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"Contending with fretful elements": Shakespeare, Kurosawa and the *Benshi*. On Film Adaptation

In contemporary discussions of film adaptation, perhaps the one thing agreed-upon is that fidelity to the literary source material is not a valid criterion for criticizing a film. Some critics posit this as a recent development, while others point to a long legacy of agreement since the advent of cinema. What emerges from both sides is that authors begin scholarly work by acknowledging and disavowing this 'myth' of fidelity: "the book was better than the movie" is not a valid statement for serious criticism. Yet the anxious dismissal which introduces countless essays and books on film adaptation reveals that the idea of fidelity is still prevalent – and even dangerous – enough to warrant a dismissal. Even if the notion of fidelity of an adaptation to its source novel does not contain a grain of truth or fidelity is the "most frequent and tiresome,"[1] and "basic and banal focus"[2] of adaptation studies, the term 'fidelity' arises again and again. It looks as if more than an easy dismissal is needed to banish the specter of fidelity which "hovers in the background"[3] once and for all.

Films that call on Shakespeare for source material for inspiration can present an ideal medium through which to examine the ways an adaptation is 'allowed' to relate to and engage with its source material. Analyses of Shakespeare films are continually concerned with the relation of the new work to Shakespeare's original text. Shakespeare's work has come to stand in many ways for Western Literature, and the use of his works in film continues that very complicated legacy. Shakespeare's importance as Western cultural icon in cinema is problematical, however, when Shakespeare scholars such as Frank Kermode argue: "Many would agree with the general proposition that the best Shakespeare movies are not in English but in Japanese or Russian".[4] Western cinema seems to be faced with both the universality of Shakespeare's words and a paradox of translating those words: a predicament that mirrors the one many adaptation films face.

Akira Kurosawa's films *Throne of Blood* (1957) and *Ran* (1985) are considered by Western critics to be some of the best film adaptations of Shakespeare (related to *Macbeth* and *King Lear* respectively). Neither film has a word of Shakespeare's dialogue in them; both take place in feudal Japan and introduce characters, histories and themes not found in Shakespeare – changes by no means unheard of within film adaptations. Kurosawa's films are often relegated to 'transgressive' or 'foreign' Shakespeare-film classifications, meaning that deviations from Shakespeare are viewed as culturally-tinged deviations, something unavoidable in the act of translation. It is precisely this perception of foreignness that makes Kurosawa's films exemplary for a study in terms of adaptations. What critics label as 'otherness' in his films separates that which is not distinctly Shakespeare and labels it as Japanese,

[1] Dudley Andrew, "Adaptation", in James Naremore, ed., *Film Adaptation* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2000), 32.

[2] James M. Welsh, "Introduction: Issues of Screen Adaptation. What Is the Truth?", in James M. Welsh and Peter Lev, eds., *The Literature/Film Reader* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2007), xiv.

[3] Welsh, *Issues of Screen Adaptation,* xiv.

[4] Frank Kermode, "Our Muddy Vesture", *London Review of Books*, 27.1 (6 January 2005), 17.

thus exposing just how often analysis of adaptation films is still limited by claims of fidelity, though now under different terminology.

To examine how it is that Kurosawa's films refute such buried assumptions about adaptations, we can look to a figure of Japanese film heritage. The *benshi*, a lecturer who explained and interpreted early Japanese silent film, can give critics today a model with which to examine adaptation as a process. Through the *benshi*, an original film-text was re-imagined through the subjective voice of the presenter, and freely deviated from the original story. Through Kurosawa's films' challenge to and engagement with their Shakespearean sources, Kurosawa becomes like a *benshi* in rejecting the infallibility of the original. Through scene analyses of Kurosawa's two Shakespeare-related films, I will argue that in the position of a *benshi* Kurosawa breaks a pervasive binary of Western adaptation theory not only by interpreting but also by countering and criticizing the 'original'. The form, style, and content of the film are Kurosawa's vehicles for mounting this challenge.

Early Japanese Film and the *Benshi*

Early models of the *benshi* can be seen in nearly all early silent film contexts; those were the lecturers in the theater who translated or extended the on-screen images. In the United States and most Western countries, such lecturers had faded from use by about 1910.[5] However, in Japan the lecturer's role transformed into the art of the *benshi,* which remained a popular aspect of a film well into the 1930s. The *benshi* originated in attempts to translate Western culture or extend a film clip. Yet as films became more narratively complex, the *benshi* evolved with them. As Donald Richie explains, the *benshi* narrated, performed dialogue, and "assumed responsibility for interpreting and analyzing the film as well".[6] The origins of the *benshi* in traditional Japanese theatre have been often noted in examinations of Japanese film.[7] From the chorus in Noh drama, the chanter in puppet theater (*bunraku*) and the narrator in *kabuki*, informing voices are often present and serve to create a Japanese theater which is "a pictorial expansion of verbal storytelling".[8] Richie's assessment of the narrative voice points out the split between the verbal and the picture that exists in Japanese theater, and which migrated to film in the popularity of the *benshi,* where the film on-screen was blended with a 'live' performance. The separation between verbal storytelling and the film picture becomes a space negotiated by the *benshi*'s translation of cinema. The *benshi* themselves were not unaware of their task as adapters as well as translators. A famous *benshi,* Musobei, once wrote: "Translation must be faithful to each word and line of the original work, but a word-for-word translation will just not express the artistic taste permeating the original. The only thing that will bring that to the surface is originality as a translation".[9] While Musobei's ideas may seem to be restricted by being "faithful to the original" in spirit, his "originality as a translation" and "artistic taste" suggest not one single meaning, but a more dynamic approach to transforming the original. The purpose of originality was

[5] Donald Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: A Concise History* (New York: Kodansha America, 2005), 18.

