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“Seeds of time”: Women, children, and the nation in Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (2015)

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From the outset, Justin Kurzel’s *Macbeth* (2015) foregrounds the family, presenting it as the building block of civilized society. While Duncan and his son Malcolm are obviously central to the state, the Macbeths, the Macduffs, and Banquo all have progeny, and in this film even the witches and the Scottish army have children among them. In its opening images, the film presents women as mothers, implying that they are primarily biological and social reproducers. We see the witches on a hillside with two children, and Lady Macbeth gazes grief-stricken at the corpse of her son on a funeral pyre. Multiple boy soldiers are slaughtered in the opening battle and, later, Macbeth personally murders Lady Macduff and her three children. Children, then, are highly valued – Fleance is a beloved son and of course he will be the progenitor of kings, the Macbeths never recover from their child’s death – but they are endangered subjects. Indeed, Hanh Bui’s remark on Banquo’s son can be applied to almost all of the children in the film: “[f]rom the moment he appears on screen, Fleance bears constant witness to life’s hardship, insecurity, and death” (Bui n.p.). In this essay, I argue that in Kurzel’s *Macbeth* the only hope for the future of the nation is its children, but they are a finite resource threatened by a militaristic and power-hungry patriarchal culture. I contend too that women are shown to be the victims of the state; as men compete and strive to shape the nation in their image, women are often collateral damage. However, women, in the form of the witches, are also revealed to be the best guardians of the state. While the film implies that the only safe place for a woman is on the margins, and the only safe role that of observer, this paradoxically is how the women can actively protect their interests

and shape the nation's future. Ultimately, Kurzel's *Macbeth* presents the viewer with the birth of a nation; yet, with its mothers and its children endangered, it is a parturition fraught with grave difficulties.

* * *

Considering *Macbeth*'s subject matter and the popularity of the horror film, Kurzel could have used horror conventions in his portrayal of the witches and children. Two recent film adaptations of the play successfully draw on horror to present their witches as infernal bloodthirsty nurses (Goold, 2010) and disturbingly sexualized teenage goths (Wright, 2006) (Kapitaniak), while several stage productions have presented the witches as uncanny children (Miller *Childhood*). Moreover in the earlier 1996 TV film *Macbeth on the Estate*, children were everywhere, and the witches were delinquent pre-teens, just as violent as their adult peers. By contrast, the children in Kurzel's *Macbeth* are not figures of fear or suspicion; they are unambiguously human and are unmistakably vital, loved members of the family.

The value of children is clear from the film's opening images: an overhead shot shows a toddler's corpse atop an unlit pyre. The child's parents, the Macbeths (Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard), step forward to perform their goodbyes and funeral rituals. Lady Macbeth weeps as she places flowers in the boy's cold hand, while a stoic Macbeth puts stones on his eyes and crumbles earth onto his chest. As Louise D'Arcens observes, the funeral stages not only parental grief, as the whole village has gathered to grieve: "Here the death of a child is cause for public, communal mourning that is as much concerned with loss of lineage as it is with emotional anguish" (n.p.). Amongst the mourners, Banquo clutches young Fleance to him. From a distance, the witches look on and, notably, there are five members in this multigenerational family. The Older Witch holds a Child Witch in front of her, the Younger Witch cradles a baby, and the Middle Witch stands to the side.¹ The blocking of these characters illustrates the importance and integration of the children in their family, and it is repeated later in the film. Children are

foregrounded once again at the Battle of Ellon when a pitiful group of teenage soldiers are sent to reinforce Macbeth's army: "Virgins to war, they're terrified" (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie 2). The phalanx of fresh-faced boys halts Macbeth's army in their tracks; as the opening crawl of captions have informed the audience, the situation is dire and these are Duncan's last reserves. All that the adults can do is prepare the boy soldiers; they pray beside them, arm them, and paint their faces, and we see Macbeth gently assist one in particular, the Young Boy Soldier (Scot Greenan). However, this care is all for naught as it proves to be a "foul and fair a day"; Macbeth's army wins the battle, but suffers heavy losses. Afterwards, Banquo and Macbeth haul the gory, rain-soaked bodies, mostly of boys, into heaps. Later that night, Macbeth reverently ministers to the Boy Soldier's corpse, as he did to that of his own son. (Fig.1.) These boys, then, are cared for and valued, but they are imperiled as the desperation of Duncan's situation means that they are most useful in battle as cannon fodder. Carol Chillington Rutter notes that, following the witches' prophesy, Macbeth wages "a war on children [... he needs] to destroy the 'seeds of time' in a futile attempt to control the future he both wants and wants different" (*Shakespeare* 165). Kurzel's Macbeth certainly wages such a war against Banquo and Macduff's offspring, but children are in danger long before he comes to power.

