

December 1979

Orson Welles' Macbeth: Archetype and Symbol

Walt Ulbricht

University of Wisconsin-Parkside

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr>

Recommended Citation

Ulbricht, Walt (1979) "Orson Welles' Macbeth: Archetype and Symbol," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol14/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in University of Dayton Review by an authorized editor of eCommons. For more information, please contact mschlangen1@udayton.edu, ecommons@udayton.edu.

Orson Welles' *Macbeth*: Archetype and Symbol

Walt Ulbricht

The translation of Shakespeare's plays into film has been a continual dilemma for filmmakers since Sir John Beerbohm's three minute adaptation of *King John* in 1899.¹ The question of filmed adaptation is not a matter of the motion picture camera's ability to interpret Shakespeare, for literally hundreds of silent and sound have been filmed. The problem, however, becomes one of *method* and *approach* in Shakespeare film. To what degree will the film be set from the language and the conventions of the theater?² How will the film express Shakespeare's drama in such cinematic terms as movement, lighting, sound, mise-en-scene, editing, color, camera angle and distance, composition, or special optical effects? In viewing Shakespeare films we must first realize that the filmic medium is largely distinct from the theatrical. The spectator in film is "in permanent motion as his eye identifies itself with the lens of the camera, which permanently shifts in distance and direction."³ The screen simply defined possesses a language of its own. Shakespeare films thus merit serious examination as a group of autonomous films which "stretch the capabilities and challenge the inhibitions of the art."⁴

Orson Welles has vigorously explored this aesthetic relationship of theater and film. Welles, a recognized innovator in film style and film structure, brings his own signature to Shakespeare on the screen. With the 1948 Republic Film production of *Macbeth*, Welles takes Shakespeare's tale of murderous ambition and creates a highly personal interpretation of the play. Welles himself describes *Macbeth* as a "violently sketched charcoal drawing of a great play."⁵ To produce this unusual portrait of Shakespeare. Welles discards one third of the lines, eliminates several characters, introduces an original character, the enigmatic Holy Father, and strips the play of various Elizabethan themes of kingship and individual guilt.⁶ The net effect of Welles' approach is a subjective presentation of *Macbeth*'s psychological condition.

The nightmarish quality of *Macbeth* is introduced by its opening credits. A cymbal crash and a brass fanfare announce the elongated letters of the title: CHARLES K. FELDMAN PRESENTS A MERCURY PRODUCTION BY ORSON WELLES. A sullen and resonant voice, unmistakably that of Welles, then recites the prologue:

Our story is laid in Scotland, ancient, savage, half-lost, in the mist that hangs between recorded history and the time of legends.

The Cross itself is newly arrived here. Plotting against Christian law and order are the agents of chaos: priests of hell and magic, sorcerers, and witches. Their tools are ambitious men.

This is the story of such a man and of his wife. A brave warrior, he hears from the witches a prophecy of future greatness, and from this cue, murders his way up to a tyrant's throne only to go down hated and in blood at the end of all.

Simultaneously, an intriguing image of a cross-form and a series of static objects is juxtaposed on the screen. A bank of fog, suspended in darkness, swirls in a slow, clockwise circle. A dissolve introduces the second shot, a low angle view of a monolithic Celtic cross. Stone-carved and rigidly positioned, the religious monument creates a disturbing tension of form and movement between the sensuous movements of the fog and the stationary materialism of the Cross. This visual dichotomy concisely articulates the basic issues of *Macbeth*. Transferring the play to "Scotland, ancient, savage, and half-lost" and denying the images an effective context of reality, Welles removes the film from a concrete and historically definable period and pushes the drama toward an abstract time and space where two elemental forces are in conflict. Irrational impulses, signified by the "agents of chaos" and the layers of mysterious mist, battle the system of orderly constraint and the Cross. Welles thus prepares the viewer for an excursion into a mythic land of a turbently distressed mind. *Macbeth* violently reduces the dramatic spectrum of Shakespeare's play to present a set of elemental symbols operating against a bilateral field of black and white. The players and the setting represent opposing facets of morality or, expressed in modern terms, the competing actions of consciousness and unconsciousness.