[6] Joanne Bernardi, *Writing in Light: The Silent Scenario and the Japanese Pure Film Movement* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), 36.

[7] See Donald Richie's, Jeffrey Dym's, and Joanne Bernardi's work on the *benshi.*

[8] Donald Richie, *A Hundred Years of Japanese Film: A Concise History* (New York: Kodansha America, 2005), 20.

[9] Quoted in Abé M. Nornes*, Cinema Babel: Translating Global Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 117.

to act as an extra-cinematic voice, to intercede and negotiate the original into a meaning the *benshi* thought best to communicate to the audience.

The separation between verbal storytelling and the film picture becomes a space negotiated by the *benshi*'s translation of cinema. The ubiquitous classification of Kurosawa's work as a translation of "Shakespeare's words into Japanese images"[10] puts him in the same position as the *benshi,* negotiating that separation. Yet those who point to Kurosawa's mediation between text and film often gloss over the mark of the translator on the final product. Unavoidably, translation entails creative interpretation. While this idea may seem self-evident, it is so often forgotten that it is worth spelling out. Kurosawa's allusions to Japanese theatrical modes and traditions are apparent and much lauded in his Shakespeare-related films, as is their use alongside mainstream Western (Hollywood) traditions of film. What some might overlook is the precursor for this blending in the form of the *benshi,* whose informing voice gave the audience not only a Japanese cultural lens but a subjective one: a dynamic and personal interaction with the pre-translated work in which the *benshi* could add, delete, criticize, counterpoint – essentially, talk back to the work he translated. So, when a character steps out of the action to comment on the story (as will be seen in *Ran*) or the film is bookended by a chanting chorus (*Kumonosu-jo / Throne of Blood*), it is not only within a theatrical tradition these techniques are operating, but in a film adaptation tradition.

Shakespeare in a Strange Land

The *benshi* stands as a historical model that runs counter to the way in which most adaptations are tackled today: not as a binary, but an exchange. As I outlined earlier, fidelity-obsession continues to haunt adaptation studies, and I am by no means the first to point this out. The field today, Thomas Leitch explains, operates on a "severe economy" of principles "which have ossified into a series of unvoiced and fallacious bromides most often taking the form of 'binary oppositions that poststructuralist theory has taught us to deconstruct: literature versus cinema, high culture versus mass culture, original versus copy'".[11] At the heart of this divide is the last binary: original versus copy. Even when denying fidelity as a useful assessment, unspoken in criticism of film adaptation is the infallibility of the original. The adapted signifier is nearly always inferior, seen only as an echo of the 'true' meaning of the original. In this mode of thought, the adaptation cannot criticize, interpret or otherwise touch the original. As it stands, adaptations are trapped: acknowledging a debt to the original means an adaptation cannot escape its shadow, and denying a relationship all together eliminates any exchange of meaning and interpretation between the two.

Few sources cast quite as long a shadow as Shakespeare's works do. The long history of Shakespeare as representative of Western literature has imbued his work with almost mythical authorial intention, meaning that adaptations of his plays are an ideal case study of the spectre of fidelity. His enormous cultural importance means that the problems all adaptations face are amplified, and deviations are at

[10] See Erin Suzuki, "Lost in Translation: Reconsidering Shakespeare's Macbeth and Kurosawa's Throne of Blood", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 34 (2006), 93-104, and J. Blumenthal, "Macbeth Into Throne of Blood", *Sight and Sound*, 34.4 (1965), 190-195.

[11] Thomas M. Leitch, "Twelve Fallacies of Adaptation Theory", *Criticism*, 45.2 (Spring 2003), 150.