Insert Fig.1. The Boy Soldier. Screenshot.



Fig.1. The Boy Soldier.

Screenshot.

For Macbeth, the death of the Boy Soldier is a heavy blow from which he never recovers. Lady Macbeth is haunted by the death of her son (discussed below), but Macbeth seems more struck by the loss of the Boy Soldier, a pseudo-son and teenage copy of himself. As I have discussed elsewhere, the trauma of war is embodied in Macbeth's repeated hallucination of the Boy Soldier; he appears in Inverness to offer Macbeth the "dagger of the mind" and lead him to Duncan's tent; he reappears in Macbeth's vision with the "none of woman born" promise; and, with his own throat cut and leaking gore, he watches as Macbeth dies (Semple). Children are everywhere in the play – sometimes as characters, symbols, metaphors – and "the image of the child draws together the play's stake in history" (Chillington Rutter, *Shakespeare* 169).² Grief-stricken and suffering from PTSD, Kurzel's Macbeth fails to protect or sustain the life of any children, biological or adoptive; paradoxically this, the film implies, compels him to turn on youth and the future they might bring.

In the play, unnamed murderers kill Lady Macduff and her son in their home at Macbeth's command (4.2). Kurzel's film expands the number of children to three and makes Macbeth the murderer of all four Macduffs. In a tense scene, the camera tracks the Macduff family as they flee through a dark forest. Lady Macduff's screams of "Murder!" and "No! My babies!" are chilling. In the next scene, Lady Macbeth kneels beneath three stakes mounted high on a dune near Dunsinane; she weeps for what is about to happen. Her husband approaches with a torch and burns Lady Macduff, her daughter, and her two boys at the stake. This is the climax of Macbeth's villainy, and the wanton destruction of the nation's most finite resource – children – breaks Lady Macbeth. The film's Shooting Script states: "Her mind [is] cracked by the atrocity she's witnessed" (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie 69). The play's overriding "motive is barrenness: Macbeth's appalled, delayed, recognition of the black joke that mocks his dynastic project. Having no children, he has no future. To keep that future at bay, he must kill it [by killing the children] that are the future" (Chillington Rutter, *Shakespeare* 165). The film clearly marks Lady

Macduff and her children as sacrifices, martyrs to Macbeth's madness but also to the (seemingly) predetermined birth of the nation. This connection between sacrificial lambs and the onward march of history is strengthened by Macbeth's ravings about the prophesy: "The spirits [...] have pronounc'd me thus: 'Fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman Shall e'er have power upon thee'" (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie 68). On the one hand, the Macduffs' deaths are needless, but on the other, they are vital to bring about Macbeth's downfall and ensure the rise of Malcolm.³ And yet, in Kurzel's film, Malcolm's rule does not offer genuine change or sanctuary for Scotland's children. Rather, the possibility of an alternative future, a safe space where children are not prey, is put forward in the form of the witches.

* * *

It is clear that whatever the witches are in Kurzel's film, they are not villains, nor are they malevolent or supernatural. Kurzel's Weird Sisters defy the expectations of anyone seeking the modern stereotype of the Halloween witch; they are not cackling crones (*à la* Welles's *Macbeth* (1948)), part of a coven (*à la* Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971)), nor do they use witchy props (Polanski's witches bury a severed arm, dagger, and hangman's noose, and later gather around a smoking cauldron). In her analysis of the witches in several film adaptations of *Macbeth*, Susan Gushee O'Malley suggests that perhaps "the traditional witch no longer has the power in our imagination that they once had" (79). In interviews, Kurzel suggested that his witches were powerful but it was neither paranormal nor political power they wielded. He stressed the witches' humanity, their connection to the land, and their passive observation of events:

I wanted to ground them, so that [...] they had a kind of dignity, they felt more human.

My inspiration came from a lot of travellers, and the idea that they were from the land

rather than mystic beings. [...] Also, I'm allowing them to traverse through the possibility that they're a figment of Macbeth's imagination – created from the shadows of war.

Which is why we were interested in having them appear on the battlefield, perhaps as observers and watchers of his tragedy. (Lambie n.p.)