To gain a better understanding of Welles' *Macbeth* it may be useful to refer to the psychological concepts of Carl Gustav Jung. To Jung the mind is composed of three interdependent parts: the conscious aspect, the personal unconscious, and the collective unconscious. The conscious identity is related to the disciplined and orderly activities in life. Jung suggests that the conscious is a powerful cohesive force, drawing the various parts — images of the sense functions and of past processes — in the direction of the mind's center, or ego.⁷ The personal unconscious is a diffuse entity of sensual instincts and psychic energy. The collective unconscious is "the sediment of all the experience of the universe of all time. . . an image . . . that has been in process of formation for untold ages."⁸ In Jung's view a well balanced personality "synthesizes" the separate aspects of the psyche by recognizing the obscure communication of the "primitive mind, its 'collective' images and its mythological motifs."⁹ As the body is a product of biological evolution, the mind also carries with it "an inherited organization of psychic energy, a rooted system."¹⁰ This condition of imaginative thought or the ability to formulate mythical motifs is called an "archetype":

The archetype is a symbolic formula, which always begins to function whenever there are no conscious ideas present. The contents of the collective unconscious are represented in consciousness in the form of pronounced tendencies, or definite ways of looking at things.¹¹

Jung's concept of the psychological archetype offers the investigator a means to interpret the various myths and symbols found in social institutions, religion, and in the arts. Based on the premise of the collective nature of archetypes and the belief of the universal representation of these thought patterns in distinguishable symbols, it is possible, according to Jung's School of Analytical Psychology, to uncover certain meanings in man's social environment. The Christmas archetype, for example, is latent with the symbolism of rebirth and rejuvenation. The Christ child represents an eternal drama for mankind depicting the natural process of death, birth, and the perpetual forces of human life. Christian or non-Christian alike receives an inner feeling of mythological rebirth during a winter season of ornamental coniferous trees, festive food and drink, songs of "good will to men," and a warm, spiritually-healing fire in the hearth. But the period in a person's life

when he comes to perceive himself as an entity in the world is a profoundly important event characterized by "the processes of individuation — the conscious coming to terms with one's own inner center or Self."¹² It is a moment when one discovers a particular kind of archetype, the "Shadow" of the unconscious personality opposite the conscious identity. This realization of a darker half in the personality requires a thoughtful period of psychological education in which the individual must learn to integrate both his unconscious and conscious aspects.

In many ways *Macbeth* is a psychological case study of a man lately coming to terms with his "Shadow" or primal instincts. Shakespeare's protagonist is confronted with the knowledge that "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player/That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/And then is heard no more." He is a man who has unsuccessfully integrated the opposite natures of the unconscious and the conscious mind. It is precisely this process of individuation that Welles emphasizes in *Macbeth*. The film is mythic fable that probes the relationship between the conscious and the unconscious forces at war in the mind. An investigation of the visual symbol in *Macbeth* demonstrates Welles' personal approach to Shakespeare: one particular symbol — the Fork or bifurcated image — represents the dislocation of Macbeth's mental personality. The bifurcated image is first seen in the previously mentioned prologue sequence. Occurring in the same shot with the Celtic style Cross, a tree limb, leafless and physically contorted, appears in the lower righthand corner of the film frame. Although the limb extends beyond the top of the frame, numerous branches sprout from the object in a Y-shape fashion. An interesting contrast is again established between dissimilar images. The tree, a twisted, unnatural growth, is forcefully juxtaposed with the inanimate monument, an emblem of spiritual craftsmanship.