times tantamount to heresy. Shakespeare films also illustrate well the two modes of relation to the original in which fidelity is typically viewed. The first is the text of an author: the absence or presence of Shakespeare's original language is distinctive, perhaps more than that of any other author in Western culture. Since so much weight is placed on the historical fame and poetry of the original text (as well as its distinction from modern colloquial language), deviating is both obvious and a kind of betrayal, but so is cutting or tossing aside the language. As Kenneth Rothwell explains, even those Shakespeare adaptations without any Shakespearean language still bear a relation to the original the films – and critics – cannot ignore: "Like unwanted illegitimate children, no matter how emphatic the protests that they are 'not Shakespeare' they have the impudence to lurk on the fringe of the family circle."[12] In an attempt to study Shakespeare adaptations, then, it might seem counterintuitive to look at films which cast off not only the Shakespearean language but the English language as well. However, global Shakespeare is a rapidly expanding genre, and critics like Alex Huang work to form digital archives of the wide variety of Shakespeare performances from around the world. It is therefore difficult to continue to view foreign Shakespeare films as 'avoiding' the problem English language films have in casting off the Bard's poetry (as they have long been said to do). For example, in his examination of Shakespeare films, Peter Brook writes: "The great masterpiece, of course, is the Kurosawa film, *Throne of Blood,* which doesn't really come into the Shakespeare question at all because it doesn't have the text".[13] In this way, analysis of adaptations such as Kurosawa's are dismissed to the fringes in order to keep the original/adaptation binary stable. In Brook's assessment, foreign Shakespeare isn't 'real', or at least it can't be discussed in the same way as English-language Shakespeare films. To classify these films as 'transgressive Shakespeare', films that deviate so far from the text as to be considered only vaguely adaptations or otherwise marginal, is to reveal how deeply troubling to the foundations of adaptation foreign Shakespeares can be – and just how vital a role they can play in adaptation studies.

If an adaptation is divorced from the original language, the other commonly cited relation critics choose is to its 'spirit': the inferred authorial intent of the original work. While often perceived as a looser principle of adaptation, under its surface we find again fidelity to a supposed authorial intention. The idea that there is only one true message inherent in the original maintains the binary opposition between adaptation and original. Shakespeare criticism often lauds the ability of cinema to expand upon what Shakespeare wrote. While this expansion might seem initially to provide some freedom, in fact the films are still shackled by the thought of 'what Shakespeare would have wanted'. Therefore, through text or through spirit, fidelity creates a one-way street of meaning progressing from the original to the adaptation, the adaptation passively observing or reflecting the original as an audience (purportedly) views a film. And as Andrew defines it, if the film is not reproducing "something essential" from the original, its relation to that original is irrevocably split. In this mode, the original exists in a kind of isolation, unaffected by

[14] Andrew, *Film Adaptation,* 30-31.

adaptations that do not hold that 'essential' aspect: "the uniqueness of the original text is preserved … it is intentionally left unassimilated in adaptation".[14] It is in the 'assimilation,' however, that foreign-language Shakespeare reveals the binary under which adaptation studies currently labor. The particular case of Kurosawa's 'Japaneseness' is my way to examine how that revelation works.

In his book on Kurosawa's work, Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto argues that "Japanese adaptations of Western texts are often regarded as mere imitations; it is only when some uniquely Japanese codes of traditional culture are mixed with great Western originals that adaptations become worthy of praise and appreciation".[15] Examinations

[15] Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa: Film Studies and Japanese Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 192.

of 'Japaneseness' in Kurosawa's work haunt criticism in the same way that fidelity haunts the assessment of Shakespeare adaptations. In comparing *Throne of Blood* to *Macbeth,* Rothwell claims that "[t]he multiple alternations in plot and character mainly stem from a desire to blend Japanese with Western cultural codes".[16] Rothwell's assessment takes the meaning out of the filmmakers' control and into the hands of 'culture', denying a real analysis of the change to the source as independent or source-challenging decisions. Fears about changing Shakespeare are subsumed into the idea of cultural difference. The way Rothwell describes Kurosawa's incorporation of multicultural sources and techniques as "ransack[ing] Western and Japanese culture"[17]

[16] Rothwell, *History of Shakespeare on screen,* 197.

[17] Rothwell, *History of Shakespeare on screen*, 197.

maintains the same sort of highly-charged, emotional language as does 'betrayal' to fidelity. Casting Kurosawa as a distinctly Japanese filmmaker and assigning the deviation from Shakespeare to the imaginary influence of some incomprehensible 'other' culture is an easy trap for critics to fall into, labeling a lack of fidelity of the source as an unavoidable cultural translation. One can see this often in Kurosawa's case, as critics are so deeply engaged in examinations of 'Japaneseness' in his films that the engagement with Shakespeare is often overlooked. The model of the *benshi* can be useful to avoid such 'lost-in-translation' assumptions because its extra-cinematic voice foregrounds the work of translation, interpretation, and criticism in film. In *Throne of Blood* and *Ran,* the *benshi*-like voice emerges in two separate ways. Both ultimately can be seen as far more than just 'transgressive' Shakespeare.

'Japanization' and *Throne of Blood*

[18] *Kumonosu-jo*, the movie's title in Japan, means "Spider's Web Castle". For release in the United States and Europe it was renamed *Throne of Blood,* which I will use to avoid confusion.

Criticism of *Throne of Blood* [18] has long been concerned with mapping the film's connections to *Macbeth* and investigating its aesthetics through a Japanese theatrical lens. In line with this focus, "critics almost unanimously agree that Shakespeare's poetry is replaced by visual imagery in *Throne of Blood*".[19] The idea of replacing poetry with visual imagery is a potentially problematic assertion about the transition between mediums that, as described above, serves to maintain the language of the Bard unchanged. Yet examining where and how Shakespeare's language emerges within the film can also reveal the ways in which it is transformed and interpreted by Kurosawa – the ways the film talks back to the original.

