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How do Akira Kurosawa's female characters reflect Shakespeare's female characters in reference to his films *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985)?

The women in Kurosawa's films *Throne of Blood*[1] (1957, his adaptation of *Macbeth*) and *Ran*[2] (1985, his adaptation of *King Lear*) play such striking roles that it is surprising that critical work devoted to their analysis has only made up a relatively few pages of the overall analysis of his cinematography. This is not to say that they have gone unnoticed – indeed, such discussion ranges from Stuart Galbraith IV highlighting the 'ferocious and demonic sexual fury'[3] with which *Ran*'s Lady Kaede (Goneril/Regan/Albany) licks blood from her brother-in-law Jiro's (Regan/Albany) neck, to Keiko I. McDonald, whose short study on the use of Noh (a Japanese dramatic form, from which Kurosawa has famously borrowed elements including 'masks, makeup, body movement, and symbolic conventions')[4] in *Throne of Blood* sees much of these characteristics imposed onto the character of Lady Asaji (Lady Macbeth).[5] Nonetheless, there is a sense, due to the major significances these women hold in Kurosawa's work, that they have been underappreciated.

Both films each portray two prominent women. In *Throne of Blood,* Kurosawa's translation of Shakespeare's witches takes form as one entity, a witch

[1] Akira Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-Jo)* (BFI, 1957).
[2] Akira Kurosawa, *Ran* (Studio Canal, 1985).
[3] Stuart Galbraith IV, *The Emperor and the Wolf: The Lives and Films of Akira Kurosawa and Toshiro Mifune*, 1st edn (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 580.
[4] Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke UP, 2000), pp. 267–268.
[5] Keiko I. McDonald, 'Noh into Film: Kurosawa's "Throne of Blood"', *Journal of Film and Video*, 39 (1987), 36–41.

who rules the forest and, like the mist that spreads like poisonous gas throughout the film, encompasses the whole film's diegesis with evil. Alongside this is Asaji, whose, as Galbraith IV observes, 'entire performance is, like that of the witch (with whom she is thematically linked, based on Noh'[6]. Galbraith IV is right that the symbolic references Kurosawa makes to the Noh tradition, through costume, setting and performance, mirrors the two women with each other; but this mirroring is also achieved by other more cinematic means, including editing, diegetic/non-diegetic noise, and the overall mise-en-scene, and these function as symbolic points of reference for Kurosawa's Western audiences as the references to the Noh tradition does for his Eastern ones. It seems crucial to highlight this point, as, as it stands, most of the critical analyses of the female characters in these films seem to take their direction from Kurosawa's integration of Noh into film. While the acknowledgement of Noh in Kurosawa's work is crucial to any critical analysis of his work – he has indeed been quoted to describe the tradition as 'the real heart, the core of all Japanese drama'[7] – nevertheless, it seems that critics too readily rely on Kurosawa's allusions to Noh and turn a blind eye to the cinematic conventions that Kurosawa also exploits.

On top of the parallels between the two women in *Throne of Blood*, critics, such as Antony Dawson, have gone on to draw further comparisons between Asaji and *Ran*'s Lady Kaede because of the way they can be read to engineer the fate of the men around them.[8] Indeed, in many ways Kaede not only reflects Shakespeare's Goneril and Regan, but Lady Macbeth also. Yet the connection between the two women always inevitably seems to lead critics back to the use of

[6] Galbraith IV, p. 237.
[7] Kurosawa quoted in Tetsuo Kishi and Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare in Japan* (London: Continuum, 2005), p. 132.
[8] Anthony Dawson, 'Cross-Cultural Interpretation: Reading Kurosawa Reading Shakespeare', in *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*, ed. by Diana E. Henderson (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), p. 167.

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Noh in Kurosawa's films. While in *Throne of Blood* Noh is clearly a powerful influence on Isuzu Yamada's performance style, *Ran*'s Lady Kaede often drops her Noh mask, in favour of showing more human – if still evil – traits.

The comparisons that be drawn between the forest witch and Asaji, and Asaji and Kaede have undeniably dominated the critical discussion of Kurosawa's female characters, and this has arguably been to the detriment of possible discussions of the stark contrasts between Kaede and Lady Sué (Cordelia/Cornwall). They are polar opposites despite having undergone similar circumstances: their castles and homes invaded, their families murdered (Sué's brother, Tsurumaru, spared but at the expense of his sight – a Gloucester parallel), and both are married off to the sons of the man responsible for these crimes, Hidetora Ichimonji (Lear). The lack of recognition of Sué in critical discussion of *Ran* may indeed be a reflection of her lack of screen time (although it is probably a similar time that is allotted to the forest witch in *Throne of Blood*); nevertheless the virtuous elements she embodies of Shakespeare's Cordelia really should make her more of a priority to critics.