Another interview with the director clarifies that “The witches really came out of me wanting to make them feel like travelers; make them feel quite real. So it was really from that and my research on travelers and gypsies of the time” (Sarner n.p.). Kurzel's *Weird Sisters* are nomads with a connection to the land who observe settled society from its fringes. The quintet of witches oversee, or appear in close proximity to, significant events in Macbeth's life – his child's funeral, the Battle of Ellon, his death – and it is this distance, this passive observation, that enables them to not only survive Duncan and Macbeth's wars, but to thrive when, in contrast, the women closest to the center of power die (Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff). However, paradoxically, it is through watching from the margins that the witches can act and shape the nation. By caring for their children and providing sanctuary for Fleance, acting as off-screen guardians to the boy (as I discuss below), they actively safeguard Scotland's future.

Macbeth's first contact with the witches is through the Child Witch (Amber Rissmann, aged 7 at the time of filming). As Macbeth and Banquo gather their comrades' bodies, the smoke clears and they see the witches huddled over a corpse. The Child Witch stands between the two groups and eventually bridges the gap by approaching the soldiers, unafraid and curious. The Child Witch touches Macbeth's dogtags, takes a token from his tunic, and moves past to let her elders deliver their prediction. The group's appearance – a girl and women on the all-male battlefield – puzzles the soldiers, but the men are not fearful or alarmed at their interaction with the quintet. When the witches leave the scene, they do not disappear “into the air” or use any supernatural powers; holding the hand of the Child, they simply walk determinedly back into the smoke, ignoring Macbeth.

The Child Witch is a younger version of her elders; she has the same plaits, facial scars, and clothing as the adults.⁴ In this scene, and throughout the film, the Child Witch clutches a rough straw doll. In contrast to, for example, the clay voodoo doll used by Welles's witches or the dolls used by the Macduff children who doubled as the witches in Michael Boyd's 2011 stage production, there are no negative connotations attached to this doll.⁵ Rather, the doll is a toy, an object that marks the girl as a child who engages in normal childhood activities like playing. Moreover, as a model of a person, the doll is an image of reproduction, implying that the witches are capable of making miniature selves and successfully enacting and modelling a benign maternity. Examining early modern stories of witchcraft, Diane Purkiss finds that the witch is "a dark other of the mother and housewife" (134), and it is in particular her disorderliness and opposition to stability that "[... means she] becomes an occasion [...] for acting out anxieties about the mother" (139). Kurzel's film takes a very different stance on its witches, who are, at the least, nonthreatening maternal figures. This is affirmed by the fact that the Young Witch and Older Witch are often shown holding an infant child. The baby is plump, healthy, and sleeps contentedly in their arms.⁶ In the early modern "popular imagination children and adolescents were thought to have been particularly vulnerable to witchcraft" (Sharpe 67), but at no point does the film suggest that the witches are hostile or a danger to children, quite the opposite in fact. Although the witches are shown draining some blood from a dead soldier – the only gory or truly strange action they engage in in the film – their actions are intelligible as a medieval ritual, like those seen at the funeral of the Macbeths' son. These witches, then, are not supernatural, sinister, or frightening, and they do not harm any living creature; they have instead a family that stays united throughout the film.⁷

In contrast to the Macbeths then, who have no (living) children, the witches have two and they are "the only household which emerges unscathed in Kurzel's film" (Bui n.p.). The film presents the ability to have, rear, love, and protect children as a mark of benevolence and

heroism. The Macbeths fail in this endeavor, and this contributes to their deaths; the Macduffs try but fail too. Only the witches succeed and, the film implies, even expand their brood. In Kurzel's film, children are not safe with their parents or in their homes (the sons of Inverness are casualties in Duncan's war), but they are safe with the witches.

As Banquo is cut down by assassins, he roars at Fleance (a boy of about 12) to "Fly!" The boy is frozen with fear and anguish, but he eventually runs deeper into the wood. The assassins hot on his heels, Fleance suddenly lurches to a halt because "In a small clearing covered in leaves, as if she's been waiting, is the CHILD WITCH. Staring at him calmly" (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie 54)." (Fig.2.) When the soldiers arrive, there is no sign of either child. As both vanish, it is "suggested that [Fleance] evades his would-be killers through the intervention of the weird child" (Bui n.p.). This was clearly the intention of the filmmakers, as Kurzel notes in an interview that he was especially taken with "the idea of Fleance almost following the witches into the woods after Banquo's death" (Sarner n.p.). For Bui, the two children here are markedly different:

this scene [...] brings into focus the cultural contradiction between children as innately innocent and good (Fleance) versus children as naturally corrupt (the girl witch). [...] Is the girl witch ultimately an agent of redemption or retribution? Can we consider her vulnerable in any conventional sense? Questions about the girl's status as innocent child or agent of evil are raised early in the film. [...] the girl witch's facial expression throughout the film betrays a certain knowingness: perhaps of the future, perhaps of evil itself. (n.p.)