[19] Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa,* 268.

What has prevented many critics from this sort of assessment – Kurosawa's themes rather than an imaginary 'Japanese' cultural theme – has been outlined

by Yoshimoto as the tendency of critics to analyze *Throne of Blood* as either a Shakespeare film or as a Noh-influenced Japanese film – not both simultaneously. In his chapter on *Throne of Blood* he argues that the typical reading of the Noh aesthetic assumes a Buddhist or Japanese world view, but that in fact "[a]nybody can use formal features of Noh for a variety of purposes, so that the presence of Noh conventions in film … by itself does not – in most cases cannot – simply reproduce the specific world of Noh".[20] The limitations of this reading, as reported by Yoshimoto, emerge repeatedly in criticism that tends to either privilege the retention of imagery found in *Macbeth* or outline the Noh or Buddhist implications of the film. In this case, the relation between the original and the signifier overwhelms interpretation of the film itself, and as Yoshimoto says, analysis must not "stop short of analyzing how these conventions function in the specific context of the film's textual system".[21] While he does not provide a concrete example of what this approach would look like practically, the model of the *benshi* may supply it: the film provides extra-cinematic voices that mark how it comments on the Shakespearean text.

A brief example of how *Thone of Blood* addresses Act Five of *Macbeth* illustrates this dynamic. As Macbeth delivers his famous "To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow" soliloquy, he despairs over the cycle of life and death that seems to be "full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing", and in which man is nothing more than "a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more".[22] His contemplation of life, however, begins with a comment on the recent news of Lady Macbeth's death: "She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word".[23] Yet for Washizu, the Macbeth character-function in *Throne of Blood*, there is not a moment to even acknowledge the lack of time. The last few scenes of *Macbeth* (Lady Macbeth's death, the slaying of Macduff's family, Macduff's confrontation with Macbeth, and the crowning of Malcolm as king) are condensed and accelerated in *Throne of Blood*. The film eliminates Macduff's role and we are not told that Washizu's wife has died – we leave her at the moment when she has almost broken down; this keeps the audience's focus solely on Washizu. The final four minutes of the film portray his men's mutiny and the murder of Washizu, after he has rushed from Asaji's side.

Yet the chant-like despair of Macbeth's "to-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow" can be found in *Throne of Blood*. One looking for the bleak march of time that is evoked in Macbeth's speech will find it in the slow chanting of the chorus, bookending the film in identical sequences: a pillar surrounded by fog, reading "Here stood Spider's Web Castle" is shown while male voices chant: "Look upon the ruins of the castle of delusion, haunted only now by the spirits of those who perished, a scene of carnage born of consuming desire, never changing now and throughout eternity".[24] The authoritative voice makes explicit the themes of the film: time is cyclical and men are bound to commit the same errors. Kurosawa uses this tradition to open and close the film not because *Macbeth* is a play and he is linking Elizabethan stage techniques to Noh (Japanese) stage techniques, but

[20] Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa,* 254.

[21] Yoshimoto, *Kurosawa,* 262.

[22] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (New York: Washington Square Press, The Folger Library, 1992), V.v.19-25.

[23] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v.18-19.

[24] Akira Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood*, Criterion Collection, 2003, DVD.

Fig. 1: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood*, 1957, DVD, 2003, Criterion Collection.

in order to ground his meaning at the beginning and the end of the film, moving more into the realm of the *benshi* model than theatrical ones.

The mood and emotion of Macbeth's soliloquy are further dispersed into the film as the Shakespearean "Life's but a walking shadow",[25] becomes the motif for the setting of *Throne of Blood*. The film landscape is sparse, both in the castle and out – the only deviation comes from the surrounding woods, a confusing maze of trees and paths. The castle Washizu comes to rule is built on a volcanic slope, a bleak landscape of dark rock and not much else. The dark castle and ground are contrasted with pervasive fog and a blank, white sky. The characters of this world are the "poor player[s]" on a barren stage.

[25] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v.25.

The structure of the narrative also echoes the themes set forth in the chanting choruses. In the first scene of action, messengers deliver the news of Washizu's battle victory to the Great Lord. In one of the final scenes, Washizu, now the Great Lord, receives in the same way the news of his impending loss. The repetition points to Washizu's incomprehension of his place within a larger cycle: he is killed by his own men just as he killed the previous Great Lord, and realization comes too late (if at all). The hopelessness of cyclical actions, emphasized by its verbal repetition in the chorus, echoes Macbeth's "to-morrow … creeps in this petty place from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time", and Washizu's ignorance of the cycle makes him equally ignorant of Macbeth's knowledge that "all our yesterdays have lighted fools / the way to dusty death".[26] Kurosawa's repetition in both the opening chorus and in Washizu's downfall indicates that the cyclical nature of the film mirrors Washizu's failure to learn from the yesterdays of his predecessors.

[26] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.v.20-24.