Parallels between Asaji and the forest witch can been drawn from each of their first moments on screen. In both encounters, the frame is marked by a change from lightness to darkness that is exaggerated by the chiaroscuro effect used throughout the film. In the case of the latter, this change occurs as Washizu (Macbeth) and Miki (Banquo) are drawn further into the forest. It is obvious how this woodland became known as Cobweb Forest – cuts of the two men riding hopelessly across the frame is so repetitive that their progression is only validated by the fact that they move from left to right across the frame. Adding to this sense of confusion is the use of subjective framing where a web of branches overlays the entire mise-en-scene. Through this, Kurosawa symbolises how the

men are already ensnared onto a path towards their own destruction, whilst projecting a similar sense of entanglement onto the audience through his foregrounding of the webs of branches within the frame. The overt symbolism of the forest early on foreshadows the fulfillment of the witch's last prophecy 'you will not lose a single battle unless Cobweb Forest begins to move' and Washizu's untimely fate at the end of the film, where once again Kurosawa uses subjective framing, only this time with an overlay of arrows.[9] The significance of Cobweb Forest in the narrative arc is made even greater by the way in which Kurosawa aligns it with the character of the forest witch, as her dominance over this setting makes it become part of her, thus translating Shakespeare's three witches almost into a force of nature. Her white costume camouflages her into the excessive white fog that Washizu, Miki and the viewer have been subjected to, and this fog, once stagnant, announces the presence of the supernatural being by the way in which it suddenly begins to drift across the frame, blurring and obscuring the viewers vision. The uncanny synchronisation of diegetic sounds of thunder and the witch's cackle tie these visuals together in its indication that the forest witch reigns over this harsh environment that cannot be tamed by men, thus referencing her as some distorted and evil version of Mother Nature, or as J. Lawrence Guntner describes, as the spider of Cobweb Forest.[10]

In the case of Asaji, this transition from lightness to darkness is characterised by the movement from exterior shots, that Dawson has described as 'images… of a life of pastoral contentment, peasants working the fields in bright sunlight, horses being exercised, a chorus of young retainers talking about

[9] Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-Jo)*.
[10] J. Lawrence Guntner, '"Hamlet", "Macbeth" and "King Lear" on Film', in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare on Film*, ed. by Russell Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 120–40 (p. 130).

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paradise', to interior shots within a dark, bare room.[11] At the start of both scenes, the character blocking, which places the women sitting down and with Washizu standing looking down at them, and the presence of Noh in both of their performance styles means that from the outset the two women are related to one another. Even the single beam of light that streams in from an open door and spotlights Asaji gives her a similar white glow to the one emitted by the forest witch, shrouded in white mist. Nonetheless, in spite of these similarities, the fundamental differences in settings render from the outset the various differences between the women as well, as the exterior landscape of the forest represents a world beyond man's control where the interiors of the North Mansion is definitively under man's control, and this case, that particular man is Washizu.

Dawson has interpreted the initial images of 'the bliss of communal life' as a sign of Washizu's contentment, and subsequently accuses Asaji for manipulating him and driving him towards his untimely fate.[12] Yet it seems clear from this sequence of 'pastoral bliss', that Washizu does not take part in these positive images. Instead, he interrupts them scowling, undermining a retainer's speculation that 'our lord and his lady must be very happy'.[13] The use of a long shot gives an impression of Washizu's impenetrability, thus suggesting he is already consumed in his desire for power. In reading this pastoral sequence differently to Dawson, one soon sees a subtext emerge from these images. The initial establishing shot shows people labouring in the fields surrounding the North Mansion that is in the centre of backdrop of the frame; this then cuts to the courtyard of the North Mansion where a tracking shot follows Washizu's retainers

[11] Dawson, p. 166.
[12] Dawson, p. 166.
[13] Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-Jo)*.

who talk and work, attending to horses and sharpening arrows; finally, the camera cuts as Washizu emerges from inside and stares out over the courtyard, where he is met with bows and silence. The symbolic value of this sequence is not of 'pastoral bliss', as Dawson suggests, but a demonstration of the feudal system. It is through this sequence that Kurosawa not only foreshadows Asaji's assertion that 'every samurai longs to be the master of a castle', but also validates it as truth: deep in Washizu's heart is this desire.[14] That Dawson is corrected in his analysis of this sequence is vital, as the conclusion that he consequently arrives at – that Asaji is the puppet master and Washizu her pawn – offers a very basic reading as to how Kurosawa has translated the figure of Lady Macbeth. There can be no doubt that Asaji is in many ways evil, and in many ways she encourages and is complicit with Washizu's ambitions for power. But Dawson's understanding chooses not to address the more human dimensions Kurosawa adds to her character, which is exemplified by the incongruity between Lady Macbeth's assertion that: 'I would, while [the babe] was smiling in my face,/ Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums/ And dashed his brains out' and Asaji's plunge into madness following the birth of her still born baby.[15] While the imposition of Noh onto Asaji and the forest witch is certainly a factor to be considered in the portrayal of these women, in overemphasising it, critics have overlooked potential nuances to Asaji's character that can be read through a more filmic analysis, and consequently reduced her to little more than a Noh mask.