Thick fog creeps from the bottom of the frame and dissolves into a triad of witches who appear on a volcanic crag. These figures are not clearly perceptible to the viewer. The witches stand in silhouette with the backlighting preventing any detailed examination of their faces or physiognomy. One item, however, attracts considerable attention in the composition: a pair of forked branches, resembling two grotesque tritons, occupy the left portion of the screen. These branches constitute the only object in this shot with a well-defined shape and identity. One's eyes are thus guided from these branches and across this unusual composition of half-revealed forms to fix on the distant activity of the witches. Several shots later, a closeup of the branches appears on the screen. The film frame is transformed into a web of serpentine lines. This image directly dissolves into a closeup of three hands stirring the bubbling liquid in the cauldron. Several important associations are revealed with these shots. The witches, identified in the prologue as the "agents of chaos," lack a physical presence which the viewer can recognize or perceive. In this case Welles substitutes a predominant image for the identity of the witches. The forked branches due to certain graphic and visual elements assume a greater conceptual significance. These bifurcated objects function as a *symbol* for the force "plotting against Christian law and order." In Welles' nightmare world "images and objects have powers that go beyond the literal meaning."¹³ In visual terms the forked branches symbolize the nature of unconscious or primitive man — the bifurcation of reason and destructive will. As the trunk of the Fork extends in two divergent points, the human psyche may also find itself split into two parts. Called "dissociation" by Jungian psychologists, this condition occurs when a person is "unable to control his moods and emotions, or to be conscious of the myriad secret ways in which unconscious factors,

insinuate the University of Dayton Review, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1979), Art. 5. The image of the bifurcated branch seems particularly appropriate for these "agents of chaos."

Welles relies on a variation of this symbol to identify Macbeth. In the next shot the witches, only their gnarled hands visible, reach into the boiling cauldron to extract a formless lump of clay. As the witches rip and pull squeaking chunks of clay from the voodoo doll, a sequence of accelerated close-ups produces a rhythm of violently swift movement. The witches' fingers tear into the clay figure like the talons of a vulture clawing at carrion. Suddenly, the doll arises from the boiling, black liquid as a closeup thrusts the roughly formed facial features into a full frame enlargement. A neanderthal brow and deeply sunken eyes mask the face in darkness; the doll, a child-man image of the Scottish thane, forebodes great mystery and terror. The film proper begins. Macbeth first appears by galloping through an omnipresent wall of fog as thunder and lightning crack the sky. He wears a barbaric battlesuit of animal skins, a bloated breastplate, and a bizarre helmet which resembles an inverted funnel. Macbeth seems to be electrically charged by this primordial environment of restless forms, and he thrusts himself from the saddle when he encounters the witches. With their backs turned to the camera, the witches hail Macbeth as the Thane of Glamis. In the witches' prophecies of Macbeth's future greatness, the clay doll reappears on the screen. The witches place the amulet of Cawdor around the doll's neck and crown the figurine "King hereafter" with a spiky headdress. The doll's crown, a translation of the bifurcated image, possesses four large spikes at each corner of the square object. A closeup shot accents its unusual shape and exaggerated size. More than an emblem of political power, this crown suggests the pervasive nature of the witches by integrating the Fork motif into its basic design. A crucial bond is consequently established between the witches and the aspirations of mortal Macbeth.

As Macbeth contemplates the prospects of the Scottish crown in the courtyard of Inverness, the bifurcated image repeats itself. Macbeth is undergoing an intensive psychological conflict: his conscious mind questions and excoriates the thought of killing Duncan; his unconscious mind freely desires the throne of Scotland. For Macbeth it is a moment when "o'er the half-world/Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse the curtained sleep." During these moral deliberations, Macbeth is joined by Lady Macbeth. One item which she wears, a large, ornamental belt, is a conspicuous manifestation of the Fork motif. It extends in length from her waist to a point near her ankles. As a visual symbol the belt represents an externalization of Macbeth's mental processes: the Y-shape belt illustrates the anguished split in Macbeth's mind. Welles, however, places this symbol in movement. As Macbeth's soliloquy grows in intensity, Lady Macbeth approaches the foreground of the screen where her husband is located. Her physical presence, signified by the belt, becomes a dominant force in the discussion. Her attitude — "Art thou afeard/ To be the same in thine own act and valor/ As thou art in desire?" — stirs Macbeth into motion. He shakes off his stationary pose, and he crosses to the opposite side of his wife, an action which confirms her opinion on this critical issue. An interesting set of proxemic patterns is established by this action. The bifurcated image, suggested by Lady Macbeth's belt, is reproduced by the position and the movement of the actors. Her entrance in the composition creates a Y-shaped pattern in the spatial arrangement of the actors. Her body constitutes the left line as Macbeth's upper torso composes the trunk and the right portion of this Y-shape configuration. When Macbeth decides in his wife's favor, his movements reestablish this symbolic arrangement. Furthermore, the same emphasis is given to this new relationship by following Macbeth's actions in