Throne of Blood visualizes the ideas expressed in Macbeth's soliloquy, as opposed to *Macbeth,* in which the speech is the subjective expression of one character in a cast of many. Macbeth contemplates the cycles of life, but Washizu is too busy *being* the fool on the way to dusty death to stop and think about how he got there. He is shown questioning his actions, perhaps feeling guilt, but his character generally does not express as much indecision as Macbeth. Perhaps most importantly, he is ultimately unaware of his own role within a larger narrative. Kurosawa's choice to keep Washizu largely silent on his feelings does not mean he is giving the audience a flat character. Rather, he uses Washizu to illuminate the vision of a fool alluded to within the soliloquy.

The Noh theatrical traditions seen in *Throne of Blood*, therefore, are used to further express the cycle of violence inhabited by unaware players. Noh makeup and costuming – as has been often noted in criticism – takes away personal markers and expressions, transforming the actor into a symbol of actions rather than an individual. Throughout *Throne of Blood,* Kurosawa presents highly stylized acting and costumes as well as limited facial and body movements – in line with Noh drama aesthetics. There are few close-ups; the camera prevalently stays stationary, and at a distance, so that the spectator sees the film from the point of view of theatre audience. Through his use of Noh aesthetics, Kurosawa works to move his characters from individual psychological portraits into character-types, giving the audience the anthropomorphized form of Shakespeare's metaphors.

Yet in the final scenes of the movie, Kurosawa breaks with his established camera style and closely follows Washizu's face, and for the first time the chaos and confusion of the battle is represented in close-up. As his enemies disguise themselves as the forest to attack his castle and Washizu faces his downfall, the camera is placed as if among the soldiers: Washizu's stricken face is visible through the flashes of men running past. The camera follows Washizu's movements through the upper levels of his castle as his men gather below to overthrow their lord. Kurosawa keeps the camera centered closely on Washizu for the four-minute-long scene of his death, as he is pinned by innumerable arrows, throws himself around the stairs of the castle's courtyard, then dies in front of his own army. The view of the amassed army firing the arrows is kept off-screen until Washizu dies. He screams and shouts throughout, the only other sound the thud of arrows hitting wood. His death scene can certainly be described as "sound and fury", and is a stark contrast to the stifled movement and flashes of violence the audience has seen before.

[27] Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.iii.54,75.

[28] Ana Laura Zambrano, "Throne of Blood: Kurosawa's *Macbeth*", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 2 (Summer 1974), 274.

Within the film, then, what does all this sound and fury signify? At the end of *Macbeth*, it is implied that the 'just' political forces have triumphed. In the bleak picture of mankind and a cycle of violence in *Macbeth* there is at least a glimpse of hope in the future. Malcolm implies that those who fled from the "watchful tyranny" of Macbeth will return, the country will "be planted newly".[27] Critic Ana Laura Zambrano claims that, for Shakespeare's audience, the guarantee of monarchs after Macbeth, leading to the Elizabethan age and beyond is the bright future after Macbeth's tyranny, ensuring "tragedy is thereby contained".[28] In contrast, *Throne of*
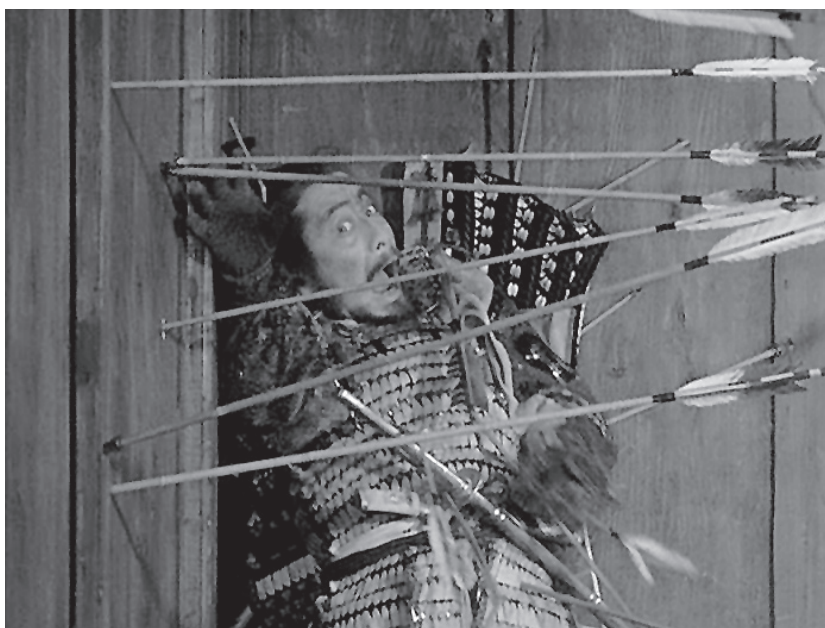

Fig. 2: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Throne of Blood*, 1957, DVD, 2003, Criterion Collection.

[29] Other film adaptations of the play have interpreted it in this way; consider the apperance of the witches at the very end of Orson Welles' *Macbeth* (1948).