It is obvious as to why parallels have been drawn between Asaji and Kaede. The scene in which the former goes on to coax her husband into following

[14] Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood (Kumonosu-Jo)*.
[15] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by John Wilders (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 110 [1.7.56–8].

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the fate prophesised for him by the forest witch, is echoed by the scene in *Ran* where Kaede points out to Taro that the banner, a symbol of the Ichimonji clan, belongs with the head of the house. Dawson has identified that while in *Macbeth* 'Lady Macbeth questions her husband's understanding of what it means to be a man… Asaji doesn't need to encourage an abstract notion of manliness – the samurai code does this for her.'[16] Even more shocking then this is that in *Ran* Taro, and, Jiro much less so, need little persuasion from Kaede to betray their family. Cinematic resemblances between these two scenes manifest in their Noh influenced performance styles, the character blocking – where man and wife converse unnaturally, turned away form one another, their faces directed towards the angle of the camera – and the lack of musical score. The effect of these cinematic techniques is an eerie stillness that is only interrupted by diegetic sounds from the world outside (a horse neighing in *Throne of Blood*, a cuckoo chirping in *Ran*), underling the sense of entropy that underscores both films, and the direction of their performance towards the camera, rather then to one another, projects this entropy upon the viewer. Tetsuo Kishi and Graham Bradshaw have argued that although the 'scenes involving the vengeful Lady Kaede are very powerful indeed… they have nothing to do with *King Lear*.'[17] Yet it seems obvious that she does, for she enables Kurosawa to reinvent the play, alongside Japanese legends, in a way that is meaningful to the twentieth century, 'when the world seemed poised on the brink of nuclear destruction',[18] a world

[16] Dawson, p. 169.
[17] Tetsuo Kishi and Graham Bradshaw, pp. 143–144.
[18] Guntner, p. 137.

where 'men prefer sorrow to joy, suffering to peace'.[19] This is reinforced by Kaede's speech:

> I was born and brought up in this castle. It used to belong to my father. I left it to marry you. My father and brothers relaxed their vigilance after the marriage. Hidetora, my father-in-law, murdered them. Now I am back in my family castle. I have longed for this day. Right here in this room, my mother took her own life.[20]

As Kaede speaks, although her body remains controlled and aloof, her Noh mask cracks with emotion as her face reveals her grief at recalling these memories. Kaede's back-story, which she recites painfully slowly towards the camera, almost solely for the viewer's benefit, makes it glaringly obvious that this is a woman who has been pushed to vengeance. Women, in Kurosawa's films, may complicit with evil, but they are products of an evil world. Unlike Asaji, whose emotions remain remote even in her madness, as she obsessively tries to wash away the blood from her hands, Kaede's emotions erupt at several points in the film.

In some respects this renders her far more akin to Lady Macbeth than Asaji is. The infamous scene where she cuts Jiro's neck, before licking away the blood and seducing him, further demonstrates this similarity, as her use of her sexuality as a means for power reflects her Shakespearean counterpart. In their discussion of the use of Kurosawa's use of Noh in film, Kishi and Bradshaw have recognised that while Noh performance can seem static, it is this stillness that accentuates violence when is does occur.[21] Certainly this is the case with the

[19] Kurosawa, *Ran*.
[20] Kurosawa, *Ran*.
[21] Tetsuo Kishi and Graham Bradshaw, p. 133.

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scene in question. Kaede contains her anger as Jiro asks her 'But deep in your heart, you must hate my father for what he did to your family. Am I wrong?'[22] and bears resemblance to Goneril and Regan as she submits and apologises to Jiro, but shuffling along the floor, with her dead husband's helmet offered up to his murderer, Kaede recreates the 'hallmark' of Asaji, the foreboding sound of a predator approaching its prey.[23] She erupts mid-bow, symbolically throwing the helmet across the room carelessly – just as Lear's elder daughters never really cared for him, Kaede admits 'I don't care about my husband's death'.[24] Whereas Asaji's outbursts of movement are always like dances, accompanied by non-diegetic music, and heavily mediated through Noh performance style, Kaede's movement is far more spontaneous. When she draws the dagger, putting it to Jiro's throat before tearing through the arm of her kimono with it (as her shuffle recreates Asaji's 'hallmark', this tearing through her kimono references Asaji's kimono that 'hangs finely and formally, except for the left arm and shoulder, which have slipped off the frame like a broken wing' suggesting that this is Kurosawa rewriting his first characterisation of Lady Macbeth), she resembles a samurai. This subsequently portrays her frustration at the way in which her gender restrains her from avenging her family with her own hands, much like Lady Macbeth is frustrated about the way gender of her ambitions for power.[25] Even Kaede's death is marked by an eruption of movement, only this time in the form of blood splattering volcanically across the room, symbolically marking the castle she was born and raised in her territory even if she is dead. Her vivid red blood that mars the wall echoes the blood-pledge given to Hidetora earlier in the