an intricate fashion. The camera first tracks leftward with Macbeth; it then rises over his shoulder. Orson Welles's *Macbeth*: Archetype and Symbol of actor and camera result in a *third* variation of this Y-shape composition: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are linked by their contiguous arms. Spiritually and physically, the couple has assumed the dissociative nature of the witches.

Another symbol which Welles uses in *Macbeth* is the circle. Contrasted with the bifurcated image and its suggestion of emotional dislocation, the circle is associated with the Christian forces. It represents a state of reason and conscious activity. The Celtic cross and the Holy Father are repeatedly distinguished by this symbol. Beginning in the prologue and extending throughout the film, the Cross is a conspicuous symbol of rational order. The scene in which Duncan arrives at Inverness is profusely marked by this emblem. Duncan's processional train is led into this site by an escort of raised staves, a wooden modification of the Celtic cross. These staves pierce the foggy air and tend to obliterate the human identity of the group. On a level of law and order the staves represent the just rewards of traitors. Cawdor's head is hideously impaled upon a towering cross in the courtyard. A few moments later the staves assume a ritualistic significance. These objects, like the multitudinous candles, dispel the evil spirits that linger in the Scottish air transforming Macbeth's castle into a place where "heaven's breath smells woefully here."

The formal integrity of the staff indicates a quality of order and conscious design. Unlike the forked branch of the witches, the staff is an architectural fusion of two basic forms: the interlocking vertical and horizontal lines and the circular emblem unifying the crossed arms. A sense of integration is suggested by this physical arrangement.

The Holy Father, Welles' original creation in *Macbeth*, is closely joined with the symbol of the circle. He not only leads the royal assembly in prayer — "Dost thou renounce Satan and all his works?" — but he also personifies an ascetic Christian system. He wears a long, loose-fitting garment of black cloth. His white hair is disorderly braided. Consistent with the symbology of the Church, he has a circular bald spot on his head. He speaks in stern tones, and he seems to be a vehicle of knowledge. It is he who transcribes Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth on the field of battle.

Although the Circle indicates the conscious aspect of the psyche in *Macbeth*, it does not represent a psychological condition of complete unity and balance. In many ways the Holy Father appears an unsettling character on the screen. His harsh costume and his mysterious behavior generate a feeling of alienation in the viewer. In one writer's words the Holy Father looks "like a cross between Boris Karloff and Heidi."¹⁵ Welles seems to suggest that the priest is an inflexible ideal of one cosmic or psychological system. Much like the condition of the witches, the Holy Father is constrained by one narrow mode of action and thought. Jung describes the inadequacy of the conscious mind in the following terms:

Our present lives are dominated by the goddess Reason, who is our greatest and most tragic illusion. By the aid of reason, so we assure ourselves, we have "conquered nature."¹⁶

A more judicious relationship between the polar opposites of the psyche is required. Macduff is a character who possesses the mature integration of the rational and the irrational forces of the psyche. Macduff's ability to oscillate between these psychic poles is revealed during the scene in which he hears the news of his family's assassination. Macduff, the Holy Father, Malcolm, and

Ross meet on University of Dayton Review, Vol. 14, No. 1 (1979), Art. 5 by civil war as evidenced by the predominate Celtic cross and the V-shape tree appearing in the visual composition — a repetition of the prologue shot. The Holy Father informs Macduff of the murderous deed. Macduff staggers to the tree and grabs the left branch for support. He then releases his emotional outrage by branding Macbeth as "O hell-kite!"

