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A Comparison of Lady Macbeths

The opinions and actions of the people around us affect our decisions, even subconsciously. Oftentimes, this is harmless and only serves a social function, but there are also times when peer pressure can have a significant negative effect on people. This pressure may force individuals into making dangerous choices that they otherwise would not have made themselves. One of the main themes in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, is that of decisions; the question of whether Macbeth is truly to blame for his downfall, or if his wife is to blame for pressuring him. In both a 2015 film adaptation of *Macbeth* directed by Justin Kurzel and a 2010 play adaptation by Rupert Goold, this problem is addressed. The differing portrayals of the complex character that is Lady Macbeth, lends itself to differing answers to this question. In both versions, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth murder the king, Duncan, in his sleep so they gain the throne. However Kurzel’s Lady Macbeth is portrayed as having a significantly lesser impact and importance to the plot than the cunning and cruel Lady Macbeth from Goold’s interpretation. In the scenes directly preceding the murder, when Lady Macbeth speaks to Macbeth about the planned assassination it becomes exceedingly obvious that Kurzel’s Macbeth was the one to decide on the act, while Goold’s Macbeth falls to the will and determination of Lady Macbeth. This difference gives Goold’s Lady Macbeth more character and importance in the play.

Kurzel’s Lady Macbeth has little active engagement with the other characters, save Macbeth himself. She is often shown doing housework and sitting in the background while the action revolves around Macbeth. Even in her most active moments, the camera puts special focus on Macbeth and his reactions to the events, with Lady Macbeth rarely being the focus of camera. It is especially focused on following Macbeth through the process of his decision, emphasizing his internal monologue and his speaking with the other characters. In this version, Macbeth is also shown to be confident in his own abilities and decisions. When he finally tells Lady Macbeth “I am settled, and bend up each corporeal agent to this terrible feat” (Shakespeare 1.7.92-93) he does so with conviction in his voice as he is confident in his own choices, and Lady Macbeth merely convinced him that he is making the right choice. He was not coerced, nor did he fear what Lady Macbeth would say if he refused. This stands in sharp contrast to Goold’s Macbeth, who seems to be fearful of both Lady Macbeth’s anger and of the consequences of his murder, resulting unfortunately in a constant state of nervousness and anxiety that is very aptly portrayed. Following the murder, he constantly nags Lady Macbeth with concern after concern each of which she brushes off or succinctly answers. In this scene, the camera cuts between Macbeth and lady Macbeth throughout the action, which shows how both are of equal importance. She consistently calls Macbeth childlike, and cowardly, and “infirm of purpose”(Shakespeare 2.2.68). These are all cut from the Kurzel interpretation, along with a host of other fears that Lady Macbeth has to assuage in both the original play and in Goold’s version. This is as Kurzel’s Lady Macbeth is much meeker than Goold’s and is played much more as a background character who exists only to serve the purpose of speaking to Macbeth about the murder. Meanwhile, Kurzel’s Macbeth is confident and levelheaded. Kurzel was focused more on creating Macbeth’s image of the confident warrior, that he often sidelines other major characters to make room for Macbeth. Goold on the other hand, embraces Shakespeare’s portrayal of a nervous, imperfect Macbeth, which allows for Lady Macbeth to grow and develop as a character.

Furthermore, it should be noted that Kurzel’s Lady Macbeth is much more dependent and reliant on her husband. In the 2015 film, most of the important scenes involving Lady Macbeth are cut. This includes most of her scenes alone, and her important soliloquys. Much of her presence is, instead, given to Macbeth, who wages an extensive internal battle to decide his action. Before he kills Duncan, he is given conversation after conversation and speech after speech as he stumbles around the camp, each to highlight his changing thoughts on his plan. For many of these scenes, Lady Macbeth is entirely absent, unlike in Goold’s Adaptation. Goold’s Lady Macbeth is constantly interacting with Macbeth, which emphasizes her role in the murder. She is shown greeting Duncan and walking in and out of the stage to serve and entertain the guests, who are offstage. Every time she returns, Macbeth asks her a question regarding his decision such as “hath he asked for me?” (Shakespeare 1.7.32), which she answers with “know you not he has”. She often answers this with disdain in her voice and in a condescending manner which fully show her attitude towards her husband’s nature, which she deems “too full of the milk of human kindness” (Shakespeare 1.5.17). These interactions, which are cut entirely in Kurzel’s interpretation, demonstrate that Macbeth often goes to Lady Macbeth for answers. This dynamic depicts the role that Lady Macbeth has in the murder much better than in Kurzel’s adaptation, which only mentions this in one line, during a brief conversation between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. In the conversation directly after the scene where Macbeth makes his “if it were done when ‘tis done” speech where he expresses his reluctance to kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth says, “Their drenched natures lies as in a death, what cannot you and I perform upon the unguarded Duncan?” (Shakespeare 1.7.79-80). This is the only scene where Lady Macbeth is shown to be directly involved in the murder of Duncan, in all other times she is merely in the background. There is also a lack of planning for the murder in Kurzel’s Adaptation. This gives the impression that the murder was but a whim performed by Macbeth, further detracting from lady Macbeth’s role. Whereas Goold emphasizes the deliberate and precise plan that is orchestrated almost entirely by Lady Macbeth, with Macbeth being but the one to commit the murder. Goold’s interpretation seems more faithful to Shakespeare’s original vision as characterized by the numerous questions that Macbeth gives to Lady Macbeth in the first half of the play. Macbeth is dependent on Lady Macbeth, not the other way around.

The differences between these interpretations of Lady Macbeth clearly point out filmmaker’s goals and thoughts about the play. Kurzel, who wished to emphasize the heroic qualities of Macbeth, took from Lady Macbeth’s importance and in the end produced a play that shows the murder being entirely the fault of Macbeth. Arguably more faithful to Shakespeare, Goold portrayed an anxious and turbulent Macbeth who is ambitious while lacking the resolve to act and who is also too fearful to stand his ground. This creates a Macbeth who was not directly to blame for his murder of Duncan, but whose significant character flaws otherwise still spelled his ultimate doom, leaving room for an active and important Lady Macbeth whose influence on the events of the play are exceeded by only Macbeth himself.