While Bui reads Fleance as innocent and interprets the Child Witch as at worst evil and at best uncannily worldly, I infer that her knowingness and actions in fact mark her as a positive figure. She knows Fleance is in danger and helps him. Furthermore, as we next see Fleance at the close of the film when, like the witches, he emerges from the smoke on the heath, it is implied that the

witches shelter the boy. In both the play and Kurzel’s film, the witches only appear outdoors.⁸

The heath and woods are their spaces, the smoke and mist their elements: “[w]hereas the leading male characters of the drama are intent on jostling for promotion and securing their status, the witches represent a kind of fluidity (they vanish and rematerialise) that undermines all such well-founded identity” (Eagleton *On Evil*, 80). I discuss Fleance further below, but for the moment I want to suggest two things. Firstly, that by disappearing with the Child Witch, Fleance is temporarily positioned outside of patriarchal society and, secondly, as they already care successfully for two children, the witches are suitable substitute parents for Fleance and lead the audience to hope for the boy. Like many of Shakespeare’s child characters, Fleance is associated with “political futurity,” and thus in sheltering the boy, the witches safeguard the fate of the nation: “The struggle to fight for children or save the children becomes an index of the survival of the body politic” (Campana 8).⁹

Insert Fig.2. The Child Witch. Screenshot.



Fig.2. The Child Witch.

Screenshot.

Carol Chillington Rutter observes that as “film deprivileges Shakespeare’s words, so it coincidentally redistributes the balance of power between men’s and women’s roles: not only are there more women in Shakespeare films than playtexts but they have much more to perform” (“Looking” 243). In this scene between Fleance and the Child Witch, firstly, the female character is included to perform an important task – saving Fleance’s life. It is significant that it is the girl,

rather than one of the three older witches, who does this. By protecting a child, the Child Witch shows both a power and an ethical capacity lacking in most of the film's adults. Secondly, children in Shakespeare are "[endlessly vulnerable] to adult appropriation and manipulation" but the Child Witch and Fleance share a moment free from adults (pursuing assassins aside) (Chedgzoy 19). Fleance and the Child Witch's encounter is one of equals; there is no killer to defeat, no maternal or sororal adult who might muddy the waters with her agenda, or even tackle the assassins, again making the scene about the adults. The child pair's sudden relationship is so simpatico that they do not even need words to communicate. Indeed it is notable that these children, who appear in several scenes, have no spoken lines at all; Macduff's three children are mute; and we hear the Inverness village children only when they sing for Duncan.¹⁰ By deprivileging Shakespeare's words, Kurzel's film insistently makes its children visibly important and enables them to silently speak volumes. Although a tense and tragic scene, the film implies that at the end the children are together and safe, detached for the moment from the bloody machinations of adult men.

Fleance is not the only character who seems to find some form of refuge with the witches. Lady Macbeth is increasingly made isolated by her husband, and eventually she travels to join the witches. In tandem with Macbeth's declining mental stability, the couple's marriage disintegrates. Manic and sleep-deprived, Macbeth complains of his "barren sceptre" and points his dagger accusingly at Lady Macbeth's belly. In its casualness, Macbeth's implied threat is especially chilling. The Weird Sisters may have placed a "fruitless crown" upon his head, but here at least Macbeth sees the fruitlessness as his wife's fault. When Macbeth then attempts to manipulate his wife using sexual pleasure, groping beneath her dress, she rebukes him only to then "[kiss] him hard. Willing him to come back to her" (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie 50), but no such reconciliation occurs. In this scene, Lady Macbeth is uneasy at the prospect of removing Banquo and his son, but later she is openly against the killing of the Macduffs. Their execution is the final

straw that ends her connection to the fractured marriage. She leaves Dunsinane and returns to Inverness. In the forlorn village chapel, she sits exhausted on the floor, delivering the “Out, damned spot” speech as snowflakes drift in the open door. The camera eventually turns to reveal that she is speaking to her son, the fair-haired cherub we last saw on the funeral pyre. (Fig.3.) With this reveal, Lady Macbeth’s words take on new meaning and her shifting tone of voice – her address is variously remorseful, distressed, comforting, admonishing, pleading, and playful as she talks to the boy – is explained. However, this twist on the sleepwalking scene also foregrounds Lady Macbeth’s problem, her tragedy and motivation, as bereavement and childlessness.