[22] Kurosawa, *Ran*.
[23] Dawson, p. 167.
[24] Kurosawa, *Ran*.
[25] Dawson, p. 165.

film, which instructed him to submit to the authority of Taro and Kaede, consequently symbolising her 'identification with and power over [the castle]' and threatening of 'the male dominance associated with the samurai code.'[26]

In stark contrast to this is the death of Sué. Scored piercingly with the sounds of a flute, the non-diegetic music highlights her goodness because of the way in which it reminds the audience how she selflessly went back to retrieve Tsurumaru's flute, 'the only pleasure that was left to [him]'[27]. The low-angle shot that framed her first moments on screen is reversed to a high-angle shot, implying that, admirable as she is in her spirituality, her goodness is redundant in a world where 'even the gods can't save [mankind]'.[28] As she lies dead in the meadow that surrounds her brother's hut, her flowery kimono camouflages her with the flowers that surround her, aided by the use of an extreme long-shot; the mise-en-scene recalls the imagery that describes Cordelia's death: 'She's dead as earth.'[29] The lush green that submerges the frame contrasts with the battle sequences either side of this short sequence, which are characterised by their darkness, with splashes of the same shade of red as Kaede's blood. This juxtaposition once again exaggerates Sué's virtue in such a dark world. The way her body blends seamlessly with the grass, her gaping neck buried with by it, could be interpreted as positive, as now she is free from the horrific life she had lead and, because of her devotion to Buddha, will proceed to a new, better life. But the closing shot of the film of Tsurumaru 'tapping alone towards the edge of an abyss'[30] before dropping Sué's portrait of Buddha, which as the camera closes

[26] Dawson, p. 164.
[27] Kurosawa, *Ran*.
[28] Kurosawa, *Ran*.
[29] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by Stanley Wells (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2001), p. 270 [24.257].
[30] Guntner, p. 137.

in on we see is nearly completely shrouded in darkness, suggests otherwise. In a number of ways, Sué's morality reflects the character of Cordelia. Her performance style, which is noticeably less influenced by the Noh tradition, aids this comparison, as she is less aloof and far warmer than Kurosawa's other female characters. Her ability to forgive Hidetora for the crimes he committed against her family reflects the way in which Cordelia so easily forgives Lear for disowning her, albeit on a far more superior level. Yet it is Sué's devotion to Buddha that is more keenly analogous to Lear and Cordelia's relationship, who, in pursuit of, she dies for. Paradoxically, this devotion also renders some fundamental differences between Cordelia and herself. Whereas Cordelia's honesty, 'I love your majesty/ According to my bond, nor more nor less', portrays her integrity and assertiveness, Sué, on the other hand is far more submissive.[31] Sué's death confirms this: while Cordelia dies, having led an army to save her father, her body brought on stage for all to see alongside Lear's wails of 'Howl, howl, howl, howl!', in the portrayal of Sué's death, Kurosawa uses only two short cuts, that are as still as photographs, before cutting back to the battle sequence, signifying that even in death Sué is gentle and impassive.[32]

Dawson argues that in the filmic worlds in which Kurosawa reimagines Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *King Lear* 'it is the woman who makes things happen… evil seems to enter the world most powerfully through her'.[33] This statement is most resonant when considering Kurosawa's portrayal of the three witches as the forest witch in *Throne of Blood*, whose mist spreads ominously from beginning to end. Yet when applying this school of thought to Kaede and

[31] Shakespeare, *King Lear*, p. 104 [1.83–84].
[32] Shakespeare, *King Lear*, p. 270 [24.253].
[33] Dawson, p. 167.

Asaji, one cannot help but feel that they have been lazily categorised as 'villains'. This is by no means to declare either's innocence or to defend either's honour – just as Asaji is 'the serpent in the garden'[34]; Kaede is 'the fox in disguise'.[35] But a more nuanced reading of their position in these films show that they are both products of the diegesis and characters that surround them. If anything, the portrayal of Sué proves this, whose goodness is futile 'In a world that's gone mad'.[36]

[34] Dawson, p. 166.
[35] Kurosawa, *Ran*.
[36] Kurosawa, *Ran*.

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