encounter with the Weird Sisters. Wright chooses to have them appear in Macbeth's own home, giggling in the kitchen as they concoct their mixture of "Eye of newt and toes of frog,/Wool of bat and tongue of dog,/ Adder's fork and blind worm's sting,/Lizard's leg and howlet's wing" (4.1.14-18). This choice places them in proximity to the place of Duncan's murder; it also means that Macbeth is roused from his sleep by their presence. Since he is asleep before they appear, and since Macbeth's house has been depicted throughout the film as having the best security money can buy (in the play, his castle at Inverness is a strong fortress), the film plays with the possibility of this encounter also being a dream sequence or a solipsistic fantasy.

[\[Scene 3\]](#)

Seyton's response (assigned to Lennox in the play) echo's Banquo's when he replies, "No, my lord" with an aghast expression on his face (4.1.137). This continued inability of other male characters to see or comprehend the presence of the Weird Sisters becomes a signifier of Macbeth's break with other men. Coupled with

his vision of Fleance standing with the men, and only the men, of Scotland hailing him as king, shows just how far Macbeth has been removed from proper homosocial bonds. Even worse, the transitory nature of the power he derives from the Sisters is also visually depicted as they hiss and laugh at him, before running off. To be clear, the film does not depict women as lacking power. Lady Macbeth, the sisters, and Macduff's wife all are given agency by the director and screenwriter, just as Shakespeare gives those same female characters power and agency in the text of his play. The problem lies in Macbeth's privileging his relationship with the sisters over his relationships with men. The aghast expression on Lennox's face is a visual expression of disapproval of his master's eccentric behavior. This signifies the play's language and themes in a way that can be understood by a contemporary audience.

The final scene of the film actually occurs after all dialog has been spoken. In what Shakespeare's audience would have referred to as a dumb scene, Geoffrey Wright concludes the film with a carefully constructed set of visual images to underscore everything else we have seen.

[\[Scene 4\]](#)

The transposition of Macbeth's famous speech to the point in the narrative where he is already dead and the play's action is over might seem odd. But Wright chooses to use film to its fullest extent by juxtaposing Macbeth's speech over images of a dead Macbeth lying in the marriage bed alongside his dead wife. The appeal to nihilism in the words "And all our yesterdays have lighted fools/ The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!" is subverted by the prior image of Fleance and Macduff reestablishing homosocial bonds both have lost (5.5. 22-23). Macduff has gained a surrogate son to replace his murdered son, and Fleance gains a surrogate

father to replace his murdered father. While Macbeth may see life as a player "that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and is heard no more," Wright uses visual images to indicate that Macbeth has been tied to feminine power, while the surviving men in the play have not (5.5.25). The continuation of life, then, is represented in the images of Macduff and Fleance living and breathing together as men, while Macbeth lies dead with his wife. Even more telling is Macduff and Malcolm's silent acceptance of Fleance's murder of the woman. Just as there are no women present in the vision Macbeth has of Fleance being proclaimed king in the earlier scene, so now the movie presents us with Fleance killing the last living women in Macbeth's house. The final bit of feminine presence is exorcised from the film, leaving us with the cold body of Lady Macbeth receiving Malcolm's spittle as readily as Macbeth's cooling corpse.

The film's inclusion of these visual elements complements the portrayal of Macbeth's relationship with the Weird Sisters. Macbeth's sexual relationship with them, in all its graphic detail, visually ties him with feminine power in the film, just as his dialog would do so for a Renaissance audience. On the other side of the coin, the visual depiction of Fleance and Macduff together, a scene that does not appear in the play, signifies what the language of the play itself would communicate to its original audience. But this process of adaptation and translation is not just a question of nudity, sexuality, and male bonding. It is also articulated through deliberate use of the male gaze. Rather than attempt to break the camera out of the male heterosexual gaze, Geoffrey Wright indulges the male gaze. When Macbeth interacts with the Weird Sisters, the camera deliberately functions, as Mulvey would tell us, in an almost a textbook way. The audience is treated to the male gaze in excess, not to titillate, but to enable participation. Even as Macbeth indulges his sexual appetite, the

camera forces the audience to participate in his sexual solipsism. The camera angles, the audio cues, and the nudity are not presented in a detached way, but are treated in ways that no other scenes of the film are treated. It is not enough to merely signify Macbeth's ties to feminine power. Wright makes the audience participate in the sexual ties between them so that when Macbeth visualizes the prophecy of Scotland's thanes, all of whom are male, proclaiming Fleance as king, the audience also participates in Macbeth's fear and anger at seeing everything he has worked for come to nothing. Macbeth's sexual solipsism is perverted from the visual pleasure as Mulvey describes into Adelman's matrix of feminine power from which he cannot escape.



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