Insert Fig.3. Lady Macbeth and her son



Fig.3. Lady Macbeth and her

son. Screenshot.

Although Lady Macbeth verbally refers to the murders of Duncan and the Macduff family, the visual spectacle of the child reveals her primary concern and state of mind. From the beginning of the film, she is grieving, traumatized, and the series of deaths she has faced are messily bound up with one another. Kate Chedgzoy remarks that “an important part of the theatrical power of infancy lies in its capacity to elude [...] social specificity, so that representations of tiny babies often serve as screens on to which adults may project their own fears and longings” (Chedgzoy 22). Lady Macbeth’s dead child, here alive again as a ghost or hallucination, represents a variety of losses. The boy is a reminder of the lost closeness with Macbeth; he was a product of their love and togetherness, and now the couple can bring forth no

new life, only death. His mother's words may also be interpreted, in hindsight, as recollections of their interactions and a replay of his death (the boy's face and neck are covered in angry red sores). Haunted by the loss of her child, Lady Macbeth recalls their time together: "Out, damned spot! [...] Wash your hands, put on your night-gown; look not so pale. [...] Come, come, come, come, give me your hand". Gemma Miller sees in this scene "a connection [...] between the spots of Lady Macbeth and the spots on the child," and proposes that the scene is not a condemnation of "her behaviour [but rather] an attempt to justify it" (*Childhood*, 87). The toddler also represents a past that the Macbeths can never return to and a future that they cannot achieve. Children die in their presence and no amount of pleading can undo "What's done" or reunite Lady Macbeth and her boy: "Come, come, come, come, give me your hand" (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie 74).

Like Wright's *Macbeth* and the BBC *Shakespeare ReTold: Macbeth* (2005), Kurzel's film foregrounds the image of the Macbeths as parents mourning the death of their child.¹¹ Fassbender noted the importance of this recent tragedy for the Macbeths' marriage: "We know that Lady Macbeth has lost one child, probably many more [...] this story is about loss, the loss of a relationship between a couple, the loss of a child and of their sanity" (Aftab n.p.). For Fassbender, Lady Macbeth is not "the ambitious and power-hungry villainess of history," rather the couple's actions are "less about power and more about filling a void" (Jones n.p.). Kurzel similarly remarked on the significance of the marriage and maternity for the character of Lady Macbeth: "I wanted [her descent into madness] to feel very simple and dignified. She's a mother; she's a wife; she's desperately trying to hold on to her family and herself" (Harkness n.p.). In the film's DVD Extra, Cotillard remarks that she saw her character as "driven by despair ... she's desperate [to forget] what happened before and just looking ahead and creating their own destiny" ("Lady Macbeth"). In this adaptation then, regicide is a coping mechanism, a joint project to act as a strange form of couple's therapy, but it wholly fails to fill the gap in the

Macbeths' marriage.¹² Lady Macbeth is instead driven out of the marital home and, it seems, is only offered a chance of peace with the witches.

Having concluded her monologue in the chapel, Lady Macbeth walks out into the misty mountains. As the film progresses, Philippa Sheppard notes, Macbeth is shown “clad in white garments that suggest to modern audiences the straight jacket or the hospital gown” (Sheppard n.p.). Similarly, in a white gown, barefoot, and her hair loose, Lady Macbeth is a figure of Gothic horror, the madwoman out of the attic and free on the heath.¹³ She comes to a sudden halt as “Some way in the distance, on the crest of a hill, are FOUR FIGURES. The Witches. One has a bundle in her arms: the infant we saw earlier. It seems to beckon Lady Macbeth on. Lady Macbeth stares. Drawn inexorably” (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie 74). If this scene aims to suggest that the baby is what draws Lady Macbeth on, it fails; the infant receives no special focus, there are no close ups of it, or eye-line matches to imply Lady Macbeth's attention is on it specifically. Instead, what stands out is the allure of the witches as a group. They are marked out as the subjects of Lady Macbeth's attention, her destination, through an extreme wide shot and then a wide shot. This trio of women and their children form an all-female community who live away from the violent civilization represented by Duncan, Macbeth, and eventually Malcolm.¹⁴ Liberated from her husband's rule and madness, Lady Macbeth can see again their dead son and choose to engage with other women and their living children. Gazing at the quintet, Lady Macbeth repeats the phrase “To bed, to bed, to bed” (one for each of the three groups?) and strides to join the women.