Blood does not circumscribe the cycle of violence and ends the way it starts, "never changing, now and throughout eternity".[29] The bookend-message of the film comes much closer to the attitude assumed by the "to-morrow" speech than by *Macbeth* as a whole. The place for a new leader to step in is taken away and replaced by the chanting and pole marking the location of Spider's Web castle, "A scene of carnage born of consuming desire / Never changing, now and throughout eternity". The Noh aesthetic is contextualized into the structure of the film that makes characters into stereotypes rather than psychologized individuals. Washizu is not one man who has gone wrong, he is all men who lust after power and he shows no sign of slowing down. His death, full of sound and fury, signifies "nothing" in a way that Macbeth's does not.

By invoking the model of the *benshi* and looking not for deviations but rather to where the film chooses to direct the audience's gaze and attention, we can see Kurosawa's film as allowing the audience to inhabit the world of Macbeth, rather than just listen to his speech. The "To-morrow" speech is excised but the film itself explores its themes. Kurosawa may take Shakespeare's imagery from the soliloquy, but as with a *benshi* who translates and interprets the silent film (though in the opposite direction of 'translating' words into images), the audience is informed of his focus. Kurosawa implements an authoritative chorus and casts out the sections of the Shakespearean tragedy that might interfere with his meaning, thus presenting a far bleaker tale.

Ran: The Splintered Arrow

In *Throne of Blood*, the extra-cinematic voice of the chorus bookends the film, clearly pointing to the overriding themes. In the much later *Ran* (1985), Kurosawa returns to this authoritative voice, this time subsumed in the voices of the characters, but in ways that explicitly invoke the model of *benshi* again. In *Ran,* Kurosawa makes even more drastic changes to the characters and narrative of *King Lear* than those seen in *Throne of Blood*, and adds Japanese folklore and Hollywood-epic style staging to Shakespeare's text. Even their titles differ in clarity: Kurosawa's *Kumosjo-jo* becomes *Throne of Blood* for English audiences, while the Japanese *Ran* is unchanged, its translation of chaos (and connotations of fury, revolt, and madness)[30] remaining largely inaccessible to any monolingual Western audience.

[30] For further explications of these connotations, see Jan Kott, "*Ran*", in James Goodwin, ed., *Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), 201-207.

The story of *Ran* resembles Shakespeare's *King Lear*: an aging monarch decides to divide his kingdom among his children and lives as their guest, but their greed and disrespect eventually lead to his downfall and madness. Hidetora of the Ichimonji clan, the Lear character-function, splits his kingdom between his three sons. The youngest, Saburo (closest to the truthful and faithful Cordelia in *Lear*), criticizes his brothers' flattering words and his father's plan, citing his father's bloody accession to power. Other character-functions from *Lear* are spread throughout the film, as Hidetora, like Lear, goes mad and is driven into the wilderness, seeking the loyal Saburo whom he banished.

The banishment scene exemplifies the type of derivation and addition to Shakespearean material that can be seen in *Ran*. Saburo's refusal to his father begins much as Cordelia's to Lear, but Hidetora counters his rejection with a lesson to his sons. Hidetora uses a well-known folktale with Japanese origins, in which a king gives each of his sons an arrow to snap, which they do easily. But when the king puts the arrows together in a bundle, the sons cannot break it; this, for the king of the folktale, illustrates their strength in unity. Hidetora performs the same demonstration, and he and his advisors sit back appreciatively, believing the lesson complete. But unlike the son in the folktale, Saburo breaks the three arrows over his knee and calls his father foolish for believing the sons will help one another. The story is broken just as the arrows are: Saburo's disrespect and mockery is not just for his father's lesson, but also for the folklore connected to the metaphor.

Critics have noted the replacement of the love-test in *Lear* with the arrow-tale in *Ran*,[31] but, as illustrated by Yoshimoto, few critics get beyond pointing out the 'Japaneseness' of this tale, or classify it as a desire to blend Japanese and Western cultural codes.[32] The symbol of the broken arrows can stand for Kurosawa's method of adaptation in *Ran* as a whole: he shows a vision of chaos and discord in which characters are bound to question the gods (if any) who control the world. To achieve this, sources are fractured and dissonant. Pinpointing these moments of fracture reveals Kurosawa's subjective translation and the themes he wishes to focus on within the film.

"Fretful Elements": Hidetora's Madness

Also commonly noted concerning *Ran*'s derivations from Shakespeare is the addition of a past to the Lear-like character. Saburo reveals Hidetora's destructive ascent to power, which include killing the family of his son's wife and blinding her brother (alluding to the blinded Gloucester in *Lear*). Kurosawa said in an interview not long after he made *Ran*: "As much as I love Shakespeare, *Lear* has always been a play that I have found extremely dissatisfying … from the Japanese point of view, Lear doesn't seem to have any reflection on his past".[33] Kurosawa locates his break from Shakespeare in Hidetora's past, where he finds the lack of an explicit history to leave the character incomplete, unfinished in a way. He redresses that lack at a moment that explicitly invokes the *benshi*'s ability to incorporate new details into a story, the scenes of Hidetora's madness.

