# *Macbeth*, *Throne of Blood* and the Idea of a Reflective Adaptation

## Abstract

Adaptations have varied relations to their source material, making it hard to formulate a general theory. Instead, we characterise a narrower, more unified class of *reflective* adaptations which communicate an active and sometimes critical relation to the source’s framework. We identify the features of reflective adaptations which give them their distinctive interest. We show how these features are embodied in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*, an adaptation which responds creatively and with a radically shifted perspective on the relation between character and situation compared to its Shakespearean source. We identify some of the artistic choices through which this response to the source is conveyed, such choices being a characteristic feature of reflective adaptations.

## Kinds of adaptations

An adaptation of a narrative work bears a causal-intentional relation to the original of which it is an adaptation: an adaptation has been designed in a certain way because of the design of some other work.[[1]](#footnote-1) Being transitive, causation alone is insufficient to characterise the adaptation relation, for that would require an adaptation of an adaptation of x to be an adaptation of x which in general it isn’t.[[2]](#footnote-2) Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* is an adaptation of Brooke’s 1562 poem *The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet* (itself a reworking of earlier French material) and Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare's Romeo + Juliet* is an adaptation of Shakespeare’s play, but the Luhrmann is not an adaptation of the Brook. Adaptation requires the stronger idea that adaptations are *intentionally* (and so, indeed, causally) related to their antecedents. Luhrmann intended to adapt Shakespeare’s play and had no such intention (we assume) with respect to Brooke's poem. Adaptation is a reflexive notion: the intention constitutive of adaptation is the intention to adapt. That the author of Y could not speak the language of X, that X was unknown in that author’s community, that Y turns out to have been written before X: these facts provide evidence that Y is not an adaptation of X because they provide evidence that the author of Y did not have the required intention.

That a work is related to another work is always of some interest from the point of view of appreciating or judging it. The project of adaptation poses problems which the maker may tackle well or badly, compressing an episode, deleting a character, shifting a location or—as in the case we will consider—radically shifting perspective.[[3]](#footnote-3) We cannot understand how well or badly any of this is done without knowing the details of the source.[[4]](#footnote-4) That is true in cases where the source is unacknowledged.[[5]](#footnote-5) The absence of an intention to communicate the adaptive intention does not make the adaptive intention irrelevant to criticism or interpretation. Things we are not intended to notice may yet be relevant to our engagement with the work, as noticing the poor brush work in a painting is relevant though we were not intended to notice it. And where there is acknowledgement there are differences in the degree and the manner of its overtness. Our interest here is in a certain kind of overt adaptation, one which signals not merely the adaptive intent, but a range of complex relations the new work has to the old. Let us quickly survey the spectrum of overtness.

Where there is acknowledgement of adaptation it is not always in a form which intentionally communicates the adaptive relation: films often acknowledge their source in the credits for legal reasons without giving the appearance of anyone wanting to communicate that relation to an audience. And the communication of adaptive intent, where it occurs, may require no more than the choice of a title because the source work is so well known, as with a Harry Potter movie. The makers of such a film may hope and expect that the audience’s knowledge of the source will enrich their experience of the film, but there need be nothing in the film itself which comments on, reframes, queries or disputes core themes of the original. Adaptations that do these latter things constitute an interesting sub-species we will call here “reflective adaptations”. Works in this category are replete with opportunities for a kind of rich artistic experience that brings together the adaptation and its source. Reflective adaptations are the product of an act of reflection *upon* their sources, and may generate an image *of* that source which displays it from a fresh perspective.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We don’t say that reflective adaptations are automatically superior to other kinds or that other kinds never reach very high standards of artistic achievement. A reflective adaptation might be an abject failure, misunderstanding its source, incompetently presenting its relation to that source. And there are high-quality adaptations the aims of which are not reflective: We take Copolla’s original *Godfather* film to be one. It has interesting relations to its source, relations which one needs to understand in order to get anything like a full appreciation of its achievement. But it does not communicate an active engagement with the novel’s core themes. More generally, we, like others, reject the “fidelity model,” according to which the default judgement favours the source over the adaptation and makes the former a yardstick by which the success of the latter is measured. That model works especially badly for reflective adaptations, given their role in reframing the original.[[7]](#footnote-7)

While adaptation is not much noticed in philosophical aesthetics, there is a considerable literature within and across the various narrative disciplines, notably the theories of the novel, of film, of theatre. From time-to-time we will indicate some intersections between the adaptation literature and this essay. What we are not doing is offering a definition, or even any kind of substantive theory, of adaptation in general.[[8]](#footnote-8) Perhaps adaptation-in-general is too motley a notion to be interesting.[[9]](#footnote-9) We are neutral on this issue. We characterise in some detail a specific form that influence between works can take, and which, we argue, has special interest from a critical and aesthetic point of view. What we are calling "reflective adaptation" is a robust category to be retained (perhaps under another name) however else we divide up the domain "relations of influence between works".