When we next see Lady Macbeth, it is as a corpse on the royal bed. Any number of interpretations can be put forward for her death in this film. Is it death by suicide; or a natural death brought about by exposure or heartbreak; is she murdered by the witches (there is no suggestion of this); or perhaps, does she die because she is recruited by the witches? The film's Production Notes offer some vague suggestions, but the film itself provides no answers on her

death.¹⁵ As a conspirator in Duncan's murder she is not innocent, and perhaps this is why she must die (and why her corpse is ejected from the company of the witches). For Bui, Cotillard's Lady Macbeth "is portrayed as both victim and accomplice of the powers of darkness" (n.p.), while for Miller, her "guilt is complicated with a backstory of maternal loss that both humanizes and exonerates her actions" (*Childhood*, 87-88). In general, the film does present Lady Macbeth as a sympathetic figure who suffers her own losses, protests Macbeth's cruelties, and abandons him following his most heinous crime.¹⁶ Questions about her cause of death aside, what is certain is that it is Lady Macbeth's choice to join the witches and it is something she wants – her focus is clear and her repetition of "To bed" is definite and filled with longing. With the witches on the heath, the film implies, perhaps she can finally be free from the violent society of men, achieve peace and attain the rest that has eluded her since Duncan's murder. With the witches, she can at least be close to children and, in her death, can leave behind the world her husband has helped perpetuate, "a nightmare vision of a kingdom cleared of children" (Chillington Rutter, *Shakespeare* 166).

* * *

At the film's finale, the witches occupy the position of witnesses on the fringes of the fray. Macbeth and Macduff's duel is interspersed with shots of the witches, as a group and as individuals. The two warriors fight until Macbeth has the upper hand – literally, as he straddles the battered Macduff and holds a dagger above his throat. But at his foe's announcement that "Macduff was from his mother's womb Untimely ripp'd," Macbeth is shocked and drained (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie 83). Macbeth sits back, immobile, and sees the witches and then the bloodied Boy Soldier before him (Fig.4). Macduff's declaration immobilizes Macbeth perhaps because it brings to mind all of the children who have met untimely ends, or perhaps the

mention of mothers makes him recall his dead wife and son. Whatever the cause, this is the turning point: Macbeth gives up the fight and Macduff seizes the chance to gut him. As I have argued elsewhere, Macbeth's death is a kind of mercy-killing, an assisted suicide desired by Macbeth and executed by Macduff (Semple n.p.). So, although present at Macbeth's death, the witches do not cause it. The Weird Sisters emerge from the blood-orange smoke to witness the warriors' duel and return to it as Macbeth breathes his last; they stand distant from the fight as recorders of, rather than participants in, history.

Insert Fig.4. The Witches



Fig.4. The Witches. Screenshot.

In some ways, Kurzel's portrayal of the witches is in line with Terry Eagleton's against-the-grain reading of these figures: "the witches are the heroines of the piece [... They] expose a reverence for hierarchical social order for what it is, as the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare. [...] They are exiles from that order" (Eagleton, *William 2-3*). In Kurzel's film, the noblewomen are collateral damage in men's wars, but the witches, as separatists from the repressive, militaristic androcentric order, can observe and survive the growing pains of the developing nation. They are, as Kurzel remarked, dignified "observers and watchers of [Macbeth's] tragedy," but they stand outside of it. Like Polanski's witches then, Kurzel's may be read as partly "feminist" as they help to "expose the rottenness of the warrior society – all of it, from Duncan through Malcolm" (Kliman 214). The film's audience watches them watching, and this encourages a distance from and reflection on the action. In his

later work, *On Evil*, Eagleton develops his views on the play's witches arguing that they are outside of and "enemies of political society [...] Their negativity is one which finds positive existence itself abhorrent [...] This is why it can provide no political alter[n]ative to these military butchers" [sic.] (*On Evil* 81). Kurzel's quintet of Weird Sisters may not offer political alternatives, but they do offer some positivity in the form of sanctuary. In acting as the guardians of children – the infant, the girl, and the future king Fleance – the witches safeguard and help bring into being Scotland's future. This would seem to, indeed, make them the quiet heroines of this piece.