In *King Lear,* Shakespeare signals that Lear has been driven mad by his children's scorn, which makes him run out into a terrible storm. Kurosawa has a similar scene of storm-backed madness. Though both scenes represent an externalization of character, the characters shown differ significantly. In *Ran*, the storm follows the battle sequence in which Hidetora's sons turn on him, attacking his last stronghold and slaughtering Hidetora's remaining samurai and concubines. An empty scabbard preventing him from an honorable suicide, Hidetora walks down the stairs of his burning castle flanked on either side by his sons' armies, his face a blank mask.

[31] For example, see Christopher Hoile, "'King Lear' and Kurosawa's 'Ran': Splitting, Doubling, Distancing", *Pacific Coast Philology*, 22.5 (Nov 1987), 29-34.

[32] Rothwell, *History of Shakespeare on Screen*, 197.

[33] Quoted in Hoile, "'King Lear' and Kurosawa's 'Ran'"*,* 30.

Fig. 3: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, 1985, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2005.

In the script of *Ran*, Kurosawa described the scene as one in which "Hidetora, his strength drained from his body, slips and tumbles like a dead man falling into Hell".[34]

Hidetora's Noh-like blank face, particularly in this sequence, has been often described as mask-like or "deliberately alienating".[35] The Noh-like makeup distances the audience from his emotions at the moment of his downfall. One of the effects of this makeup is to delay understanding of Hidetora's madness. During the battle, the viewer can only assume that his madness is due to his children's betrayal and his loss of power. In the scene following the battle, however, Kurosawa reveals Hidetora's reasons as the masked, blank face is replaced with true madness and pain. After the battle, Hidetora wanders out of the castle and the camera cuts to a distant view of him onto a stormy, grassy plain. This scene is set in a theatrical manner: approaching Hidetora in the distance are Kyoami, Hidetora's fool, and an advisor he disowned for defending Saburo. As the two men reach Hidetora, the camera cuts to a medium close-up of the three, a shot that is static for the rest of the scene, placing the viewer in the position of the theatre audience watching a stage performance. The grass creates a sense of perpetual motion and bewilderment, as each man seems barely able to stand in its swirling mass. Suddenly disconnected from the historically accurate set pieces of the rest of the film, this place becomes like the storm in *Lear,* an atemporal location for the revelation of character.

In *King Lear*, a man brings back word of Lear in the storm, and describes the sight: "Contending with the fretful elements / Bids the wind blow into the sea / Or swell the curled water 'bove the main / That things might change or cease; tears his white hair / … Strives in his little world of man to outscorn / The to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain".[36] There is no sea in *Ran,* and Kurosawa is no more interested in matching sets than he is in translating the gentleman's speech into Japanese. Yet the "wind blow into the sea" is communicated through the wave-like motions of the grass, and the "to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain" surround the characters. The idea of Lear's madness, anger, and betrayal reflected in nature's elements is preserved here, though transported to a different setting. One might be tempted, with such similarities, to read the scene as an analogic translation from an English storm to a Japanese typhoon, but the translation effects are more complex. The film explicitly illustrates Hidetora's mindset through the character's physical location in the battle scene, during which Hidetora physically moves down the

[34] Quoted in Stephen Prince, *The Warrior's Camera: The Cinema of Akira Kurosawa* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1999), 288.

[35] Stanley Wells, "Reunion and Death: Review of *Ran*", *Times Literary Supplement* (14 March 1986), 296.

[36] William Shakespeare, *King Lear* (New York: Washington Square Press, The Folger Library, 1993), III.i.4-12.

stairs, down the "terrible scroll of Hell", in a manifestation of his hierarchical and mental downfalls. As the scene shifts to the ethereal grassy plain, the storm scene reflects Hidetora's inner turmoil, which is exactly what the audience was excluded from in the battle scene.

Lear calls for the external world to reflect and overwhelm his inner turmoil: "Blow winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow! / You cataracts and hurricanes spout / Till you have

Fig. 4: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, 1985, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2005.

drenched our steeples … / Crack nature's molds, all germens spill at once / That make ungrateful man".[37] In sharp contrast to this verbal explication of character, the only words Hidetora speaks during the scene are "Forgive me". Since the audience already knows that Hidetora gained his power with a bloody trail behind him and by unwisely banishing his son, one might be tempted to speculate on Hidetora's question of forgiveness, or interpret a general regret. Far from being speculative on such matters, this moment turns out to be remarkable. The film presents Kyoami, Hidetora's jester, who assumes the authoritative voice seen in Japanese theater to explicate Hidetora's internal state. The music, which has been until this point a dramatic and high-pitched violin, falls to an undertone and the sound of the howling wind increases. Kyoami comments, "Oh, excellent. The failed mind sees the heart's failings", and then begins to chant: "the wonder of it! I see on this withered plain, all those I destroyed, a phantom army, one by one they come floating, rising before me".[38] As he chants, he moves in theatrical, dance-like motions, which in their formality contrast his earlier jester antics. Kyoami co-opts the theatrical voice in order to directly communicate the thoughts of the characters and their importance to the story.