## Reflective Adaptations

In this section we display some of the resources of the category *reflective adaptation*.[[10]](#footnote-10) Without attempting a strict definition we highlight five important characteristics. Each gets a brief description and some clarificatory remarks, some of which show how the characteristics help set reflective adaptations apart from other devices—allusions, caricatures, retellings, intertextual echoings—that speak back to a source.[[11]](#footnote-11)

1. A reflective adaptation, Y, of a prior work, X, will have significant similarities to but also differences from X, where the mix of similarity and difference functions at least in part to raise questions about, to comment on, or to frame in a novel way X's core-themes—its approach to what may plausibly be considered its main subject. A reflective adaptation finds ways of intimating to its audience that this commentary is intended and is part of what they are meant to experience.
   * A reflective adaptation need not regard commentary upon its source as its sole or even primary aim; many such adaptations are presented as works of interest and importance in their own right. But even where reflective adaptations have these independent virtues they do, in addition, make salient their responses to core-themes of the source.
   * Adaptations generally involve cuts, though mere cutting usually produces something it is more natural to call a “version”. But some versions will count as adaptations also. We call Nahum Tate’s *Lear* an adaptation because it adds as well as subtracting, but one can imagine cases where merely by cutting and without any additions one changes the outcome of a play as dramatically as Tate did for *Lear*. Indeed, a version that systematically excises bits of problematic language in ways that constitute a sustained critical commentary on the original text may count as a reflective adaptation; in that way a production of *The Taming of the Shrew*  may well be communicating a response to the play's gendered politics.
2. In a reflective adaptation, the similarities between X and Y should enable an appropriately knowledgeable audience to regard Y as a retelling of the narrative of X, while significant deviations from X serve as indicators of Y’s reframing of core themes of X.

* These conditions are connected. Howard Jacobson's *Shylock is my Name* is to some degree a retelling of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* but it is not a reflective adaptation of it: the deviations from the narrative are considerable and develop lines of thought that are largely independent of Shakespeare’s own framing.
* Note that *deviation from* a given narrative structure is not merely *difference in* narrative structure. It is said of Hawks’ *Rio Bravo* that it was a response to the milk-toast liberalism of Zimmerman’s *High Noon*. We might argue about the extent to which this is evident in the film, but one can certainly find a systematic relation of tension between the two. Still, *Rio Bravo* is not, intuitively, an adaptation of *High Noon*, and not only because it is not a retelling of the same narrative, but because the ways in which their narratives are distinct don’t count as deviations from the earlier work. There is deviation only where there is a presumption that what we have is a retracing of the original plotline; deviations violate that presumption. We shall later suggest that the reframing effect of *Throne of Blood* is achieved exactly in this way — by making salient to the audience certain deviations from *Macbeth* once a general presumption in favour of fidelity to the *Macbeth* plot has been established.

1. In a reflective adaptation, Y’s dialogue with X should be sustained.

* The sustained quality of a reflective adaptation's engagement with its source sets it apart from more limited kinds of commentary which works are capable of generating to known precursors. Allusions, for example, may conduct a dialogue with another work. When Trollope drops an allusion to *As You Like It* in the five hundred page *The Prime Minister*, his novel does not, for that reason, become an adaptation, despite the possible richness of such borrowing. The same holds for more significant intertextual echoings. Milton's hell attains much of its force when imagined against Dante's underworld. A later work's commentary upon an earlier work is, here, both notable and shapes aesthetic experience for readers familiar with both. Such commentary is also weightier than the playful hinting achieved by allusions. This, though, does not turn *Paradise Lost* into an adaptation of *The Divine Comedy*. The intertextual commentary is too limited for that. In both these examples, characteristics 2 and 3 above are not met: the source's narrative is not being retold by the later work, and the engagement is momentary rather than ongoing.

1. A reflective adaptation's dialogue with core-themes of its source is non-dismissive: the source is being treated as worth seriously engaging with. A reflective adaptation invites re-engagement with its source, and is thus to some degree a *tribute* to it.
   * Caricatures, too, engage in commentary on a recognizable source. In a comic exchange in *The Merchant of Venice*, the play's fool, Launcelot, kneels before his blind father, and full of false pathos declares: “Truth will come to light, murder cannot be hid long, a man's son may, but in the end truth will out.” (II.ii.82-3) Launcelot is thereby mocking a moving scene, from Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy*, in which the bereaved Hieronimo says: “"The Heavens are Just, murder cannot be hid: / Time is the author both of truth and right, / And time will bring this treachery to light.” (II.vi.58-60). Reflective adaptations may be critical of their source, but in the process of remaking something worth serious consideration.
   * When a derivative work is authored by a creator significantly more gifted than the author of the source work, the derivative work is apt to render irrelevant the thematic ambitions of the source, so no valuable conversation between the works is established. This holds regardless of the intentions of the adaptation's creator. Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* comments on Brooke's poem, the preface to which promises a demonstration of the foolishness of the young; Shakespeare prefaces his play by promising a demonstration of the stupidity of the old. Perhaps an argument can be given that this emphasis on the contrast with the earlier work is sustained through much of Shakespeare’s play. But Brook's poem has comparatively little artistic value and faded quickly from critical and popular attention. At any rate there is little tendency or opportunity now for audiences of *Romeo and Juliet* to attend to the poem, and little to be gained by their doing so. In such a case we may grant that the later work is an adaptation—even a reflective one—while adding that it is not now apt to fulfil that function. Being a reflective adaptation and now being apt to fill the role of a reflective adaptation are different, as is commonly the case with artefacts: the Macintosh Portable of 1989 is a portable computer but is not well-suited to function as one in the present environment.
   * A reflective adaptation presents its source from a certain perspective; so do translations and dramatic performances. Does this make translations and performances reflective adaptations too?[[12]](#footnote-12) One difference is simply that we expect from translations and performances a very high degree of fidelity to the narrative structure of the original. But there is more to the contrast. We expect a translation or a dramatic performance to function as ways of *presenting* the source material; their primary interest is not in conveying an alternative and potentially divergent perspective. Sometimes translations or performances do things which effectively comment on their sources, thereby slipping into the adaptation category. Yet their membership within that category will be fragile. As translations and performances they are devices for the presentation of works, and it is not easy to fulfil this goal while seeking to systematically reframe the original’s core themes. So while translations and performances may flower into adaptations, they are likely to frustrate an audience’s default expectation that the creative labour they are reading or watching is directed at bringing out the potency of an original work.
2. In reflective adaptations, Y’s response to X is *enacted aesthetically*. It is not primarily an exercise in verbally articulated argument. The adaptation is expected to provide an artistic experience which includes a sense of divergence from the assumptions, techniques and stylistic signature of its source.