At the film's close, after Malcolm assumes the throne, Fleance emerges from the smoke to collect Macbeth's sword. The film cuts to the castle's ceremonial hall, a cathedral-like space, where Malcolm looks at his crown and pulls his sword (formerly Duncan's) from its sheath. The film cuts between Fleance and Malcolm, connecting the pair; one is a miniature of the other, a king and future king. Like Malcolm, Fleance examines his sword, which is the length of his body – a weapon he is barely strong enough to carry, never mind wield. (Fig.5.) Fleance begins to walk into the smoke, just as Malcolm begins to stride with determination to the castle door, sword in hand. The new king's sword is a kind of Chekov's Gun, an idea that is familiar to modern audiences due to its ubiquity in popular media. The camerawork in this coda implies that the 'gun' will go off; Malcolm will use the blade, his target is Fleance, their confrontation though delayed, is inevitable. The language of film makes clear that Malcolm is in pursuit of the boy. Fleance walks and then runs towards the sunset, his back to the camera, just as the red sun beams in the door of the hall and Malcolm walks toward it, his back to camera. The last shot of the film has the camera race after Fleance, who disappears into the red smoke; he "breaks to a RUN -- a sprint, wild, panting desperately," as the red haze engulfs the screen, his panicked breathing and the non-diegetic war-drums increase the tension (Louiso, Koskoff, and Lesslie, 87). The coda

aligns the audience with Fleance; the viewers are plunged into the blood-red smoke with him, Malcolm in pursuit, and the only certainty is that a bloody conflict lies ahead.

Insert Fig.5. Fleance



Fig.5. Fleance. Screenshot.

At the Battle of Ellon, “[Fassbender’s] Macbeth is clearly leading the last campaign to save a beleaguered king. Kurzel thus raises the stakes, making the salvation of Duncan’s dynasty rest on Macbeth’s shoulders against insuperable odds. Shakespeare’s Macbeth is a military hero; Kurzel’s is the sole saviour of Scotland” (Sheppard n.p.). If this is the case at the opening of the film, by the close, Fleance is the nation’s only hope. My reading of Fleance and Malcolm, especially in this coda scene, diverges from that of Miller. She describes the boy as “Banquo’s equally ambitious and embittered pre-pubescent son [... who returns at the film’s finale] to challenge Macbeth’s successor” (“Changing” 53). Fleance is now a “proto-assassin” (Miller *Childhood*, 90), who appears “with the hardened look of a soldier. He is no longer the charming and vulnerable young child, but an embittered avenger” (“Changing” 64). Like Bui, however, I read Fleance as “both victim and avenger, innocent and ingenious” (n.p.), as he prepares for the future conflict (picking up the sword) but runs from his attacker, Malcolm. According to Miller, in this coda scene the new king is “unsuspecting” (*Childhood*, 90), as “alone and unguarded in his castle [...] he is blissfully unaware of the impending danger” (“Changing” 53). However, as emphasized by Fleance’s youth, small physical size, and isolation, Malcolm is the aggressor with all the advantages; he is the king and can command an army (as we have just witnessed), has

reached adulthood, and has been fully trained in princely and military arts by his father (alongside Duncan, he executed Cawdor).¹⁷ In fact, Malcolm might seem like a young armchair general; flanked by friends, wearing a spotless cream tunic, atop a white horse, he looks down as Macduff does the dirty work of defeating Macbeth, and then saunters casually past to claim Dunsinane. At no point in the finale scenes does Malcolm look anything but powerful, menacing, and in-control; only his murderous intentions against Fleance enliven him to make haste out of the castle door. Once again, the camerawork of the final scene is suggestive; a confrontation between the new king and Fleance lies ahead, but only Malcolm is eager for it. In his gazing alone at the crown and in hunting the boy, it is evident that Malcolm is a new Macbeth, but he is so without the prompting of the witches, a wife, or generals. No wonder Fleance dashes away from Dunsinane and towards the sanctuary of the witches (the heath is after all their home, the smoke is their element).

Fleance's reappearance at the close of the film signals Kurzel's "[fascination] with the idea that this is a story that will be told again [... and, as part of the film's finale, he liked] the idea of suggesting two potential kings thinking about their destiny" (Sarner n.p.). In their youth Malcolm and Fleance, one a young adult and the other a pre-teen, bring to mind Scotland's past, present, and future. As Charlotte Scott remarks, in Shakespearean drama and "[w]ithin the dialectic of history, the child becomes the single most powerful emblem of memory; not only in relation to what has happened in the past but also in respect of what should not happen in the future" (154). Fleance and Malcolm are both past victims of Macbeth, but only Fleance represents the nation's future and can prevent "what should not happen": the rule of a new despot. Through this coda, like Welles's and Polanski's *Macbeths*, Kurzel's film puts forward "a myth of the eternal return of tyranny" replacing "the linear and progressive development of Scotland and England invoked in Shakespeare's text" so that "Macbeth doesn't lead to King James: he leads to another Macbeth" (Lindley 96). In Polanski's film, "society [is] the locus of

