

DONALD RICHIE: THRONE OF BLOOD AND THE FILMS OF AKIRA KUROSAWA

By Judith Brodhead

THRONE OF BLOOD

THE CRITERION COLLECTION

DVD/VHS, 109 MINUTES, 1957

Many Western educators would have a more difficult time deciphering much of twentieth-century Japanese film without the aid of author and critic Donald Richie. Author of more than forty books, including dozens on film, Richie's rewarding relationship with Japan has lasted nearly sixty years. His writing is a Rosetta stone for those who may be mystified by elements of Japanese film and its most famous director, Akira Kurosawa.

Fortunately for college and high school instructors, Richie's work on Kurosawa makes it easier to integrate Japanese film and literature into classrooms. In this essay I'll discuss how to use Kurosawa's film *Throne of Blood*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and a chapter from Richie's *Films of Akira Kurosawa*. Using *Throne of Blood* in conjunction with Richie's work will introduce students, among other things, to Nōh drama, medieval Japan, and Western and Japanese notions of leadership and the human condition.

Anyone teaching *Macbeth* today has many options: in addition to several editions of Shakespeare's play, inexpensive video or DVD possibilities include versions directed by Trevor Nunn (starring Ian MacKellan and Judi Dench), Roman Polanski, and Orson Welles (with Welles in the title role). Choices that present the plot in a different setting include *Scotland, PA*, which sets the play in a fast-food restaurant, or *Slings and Arrows*, a skillfully constructed Canadian comedy series about a Shakespeare repertory theatre in Winnipeg.

The choice I have had most success with in the classroom, however, is not British, American, or Canadian, but Japanese. Released in 1957, *Throne of Blood*, starring Toshiro Mifune and Isuzu Yamada, adds a rich layer to the students' understanding of Shakespeare and provides a window into Japanese culture. This pairing could certainly be used in a college or high school literature, film, history, or social studies class.

Kurosawa, who, like Richie, enjoyed a career that spanned six decades, is most famous for his films *The Seven Samurai* (1954), *Rashōmon* (1950), and *Ran* (1985), his adaptation of *King Lear*. If your students have never seen a Japanese film other than anime, *Throne of Blood* will be a revelation. Although the film is in black and white and subtitled, I have never encountered a student who was not



Lord Washizu and Lady Asaji in Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood*. ©1957 Toho Co. Ltd.

fascinated by at least some of its elements, whether samurai battle scenes or the evil Lady Asaji, Lady Macbeth's counterpart. It is the work of Donald Richie, who knew Kurosawa and has written about him extensively, that can help unlock the mysteries of the film for both student and instructor. In particular, his *Films of Akira Kurosawa* is a wonderful trove of film criticism and firsthand information: Richie was present during some of the filming of *Throne of Blood*, and informs his chapters with insights gained on location (including the slopes of Mt. Fuji) and from doing interviews with the director. The third edition, published in 1998 (the first appeared thirty years earlier) boasts analyses of thirty films released between 1943 and 1993, scores of photos, a filmography, and selected bibliography. This one-volume crash course in Kurosawa is suitable for any instructor.

My American students at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois, even before they crack open the text of *Macbeth*, are generally familiar with the characters and the outline of the plot. They know about the witches, the evil Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and have at least a passing familiarity with the idea that Macbeth commits regicide. In a high school or introductory college literature course, the conversation is likely to focus on who is at fault: is it Macbeth, who commits or arranges all the murders, or Lady Macbeth, who plans the first murder and urges her husband on until her own madness prevents her from doing more harm to anyone other than herself? Are the witches themselves a source of evil, or do they reflect evil in the characters?

ESSAYS

When students use critical articles as references, they may move on to more sophisticated questions about the relationship between medieval Scotland and England, whether or not King James was pleased by the suggestion that he was descended from Banquo or insulted by the brutal portrayal of Scots, or what, exactly, Shakespeare thought about women based upon the five he presents.¹ But Kurosawa's version of *Macbeth* is both Japanese and accessible, as long as one has Donald Richie's assistance, and will open the discussion to a different set of questions. Why is there one ghost rather than three witches? Why does Lady Asaji sit on the floor, walk in tiny, swishing steps, and never look her husband directly in the face? Why does Lord Washizu (Macbeth) die impaled by an arrow through the neck, killed by his own men, rather than beheaded by a single foe? In this telling of the story, who is most responsible for the tragedy?

Students are intrigued to learn that, according to Richie. "[T]he Japanese tend to think very differently about such things as witches and ghosts" (117). This will be immediately apparent to the viewers of the film, who see an androgynous figure in a white robe in the Cobweb Forest advising Lord Washizu rather than Western-style witches in ragged black. She is identified as female, but her voice, purposely distorted, certainly sounds masculine; Richie attributes the sound to Nōh tradition (118). *Macbeth*, of course, calls for three witches, often portrayed as one young, one middle-aged, and one old. This convention extends to the present day: consider John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*, the comic film *Hocus-Pocus*, and even the television show *Sabrina, the Teenage Witch*. Actresses are grateful for speaking parts in Shakespeare's plays and Macbeth provides only five: Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff, and the witches.