* Adaptations like the one we will consider, which move from one medium to another, provide especially rich opportunities for this aesthetic articulation; as we shall see, the distinctive aesthetic resources of film provide ways to frame *Throne of Blood*’s reshaping of the *Macbeth* narrative and its presuppositions.
* That a reflective adaptation is not abstract commentary on its source, and must be experienced as an aesthetically autonomous effective creation is one reason we don’t naturally think of reflective adaptations as works of literary criticism. While criticism, too, can offer commentary on its object's core-themes, criticism is primarily an argumentative activity, and something that aspired to be criticism would generally fail to meet condition 5 above. However, criticism and adaptation are connected: reflective adaptations contribute to the critical enterprise when they illuminate their sources and question their assumptions, while the work of the critic might inform the creation of a reflective adaptation.

There is another way that criticism and reflective adaptation are connected. Because a reflective adaptation’s reframing of its source is performed through artistic choices rather than by explicit commentary, it can be a task of criticism to point to those elements of the adaptation’s choice that bring to light the reframing that it offers. In the remaining sections we move in this direction. We focus on Kurosawa’s film adaptation of *Macbeth*, known in the English speaking world as *Throne of Blood*.[[13]](#footnote-13)

## A Reflective Adaptation: Character versus Situation

*Throne of Blood* abandons Shakespeare's text, and moves the location to feudal Japan. But it retains the overall narrative structure of *Macbeth*: a prophesy, partly confirmed by a promotion bestowed, leads to the ruler’s murder; the Lordship is gained; opposing forces bring destruction to the new ruler (Washizu). Incidents from *Macbeth* reappear in *Throne*: the urging of Asaji (Lady Macbeth) to murder; the dispatch of the Lord’s guards, blamed for the Lord's killing; the ghost of Miki (Banquo); a moving forest that signals Washizu’s (Macbeth’s) vulnerability.[[14]](#footnote-14)

Central to our reading of *Throne* is the thought that *Throne*’s emphasis on situation, an emphasis which we document below, is an aesthetically important and salient deviation from *Macbeth*'s emphasis on character, and a means by which it signals its reframing of a core theme of its source. In recent decades the relations between character and situation and their relative importance for determining behaviour has been a theme in social psychology and philosophy.[[15]](#footnote-15) But we do not interpret *Throne* as (implausibly) offering to adjudicate this debate; the issue made salient by the film is the extent to which certain social arrangements, including those that prevail in warrior societies, strongly determine certain outcomes; believing that they do is not the same as scepticism about the existence or efficacy in general of character.

In *Macbeth,* moral character is a central notion, made vivid partly through its explicit representation in dialogues and partly through the ambiguity of its representation in the actions of agents. There are invocations of character and motive in exchanges between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth: Macbeth is too full of the milk of human kindness, is in danger of living a coward in his own esteem; Lady Macbeth is of undaunted mettle. While seen in the context of the play as a whole, the validity of these comments can be put in doubt, they strongly encourage attention to questions about character and its interpretation. Is it true that Macbeth has “an inordinate ambition that makes murder itself seem to be a lesser evil than failure to achieve the crown and so to satisfy his wife.”?[[16]](#footnote-16) He does not linger over or fantasize about the power he supposedly craves. Does he misread himself, his self-styled “vaunting ambition,” lacking the sustained intensity which characterises genuinely ambitious minds?[[17]](#footnote-17) Is he really too weak to resist the temptations of Lady Macbeth, or is this resistance a contrived show? The apparently redundant addition in "tomorrow, as he purposes" (Act I.V) suggests that Macbeth's mind is already set on murder without his wife's promptings. Is her characterization of him as irresolute a misdescription? She, after all, grossly underestimates her own sensitivity, sleepwalking to wash her hands of the blood she previously trivialized as washable stains. While much in the play is ambiguous and perhaps indeterminate on these questions, the effect is to make character, motive and choice highly salient categories.