Macduff, however, controls his destructive impulses by transferring them into a conscious vow of retribution: "Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself/ Within my sword's length set him." As Macduff speaks these words, his mental activity is translated into a series of physical movements before the symbols of the Cross and the bifurcated tree. Although Macduff makes his vow before the tree, he then places his body in direct spatial relationship with the Cross as he carefully considers the future battle with Macbeth. Welles suggests Macduff's psychological condition by arranging the competition in depth with three distinct planes of action.¹⁷ Macduff paces across the foreground area, alternately situating himself before the bifurcated tree in the middle distance or the monumental Cross in the background. Each area corresponds to the tertiary portions of the psyche: Macduff's body represents the "Self" or inner guiding factor, the tree symbolizes the unconscious, and the Cross alludes to the conscious.

Macduff's duel with Macbeth represents the final clash between the integrated psyche and the dissociative psyche. Macduff spectacularly enters the subterranean lair of Macbeth. Shot from an extreme low angle position, he quickly strides through rolling clouds of fog and smoke. Macduff's body is cast in silhouette, the light streaming over his arms and helmet. The circle motif, a miniature version of the staves carried by Malcolm's army, appears as decoration on his helmet. In the following shot Macduff's enormous shadow smothers Macbeth against a rocky wall. A high angle shot reveals Macbeth's final condition. He wears a suit of thick animal fur and a crown of hideously long spikes, the perverse symbol of his tyrannical reign. Macbeth learns that Macduff is "from his mother untimely ripped," and the crown is casually removed by the tip of Macduff's sword. The witches magically appear in the foreground of the frame at this moment. Echoing the damned prophecy, they conclude the association between themselves and Macbeth. Their heads are shown dominating the lower portion of the frame as if Macbeth's conversion to these creatures of shadow and mist is complete.

The battle ensues in a small chamber somewhere in the higher reaches of Macbeth's fortress. A large shadow of a spiky object, presumably a window fixture, is visible on the wall. The shots then alternate between the swordplay of the warriors and high angle shots of Malcolm's soldiers below in the courtyard. Suddenly, the camera tracks into a closeup of Macbeth's face as his eyes widely expand in fear. The next shot, a metaphorical jump cut, is a closeup of the clay doll. A swordblade severs its head and the doll's spiky crown rolls near the feet of Malcolm. Macduff raises the impaled head of Macbeth before the cheering army.

Welles concludes *Macbeth* with a familiar image. The ruins of Dunsinane disappear beneath a layer of fog, an emblem of Macbeth's irrational impulses and destructive will. Macbeth, a prisoner of his unconscious, returns from whence he came.

University of Wisconsin-Parkside

FOOTNOTES

- ¹ Robert Hamilton Ball, *Shakespeare on Silent Film* (New York: Theatre Arts, 1968), p. 14.
- ² See Donald Skoller, "Problems of Transformation in the Adaptation of Shakespeare's Tragedies, From Play-Script to Cinema," Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1968.
- ³ Erwin Panofsky, "Style and Medium in the Motion Pictures," *Film Theory and Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), p. 155.
- ⁴ Jack J. Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 6.
- ⁵ Orson Welles, quoted in Roger Manvell, *Shakespeare and the Film* (New York: Praeger, 1971), p. 115.
- ⁶ See James Naremore, "The Walking Shadow: Welles's Expressionist *Macbeth*," *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1, No. 4 (Fall 1973), p. 362.
- ⁷ Carl G. Jung, "Approaching the Unconscious," *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York: Dell Publishing, 1964), p. 72.
- ⁸ Avis M. Dry, *The Psychology of Jung* (London: Methuen & Co., 1961), p. 91.
- ⁹ Jung, p. 30.
- ¹⁰ Morris Philipson, *Outline of a Jungian Aesthetics* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963), p. 62.
- ¹¹ Philipson, p. 55.
- ¹² M.-L. von Franz, "The Process of Individuation," Jung, p. 169.
- ¹³ Michael Mullin, "Orson Welles' *Macbeth*: Script and Screen," *Focus on Orson Welles*, ed. Ronald Gottesman (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1976), p. 143.
- ¹⁴ Jung, p. 72.
- ¹⁵ Charles Higham, *The Films of Orson Welles* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), p. 132.
- ¹⁶ Jung, p. 91.
- ¹⁷ See Naremore, p. 363.