In contrast, Richie writes, "[T]he idea of a trio of malevolent witches is far from the Japanese imagination. The witch, the warlock, are really priests, embodiments of a nature which is neither good nor evil. They are diviners and fortune-tellers who attempt to pierce the future but the gratuitous evil of Shakespeare's witches is impossible" (117). The evil, then, must come from another source, and in *Throne of Blood* it is Lady Asaji, who preys on her gullible and increasingly paranoid husband. In Kurosawa's tale of greed and ambition, Washizu's fall cannot be blamed on external forces.

Another major difference between *Throne of Blood* and *Macbeth* is that Lady Asaji is even more relentless than Lady Macbeth in urging her husband to murder. When he hesitates, she argues that anyone he spares is likely an enemy already plotting against him. Even her pregnancy seems contrived; when Lord Washizu, guilty about the murder of his friend General Miki, considers making Miki's son his heir (after all, he and his wife have none), Lady Asaji announces that she is with child. As Richie observes, she has told her husband, "'This is a wicked world. To save yourself you often first must kill . . . Children kill their parents for less.' This last is ironic in that it is her own child who, still-born, will kill her" (117). It's an irony Kurosawa has invented, since Shakespeare presents a Lady Macbeth who, despite her famous words about having suckled a babe, can provide no heir to Macbeth.

Although a viewer familiar with Japanese culture may recognize elements of the Nōh theatre in *Throne of Blood*, it is unlikely that high school or college students will, unless informed by Richie, who quotes Kurosawa: "I like it [Nōh] because it is the real heart, the core of all Japanese drama . . . it is full of symbols, full of subtlety. It is as though the actors and the audience are engaged in a kind of contest and as though this contest involves the entire Japanese cultural heritage" (117). Like the ghost, Lady Asaji has been designed to reflect the traditions of Nōh theater: her appearance, gait, and speech, according to Richie, follow Nōh conventions. Kurosawa also includes other elements of Nōh. For example, in *Throne of Blood*, actors move in prescribed ways, as is the case with Nōh. Kurosawa's witch lives in a reed hut that resembles part of a Nōh set, and, according to Richie, the actresses' make-up resembles a Nōh ghost mask.

History certainly influenced Kurosawa. Richie writes, "In *Macbeth*, Kurosawa saw a contemporary issue—a parallel between medieval Scotland and medieval Japan which illuminated contemporary society; and, further, a pattern which is valid in both historical and contemporary contexts." In an interview with Richie, Kurosawa noted that, "man repeats himself over and over again" (115). Surely he was both looking back at World War II and the destruction caused by human nature gone awry—perhaps predictably so—and wondering what the future would hold, and how that pattern might reappear in Japan or elsewhere.

Although Richie does not get specific in this way, it may be that Kurosawa, creating a film in the 1950s, not long after the end of the war and Occupation, was thinking of Japanese veterans who were disgusted with the officers they thought had led them badly. Historian John Dower, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the Occupation, describes a veteran who recounts ". . . an old samurai saying about bringing a souvenir to hell, which originally meant killing an enemy at the time of one's own death. Most of his comrades, he said,

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died wishing to take not an enemy but one of their officers with them as a souvenir" (59).²

The famous scene, where Washizu is shot by scores of arrows, killed only when one pierces his neck (still an impressive special effect even nearly 50 years later), is also a significant departure from Shakespeare's story. Washizu has become a terrible leader, obsessed with his own fate, ambitious beyond forgiveness, who, despite his bluff and bluster, is continually convinced by his witchy wife—who only needs to turn her head aside and intone a few words to convince her husband to follow a course of action—to go on to new and more horrific acts. His men cannot let it go on any longer. And so *Throne of Blood* may be not the tragedy of a leader who needed to be stopped by a few other men of his ilk, but of someone who has to be subdued and removed by the group he was supposed to lead. At the end of the film, Lord Washizu has long since ceased to be a leader men can bear to follow. ■

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NOTES

1. *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts*, edited by William C. Carroll (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1999), includes sections entitled "Discourses of the Feminine," "Treason and Sovereignty," and "Witchcraft and Prophecy." The section on witchcraft, in my experience, is the most popular.
2. See John W. Dower's chapter "Despised Veterans" in his book about the American Occupation of Japan, *Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999).

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Editor's Note:

Readers who enjoy considering Shakespeare in the context of comparative cultures might wish to read Fay Beauchamp's article in the Spring 2001 issue of *EAA*, "From Creation Myths to Marriage Alliances: Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Murasaki's Akashi Chapter." The latter chapter is one of the most famous in Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji*.

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