*Throne* is different. Critics have complained about the flatness of the characters as compared with those of Shakespeare.[[18]](#footnote-18) No memorable speeches are made by Washizu or by anyone else and dialogues are sparse. Kurosawa’s characters are also less vividly drawn, and raise fewer questions about the ambiguity of motive (Washizu is psychologically unchanged by the end of the play). Nothing is done to encourage us to see events from the point of view of characters. None of these things are failings. The film, psychologically austere rather than thin, consciously pushes personality, loyalty and moral resolution to the background, making the power of situation its primary theme. When Asaji persuades her husband to murder the feudal lord to whom he owes his new position, she does not call upon his courage or the rewards of status, but on his situation: Miki (Banquo) knows that the forest spirit has told Washizu that he will become king, and Miki is very likely to tell this to the Lord; the Lord’s inevitable response will be to destroy Washizu before he can make the prediction true. Washizu must kill the Lord at the first opportunity. Washizu protests that the Lord treasures him above all others. What, Asaji urges, is personal affection to a Lord who (unlike the saintly Duncan) killed his own master? And while killing his Lord brings dangers of its own to Washizu, it does not threaten the eternal damnation imposed on Macbeth by his own theological context.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Each of Macbeth's killings—Duncan, Banquo, Macduff—is freely chosen, 'free' in the sense that they represent courses of action adopted while viable alternatives exist. The prophecies as such do not call directly for these killings. Other valid options seem open. Washizu must kill his Lord because he finds himself in what, in an economic context, has been called a “single exit” situation—where a rational actor has only one realistic alternative, as with sellers under perfect competition who must equate marginal costs and marginal revenue or go bust.[[20]](#footnote-20) *Throne* presents us with, if anything, a more constraining variant of such a model, since the desire to avoid death is even easier to attribute to individuals than the desire to avoid bankruptcy. As Asaji puts it: “My Lord, you have but two paths ahead: remain here and patiently wait for our Great Lord to slay you, or slay him first and become the Lord of Cobweb castle.” The reality of the danger is immediately rendered vivid by the unannounced arrival of the Lord and his retinue, initially mistaken for an invading army. The Lord tells them that he has arrived in order to launch an attack on another enemy. Asaji points out to Washizu that such an attack is a ruse. It would be an opportunity for the Lord to see that Washizu is struck by an arrow from behind while leading the charge.

Washizu’s is not the only situationally determined behaviour in this version of the *Macbeth* story. His vividly realised death at the hands of his own soldiers exemplifies another single-exit situation (the soldiers are doing the exiting this time). They believe, with good reason, that they must kill him to survive.

Such, then, is the contrast between *Macbeth* and *Throne* with regard to core-themes: a contrast between the motives of individuals on the one hand, and, on the other hand, situations close to the single-exit model in which people lose effective agency because exactly one option is overwhelmingly preferable to the rest.[[21]](#footnote-21) By contrast, the only instance in *Macbeth* of action that even appears to be highly constrained is, in reality, a deception: Macbeth says he had no choice but to kill the grooms because of his outrage at Duncan’s killing; an unconvincing performance from which his wife’s faint draws attention away.[[22]](#footnote-22)

## Reflecting aesthetically

We have said that the thematic reframing offered by a reflective adaptation will generally be enacted through artistic choices as to medium and expressive or symbolic means rather than through explicit argument.[[23]](#footnote-23) Certain aspects of the Shakespearean perspective are retained in *Throne*, transposed from dialogue to moving images: the shafts of light and darkness in the forest display how fair can be foul and foul fair; claustrophobic spatial arrangements objectify Macbeth's sense of being “cabined, cribbed, confined”.[[24]](#footnote-24) The limited control of humans over their world is conveyed in the film by episodes of blurred vision. It is not just the mist (*Macbeth*'s"misty air") commuting from text to image in the film's many foggy shots, but carefully designed moments in which seeing becomes partial. Asaji's retreat into a dark space in a room in order to retrieve the tempered wine is one such sequence; the camera lingers on *our* inability to make out her form. The scene with the forest spirit, too, includes an unorthodox shot in which our view of the spirit is blocked by a tree. Even the head dress sign of the eclipse that accompanies many scenes has been called an icon of occluded vision.[[25]](#footnote-25) Neither the characters nor the (real) spectators are able to take in the full picture. How can they be expected to genuinely control it? Kurosawa manages, with the song Washizu hears and interrupts, an allusion to the “mousetrap” scene in *Hamlet*, again underlining the constraints on human agency.[[26]](#footnote-26)