In *Throne of Blood*, the chorus performed the same informative role. In *Ran* Kurosawa positions this function diegetically, making the theatrical voice unmistakably like the *benshi* in its direct interaction with the ongoing narrative. Kyoami illuminates the emotions behind Hidetora's mask, adding the context of Hidetora's past to the turmoil of the battle and his downfall. Lear is almost consumed with his regret in banishing Cordelia, but Hidetora is portrayed as much more culpable in his downfall, which comes after a lifetime of misdeeds and cruelty. The addition of a back-story for Hidetora, as many critics have agreed, fills a place Kurosawa felt was missing in Shakespeare. But what many critics fail to recognize is that in Kurosawa's creation of a past, Hidetora becomes his own separate character, casting off the Lear-function's restrictions. Hidetora is imbued

[37] Shakespeare, *King Lear,* III. ii.1-2; 10-11.

[38] Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, Criterion Collection, 2005. DVD.

with a guilt externalized in Kyoami's chanting, becoming a character who can criticize Shakespeare's Lear – and have a life and story of his own.

Such fracturing of the Lear character-function is hard to register in a 'Japanizing' critical approach to the film. For example, Brian Parker claims that characters in *Ran* are "less concerned with intrinsic identity than with positions of society"[39] in his assessment of Hidetora's downfall. Parker exhibits a common critical pitfall of cross-cultural reading; in assuming a perception of 'Japanese culture' in which social hierarchy is more important than in the West, he automatically classifies Kurosawa's characters by their position in society rather than their psychologized selves. Yet the camera-distancing effects in *Ran* hold the audience back and sharpen focus on the storm scene, in a way that is both deeply psychological and external to character. Hidetora's inner turmoil is revealed by the setting and by Kyoami's *benshi*-like performance.

A final series of connections that can be gleaned from the storm scene: the position of the men crouched in the high, green grass mirrors the scene near the beginning of the film when Hidetora first gives up his power and Saburo mocks his arrow-lesson. The place of the first fracture from both the Japanese folktale and the Shakespearean text has returned as a twisted version of itself: the sun has turned to typhoon, the ruler to madman.

[39] Brian Parker, "*Ran* and the Tragedy of History", in James Goodwin, ed., *Perspectives on Akira Kurosawa* (New York: Maxwell Macmillan International, 1994), 209.

In the storm scene, Kurosawa combines Shakespeare's imagery, Japanese traditions in film and theatre, to create Hidetora's necessary past. To unite all of these into a single scene (and express the fractured mind of the character) Kurosawa, in the model of *benshi*, unites influences and makes explicit the meaning of the scene for the audience.

What is Shakespeare?

A discussion of Kurosawa's cultural impact would be incomplete without an acknowledgement that Kurosawa as a filmmaker has become something of a polarizing icon, at times considered a representative of Japanese cinema and at others categorized as the most Western of Japanese directors. Many of the difficulties in categorizing Kurosawa as 'Japanese' or 'Western' resemble the anxiety surrounding original and adaptation. Both seem to be based on the disintegration of cultural signposts and the challenge of binary

Fig. 5: Still from Akira Kurosawa, *Ran*, 1985, DVD, Criterion Collection, 2005.

divisions. As the globalization of cinema – and the work of theorists like Yoshimoto and many others – problematizes a compartmentalization of Kurosawa or other directors as 'national' artists , so too the idea of the 'Shakespeare film' seems to be crumbling. With the proliferation of Hollywood-blockbuster Shakespeare movies (whose relation to Shakespeare seems ever more tenuous), new media,[40] and non-English Shakespeare, critics have struggled to classify films and other media under the heading 'Shakespeare'. If relation to Shakespeare no longer requires his text, and plot and characters can be twisted to new uses, what happens to the great symbol of Western literature?

A model of adaptation inspired by the *benshi* offers adaptation studies an alternative to classifications of either 'faithful' or 'deviant'. As *Throne of Blood* and *Ran* illustrate, adaptations make arguments, actively countering and interacting with their sources. By considering films and criticism which cross cultural boundaries, we can reveal symptoms of 'foreign' adaptations that reverberate across all modes of adaptation. In addressing assumptions of adaptation, we can free both the original and the adaptation from the limiting binary in which only the original can influence the adaptation, and not vice versa. New productions of Shakespeare and older films like Kurosawa's reveal a method of countering and engaging the source material *through* the film adaptation itself. Therefore, in answering the ever-renewing question of "what is Shakespeare?" there is no better place to turn than to the films themselves. Innovative adaptations will define what legacy Shakespeare will carry in the future, and thus far that legacy continues to be as lively and influential as it ever was.

[40] With ever-increasing ease of access through the internet, we can truly share, catalogue, and explore the many variations on Shakespeare. Peter S. Donaldson's Global Shakespeares Video & Performance Archive (http://globalshakespeares.org) is one of many projects that seek to gather together the diverse approaches to Shakespeare. One of the portals of the project, Shakespeare Performance in Asia (http://web.mit.edu/shakespeare/asia/) illustrates the increased attention to Asian Shakespeare performances that has emerged in the past few years.