[the] tragedy” (216) and “the recurrence of evil is a social rather than supernatural phenomenon” (Magnus 71). So too is this the case in Kurzel’s film, but here the combative masculine culture is singled out as Scotland’s central problem.¹⁸ Duncan, Macbeth, and Malcolm all present a danger to the nation’s children, and for *Macbeth*’s women, like the children, it seems the further they are from men, the better. While Miller takes the position that Kurzel’s children “far from being the guardians of the future, are in fact the agents of its annihilation” (Miller *Childhood*, 91), I propose that the witches represent a glimmer of hope for Fleance, and thus for the nation’s future. In joining the company of witches, Fleance gains a family, both guardians and siblings, and escapes for a time the social ills – the oppressive regime, aggressive machismo, and routine violence – that plague the nation. Maybe, just maybe, this will make the boy different from his predecessors and Scotland can hold out hope for a better tomorrow.

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Endnotes

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¹ The weird sisters and their progeny are identified as Older, Middle, Younger, and Child Witch in the Shooting Script by Louiso *et al.* In the film credits, they are identified as Older (Seylan Baxter), Middle-aged (Lynn Kennedy), Young (Kayla Fallon, aged 22), and Child Witch (Amber Rissman, aged 7).

² Chillington Rutter here draws on Cleanth Brooks’ *The Well Wrought Urn* (1949).

³ Lady Macduff and family are, to an extent, ‘refrigerated’. For more on this in modern pop culture, see “Stuffed into the Fridge” on the TV Tropes website.

⁴ Through scarification, each of the witches is marked with a Papal cross that runs from the forehead down the nose.

⁵ For a fuller discussion of dolls in productions of *Macbeth*, see Miller (“Changing”, and *Childhood*).

⁶ There is no implication that the child is stolen or adopted. As the Young Witch is most often seen carrying the infant, the film suggests that she is its mother.

⁷ The film omits any mention of the witches traveling separately and they have no bubbling cauldron with “pilot’s thumb,” or “Eye of newt, and toe of frog” (1.3.28; 4.1.14). The Macduff and Macbeth families are separated.

⁸ Peter Kirwan observes that Kurzel’s *Macbeth* “produce[s a] landscape as empathetic to shifts in power relations” and proposes that, for part of the film at least, Macbeth is as comfortable on the heath as the witches (82).

⁹ Campana draws on and quotes from Lee Edelman’s *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004).

¹⁰ The Child Witch apparently filmed one line, but it was cut from the final film (Croce, n.p.). The Shooting Script contains no lines for either the Child Witch or Fleance. In the film and Shooting Script, the Young Boy Soldier speaks only as part of Macbeth’s vision, delivering the injunction to “Be bloody.”

¹¹ The Macbeths’ childlessness has long been a critical concern. For early discussions, see Freud (1916), L. C. Knights (1946), and Brooks (1949). Miller provides an overview of the scholarship (“Changing”, 57). In Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood* (1957), Lady Macbeth gives birth to a stillborn child.

¹² In one interview, Kurzel noted that “Violence and murder has become the salvation for [the Macbeths’] relationship” (Sarner, n.p.).

¹³ D’Arcens sees the film as suffused with gothic elements and observes that scholars of medievalism, such as David Matthews, summarise this increasingly common aesthetic as “the gothic or grotesque Middle Ages” (n.p.).

¹⁴ In forming their own community, in their freedom and distance from society, Kurzel’s witches share characteristics with Polanski’s *Weird Sisters* (Kliman 214-215).

¹⁵ The synopsis in the Production Notes states that guilt and the “realisation that she has lost her husband forever to darkness, just like she once lost a child” drives Lady Macbeth to despair, and “Unable to escape her grief, and unable to make any connection with the husband she loves so much, she returns to Inverness and dies consumed by visions of her dead child” (*Macbeth: Production Notes*, 3).

¹⁶ On this front, the film is in keeping with some recent adaptations which focus on Lady Macbeth, see Carroll (2014).

¹⁷ In his review for *Variety*, Lodge sees Malcolm “fleeing” from Duncan’s murder scene as “a youthful failure of nerve” (n.p.), but his nerves are evidently under control by the film’s gory finale.

¹⁸ Kliman summarises four common approaches to *Macbeth* in stage and screen productions. Polanski’s film falls into the fourth category, which depicts social structures as the shaping, “determining force” for the Macbeths (Kliman, xiv).