While these devices underline *Throne*’s continuity with its source, the theme of limits to human agency takes, in Kurosawa’s adaptation, a radical turn that shifts the focus from character to situation. This creates a significant artistic problem: Kurosawa must transmute an affectively rich, character-focused tragedy into a narrative of largely impersonal processes, without forfeiting his hold on an audience. He might have asked us to pity Washizu; in fact none of the film's characters is a focus of empathic concern or even of impersonal sympathy. As we have noted, nothing stirring or memorable is said; *Macbeth*'sgreat, flawed central character is replaced by *Throne*'s ignoble death of a much less remarkable man. Shakespeare’s thirty four lines (I.2.7-43) on the valour of Macbeth and Banquo carry us into the fighting, allowing an imagined glimpse of frontline courage before either appears before us. Kurosawa reduces this to a generalised report, prefaced by “luck was on our side.” With the sacrifice of appeal to the spectator's empathic emotions, Kurosawa abandons the cardinal gateways through which aesthetic effect is generated in *Macbeth*.[[27]](#footnote-27)

To a large extent it is the medium-specific beauty of the film that animates its narrative and binds an audience to it; the composition and cutting of shots, the use of light, darkness and confined spaces, the interlacing motifs of spider-web entrapment, of spinning, of repetition, of circularity. The narrative’s global emphasis on repetitive episodes of survival-driven betrayal is visible at higher resolution through images of cyclical movement, repetition and entrapment: the circular movement of Washizu, and the galloping horse, the spirit's spinning, losing one's way and returning to a starting point, a horse that escapes and returns, Washizu and Miki marching to the Lord to receive their honours and marching back, discomforted by their apparent gains; Washizu’s final dance of entanglement in the rain of arrows.[[28]](#footnote-28) Throughout there is an emphasis on objects and processes rather than on agents; Kurosawa's own title (*Cobweb Castle*) names an enduring structure rather than a man, a throne multiply and contingently occupied over time. The inexorability of processes which draw one in, is marked in the hypnotically slow entry into Cobweb Castle (nearly four minutes of screen time), with the Lord’s eclipse-helmet displayed on his coffin and centre-screen as Miki fatally opens the castle gates

## The limits of contrast

Central to our reading of Throne is an account of its thematic contrast with *Macbeth*. In this section we ask whether we have, at the least, inflated that contrast.

We do not say that *Throne* lacks all psychology or that *Macbeth* presents actions as disconnected from situations. Two scenes from *Macbeth*—the appearance of Banquo’s ghost and Lady Macbeth’s washing away of the blood—focalize the idea of personal guilt when carried over to the film. And the song at the opening credits is likely to connect viewers with ideas of greed and ambition:

Look upon the ruin

Of the castle of delusion

Haunted only now

Of those who perished

A scene of carnage

Born of consuming desire

Never changing

Now and throughout eternity. [[29]](#footnote-29)

The film, therefore, does not make redundant all individual characteristics or purposes. It does, however, depict a community where those things are pushed towards the margin. Scenes which, in the source, highlight personal guilt and remorse, focus in the adaptation on intense but impotent feeling—one of the costs that highly constraining situations impose on sentient beings.[[30]](#footnote-30) Other scenes of high emotion have gone; Macduff’s response to his family’s murder and Macbeth’s to the death of his wife-- two of the most moving scenes of grief in Western literature—have been excised and Macduff, a foil to Macbeth’s nihilism in Shakespeare, is almost absent in Kurosawa. In *Macbeth* indifference to the fate of characters is peculiar to the witches; in the film, such indifference is closer to the moral centre of the work itself.

One objection to our insistence on the radical difference between these works is that it should, if correct, be manifest to someone with a good prior knowledge of the play. So either we are telling people what they already know, or, if they don’t know it, it is unlikely to be true. Either way, we have made no progress. Our answer is that familiarity with the source is actually a barrier to grasping the differences we claim to see. We hope, below, to dispel the air of paradox this claim may generate.

One of the effects of adapting a canonical and well known work is that an audience familiar with the salient themes of the original and exposed to the adaptation is likely to interpret, more or less unconsciously, the adaptation in the light of those themes.[[31]](#footnote-31) Someone who knows *Macbeth* reasonably well is likely to see the events of *Throne* through the lens of character, motive and weakness of will, at least where there is no highly salient objection to doing so, even though there are, as we suggest, better interpretations of those events available. Indeed, in many circumstances it is reasonable for an audience to assume that an adaptation borrows material from its source without making that borrowing explicit. *Throne* might have never have made it explicit that Washizu murdered The Lord; we might see The Lord retire for the night and cut from that to a scene with Washizu in command of Cobweb Castle. This would be mystifying without an understanding of the *Macbeth* plot and viewers would naturally and reasonably assume that content concerning the murder has been silently included in the film. Similarly, it is not against all reason to understand scenes in which Lady Washizu advocates murder as a means to avoid their own destruction as occasions in which she finds a convenient argument to further her own ambition (or whatever personal motive we ascribe to her), and with which to motivate her husband.[[32]](#footnote-32)

These are reasons not to be surprised that audiences familiar with the source work have not seen quite as stark a contrast of perspective between source and adaptation that we find. Our claim is that, while it is natural and tempting to import to *Throne* character-based material from *Macbeth*, this is not the best way to see the relation between the two. In the case we imagined above where the murder of the Lord is never represented, there are good reasons to assume that borrowing has taken place: doing so explains something currently lacking an explanation and urgently in need of one: Washizu’s occupancy of the castle. But that is not the case with the motives Washizu and Asaji have for the murder; the film does provide its own explanation through the arguments of Asaji: it is the single-exit situation Washizu and Asaji find themselves in. Those arguments, we suggest, should be taken at face value.

There is a normative aspect to this; we should not assume borrowing unless doing so allows us to see the work as better than it would otherwise appear. We do not see *Throne* as a better work if we understand it as importing the psychology of *Macbeth*; on the contrary, we will miss Kurosawa’s low-key but artistically coherent reframing of Shakespeare’s themes.

Another objection to the character/situation contrast we lay such stress on is that we have been ignoring the role of fate in both works. In both, prophesy is the engine that drives action and the outcome of action. At the least, the argument goes, this considerably reduces the effect of our contrast between character-driven and situation-driven narratives.

We disagree. The commonality of the theme of fate across the two works does not undermine our case for radical difference. To say that an event is fated means, in this context, that whatever causal pathway will be realised will be one that leads to it; the plot-related interest of *Macbeth* and of *Throne* is, then, largely a matter of finding out which pathway that will actually be. In the case of *Macbeth* it is a pathway we are to understand in terms of choice, and the character traits that drive choice. We ask why the predictions make regicide seem justified to Macbeth, given that it is open to him to think that he will be crowned anyway.[[33]](#footnote-33) We are moved by his increasingly aggressive attempts to resist fated events, in the face of confirmation that prophecies are true. What binds us to the action is the series of questions about how characters respond to fate.

The pathway in *Throne* is quite different. The spirit appears twice, and on both occasions its prophecies generate the situational constraints that are our focus. The first prophecy—the Lord will bestow places on Washizu and Miki; Washizu and then Miki’s son will be Lord—obliges Washizu to kill the Lord, because the immediate coming to pass of the prophecy's first part hints that its second part is reliable too, and hence grounds for the Lord to eliminate him. The second, that Washizu is safe only until the forest moves, obliges Washizu’s men to kill him when they behold the moving forest. One notable difference between film and play with regard to fated events is, then, that while the prophecies in *Macbeth* *provoke* action, those in *Throne* serve as *reasons for* action. In the case of *Macbeth*, the relation between the prophecies and subsequent action can’t be predicted from self-preservation or from some other highly weighted reason: having been told he will be king is no more a reason for Macbeth to kill the king than it is a reason not to, and taking on Fate when the validity of the prophecies is obvious, serves only to protest against the inevitable. In *Throne*, by contrast, the spirit’s prediction that Washizu will be Lord, when combined with the possibility that the current Lord will come to know of the prediction, gives Washizu an overwhelming reason for murder, while the movement of the forest gives Washizu’s soldiers an overwhelming reason to defect. It is the difference in the pathways to fate that we emphasise, and this need not put in question the fatedness of the outcomes in both cases.

\*

We have focused here on one way that an earlier narrative work can exert substantial influence on a later one; what is distinctive of this relation is that the later holds up for reflection some important aspect of the source’s choice of narrative framework. We have noted some cardinal features of this process and illustrated its application in one of the most important cinematic reworkings of Shakespeare.

1. Here we consider only adaptations of narrative works. Adaptations of other kinds, if there are any, may conform to the same or analogous requirement; for present purposes we have no opinion on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. On the failure of transitivity for adaptations see Paisley Livingston, On the appreciation of cinematic adaptations, *Projections* 4, 2010: 104–127. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See again Livingston, on the appreciation of cinematic adaptations, especially “Two Truisms about Appreciating Adaptations.” Julie Sanders writes that “it is usually at the very point of infidelity that the most creative acts of adaptation and appropriation take place." (*Adaptation and Appropriation*, London, 2006, 20). See also Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 6-7; Phyllis Frus and Christy Williams, eds., *Beyond Adaptation: Essays on Radical Transformations of Original Works* (Jefferson, N.C., 2010), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Some writers on adaptation object to the expression “the source”; Donald Whaley says that “fully illuminating the meaning of a text requires exploring all of the sources of the text, not only earlier texts but social sources as well’ (Adaptation studies and the history of ideas: the case of *Apocalypse Now*, in Welsh, James M & Lev, Peter (eds) *The Literature/Film Reader: Issues of Adaptation*, 2000, Lanham, MD, Scarecrow, p.48). We see no reason to label every influence on a work a “source” of that work, and for us the source is distinguished by being the object of the intention to adapt. But while adaptations usually have, in this sense, one source, it is possible for an adaptation to have multiple sources; the author might intend to adapt more than one work in a single act of narrative construction. Anyone who does not like “the source” is welcome to replace that expression in all its occurrences in this paper with “the object of the intention to adapt”. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. # Those Shakespearean plays presumed to derive from a source now lost—e.g. *Hamlet*—come to mind. Lucy Kraemer (*Adaption in Bollywood*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Adaptation Studies*, edited by Thomas Leitch) says “Unacknowledged or unofficial remaking is in fact so widespread in the Hindi film industry that it deserves to be considered a fully institutionalised industrial category” (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017. p.192); see also [Nathan Waddell](javascript:;), Christopher Nolan’s *The Dark Knight*: An Unacknowledged Adaptation of Joseph Conrad’s The Secret Agent? *Adaptation* (2013) 6 (1): 43-59.

   [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The idea that an adaptation may actively engage with its source-work is not new. For example, Thomas Leitch (Adaptation studies at a crossroads, *Adaptation* (2008) 1, 63-77) notes “Paul Woolf's discussion of adaptations of ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue’, which ‘enter into debates over the issues raised in the original texts’ (57–58), and Brian McFarlane's defence of Merchant Ivory's The Europeans (1979) as ‘not so much tinkering with James but rather suggesting another way of reading him’” (both in R. B. Palmer, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature on Screen*, Cambridge University Press, 2007). We go somewhat beyond current literature in characterising the modes of conversation and their implications. For a broader dialogic model, which, aside from offering useful distinctions among kinds of dialogues between works, turns the source's ability to generate aesthetic commentary from later works into a condition for acquiring canonical status, see David Fishelov, *Dialogues with/and Great Books: The Dynamics of Canon Formation*, Brighton U.K, 2010, Chap. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. But notice that the widespread recognition that adaptations should not be presumed to be inferior to their sources has gone along with a seeming desire to rid adaptation studies of evaluative notions altogether; Thomas Leitch complains that we have not yet found the "silver bullet" that will rid us of "the dead hand" of evaluation (Adaptation studies at a crossroads). But evaluation is not a matter of labelling works "good", "bad" and "better"; properly conducted, evaluation, point us to the qualities, and perhaps the faults, of works in ways that deepen our experience of it; key to appreciating an adaptation is discovering things it does better (or worse) than its source, or things it does which go beyond the ambitions of the source itself, as with *Throne's* bringing into question Shakespearean assumptions about the role of character—see below. Nor is it automatically wrong to think that a given medium may be less suited than another is to a particular artistic purpose; Rae Langton suggests that film is inherently less able than literature to embody the "projective phenomenology" of love ("Projected love", in Susan Wolf and Christopher Grau (eds) *Understanding Love*, Oxford University Press, p.160). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Linda Hutcheon’s "an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art” (*A Theory of Adaptation*, p.xvi) excludes unacknowledged adaptations, while removing “announced” leaves the weak “revisitation” very exposed; one work may extensively reference, quote from, bear obvious and intended similarities to another without the first being, in any intuitive sense, an adaptation of the second: consider the pairs *The Godfather* (film)/*The Leopard* (film) and *Rio Bravo*/*High Noon* (see text below for more on these cases). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Recent expansions of the notion seem likely to make it so. Korda’s *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933) is not an adaptation of any literary text, but may count, says [Deborah Cartmell](javascript:;), as an adaptation of “history” (review of Colón Semenza and  Hasenfratz, *The History of British Literature on Film: 1895–2015*. *Adaptation* (2016) 9: 257-258). Hutcheon’s definition (above) allows, as she acknowledges, “theme parks” as adaptations. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. # There have been a number of attempts to divide up the territory of adaptation; none we know of specifies a sub-category that corresponds closely to our reflective adaptation. An early and still influential attempt is due to Geoffrey Wagner (*The Novel and the Cinema*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: Rutherford, NJ, 1975, 222.): (a) transposition, 'in which a novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference'; (b) commentary, 'where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect . . . when there has been a different intention on the part of the film-maker, rather than infidelity or outright violation'; and (c)  analogy, ‘which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art'. Our category falls within Wagner’s (c) but so also would many things which don’t count as reflective adaptations. Wagner’s taxonomy is used by Julie Sanders in her recent *Adaptations and Appropriations* (but wrongly attributes it to Deborah Cartmell, though it is discussed in [Cartmell](https://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref=dp_byline_sr_book_1?ie=UTF8&text=Deborah+Cartmell&search-alias=books&field-author=Deborah+Cartmell&sort=relevancerank) & Whelehan (eds) *Adaptations: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, Routledge, 1999, p.24).

    [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. To give a sense of how important it is to distinguish the precise derivative relationship we are trying to capture, note that the British Film and Video Council's database of Shakespeare on film, counts 651 entries in the list of films influenced by *Macbeth*. Just what counts as an "entry" is not explained (see Rowe, Katherine, "Macbeth on Changing Screens," *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, Eds. Michael Neill and David Schalkwyk, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016, pp. 624-41). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For the idea that translations of Greek tragedies are adaptations see Lorna Hardwick, “Translating Greek Tragedy to the Modern Stage.” *Theatre Journal*, 59, (2007), 358–61. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. A more literal translation of the title is *Cobweb Castle*. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. The credits to *Throne* do not mention *Macbeth*. Should *Throne* count as an unacknowledged adaptation? No. The acknowledgement is there in the obvious narrative similarity to Shakespeare’s play along with the obvious improbability of this being accidental. Elements of homage in films are regularly taken to serve as open acknowledgements of influence without there being any explicit statement of acknowledgement, as in the baby carriage scene in *The Untouchables* (de Palma, 1987) so obviously taken from *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. For commentary in relation to literary fiction as well as references see [omitted]. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Kenneth Muir, Introduction to the Arden Edition of Macbeth (Methuen, 1997), p.xlviii. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See R. A. Foakes, "Images of Death: Ambition in *Macbeth*," *Focus on Macbeth*, Ed. J. R. Brown, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1982, pp. 7-29,and A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns and Other Shakespearean Lectures*, Longmans, London,1961, pp. 218-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Initial responses to the film dismissed it for failing to do justice to Shakespeare (see Suzuki, "Lost in Translation”). Lei Jin ("Silence and Sound in Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*," *Comparative Literature and Culture* 6 (2004)) cites Reeves and Brook, who were unwilling to consider the film as a “Shakespearean film” because it did not use the text. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “…his virtues will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against the deep damnation of his taking-off…” (I.vii.18-20). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. See Latsis, S.J. *(1972)* Situational Determinism in Economics, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, 23, pp. 207–45 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. There are other ways by which responses to *Macbeth* have conveyed a loss of freedom. One of the most striking ones is an online game based on the play called 'Foul Whisperings.' In discussing the game, Katherine Rowe observes how in one of the rooms the player is locked in a phantom battle, and that "the animation makes it impossible to control the player's avatar – dispossessing it of volition…". Katherine Rowe, Ibid, p. 632. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The pattern we are looking at is visible in other places in Shakespeare. When his characters say they have no choice, this is often presented as playing the role of excuse rather than genuine reason: hiding something other. Antony tells Cleopatra that he had no choice but to follow her ship at Actium (3.11.55-59); Othello tells the audience that he has no choice but to kill Desdemona (5.2.6). The former is expressing love. The latter is avoiding whatever is genuinely driving him to kill her. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. See above, Section 2, point 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. For a more detailed intertextual analysis, see John Gall, "*Throne of Blood*: Kurosawa's Cinema of Allusion," *Asian Cinema*, (2004, 1,234-42). For the morphing of Shakespeare's language into pictorial articulations rooted in several Japanese arts, see Saviour Catania, "The Haiku *Macbeth*: Shakespearean Antithetical Minimalism in Kurosawa's *Kumonosu-Jo*," in *World-Wide Shakespeares: Local Appropriations in Film and Performance*, Ed. Sonia Massai, London and New York, 2005. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Jack J. Jorgens, "Kurosawa's Throne of Blood: Washizu and Miki Meet the Forest Spirit," *Literature Film Quarterly*, (1983, 3,167-73). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Suzuki, who discusses the reference to Hamlet, suggests that, unlike Claudius, who hears about his guilt, the song Washizu cannot bear to hear conveys to him his future fate and participation in a role he has been scripted to play. Suzuki also proposes that this follows from the selective use of Noh conventions in which Asaji is one with her mask whereas Washizu fights it (and ironically becomes even less free as a result). Both points deepen the de-psychologizing of Macbeth we have been tracing here. See Erin Suzuki, "Lost in Translation: Reconsidering Shakespeare's Macbeth and Kurosawa's Throne of Blood," *Literature Film Quarterly*, (2006, 2, 93-103). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. For an attempt to relate this de-emphasis on freedom and individuality to Kurosawa's appropriation of Noh and its own non-individualistic Buddhist orientation, see Henry Somers-Hall, "*Throne of Blood* and the Metaphysics of Tragedy," *Film-Philosophy*, (2013, 1,68-83). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. To these we might add two further devices which *may* have implications of repetition: the centipede flag with its sine wave-like design, and (once again) the schematic eclipse on Washizu’s helmet and the Lord’s. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. In addition, there are indications that Washizu feels at least the attractions of a move up the hierarchy—see the brief, awkward conversation with Miki as they rest before their entrance into Cobweb Castle where they will both, it turns out, be promoted by the Lord. See also the first conversation between Washizu and his wife where he speaks of a “troubling dream.” Indeed she calls his denial of ambition “a lie”, immediately making the point that ambition is irrelevant--the Lord will kill him anyway. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Some would deny that Asaji is tormented by what she has convinced Washizu to undertake. But Asaji's guilt—a detail in which Kurosawa follows Shakespeare—makes it difficult to accept her description as merely devious. See for example the argument of Anthony Dawson, "Reading Kurosawa Reading Shakespeare," *A Concise Companion to Shakespeare on Screen*. Malden, MA, 2006. 155-75. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. An interesting question which we don’t presume to answer here is whether that is the result of (unconscious) inference or of priming--the automatic activation of a network of source-relevant concepts--or some combination of the two. On some ambiguities in the notion of priming together with doubts about the extent to which priming is empirically supported, see Daniel C. Molden, Understanding priming effects in social psychology: what is “social priming” and how does it occur? *Social Cognition*, 32, 2014, pp. 1–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. We are not assuming here that ambition plays exactly this role in Shakespeare’s play—as indicated above, we regard the play as somewhat ambiguous on this score. The point is simply that ambition is made a highly salient concept in Shakespeare’s play and, hence, may be a concept some readers/spectators will simply import when watching the film. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. The thought occurs to him—I.iii.142-3—but, implausibly, he never returns to it. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)