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Macbeth / Scotland, Pa

Black comedy

Directed and written by Billy Morrisette, *Scotland, PA* is a film based on William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. Morrisette sets his characters in the American society of 1975 and decides to turn a tragedy into a black comedy. He uses humor to expose and comment on the various issues that concern him and the society he lives in but he also does what Shakespeare has done in his play - he introduces humor so that the audience can get some relief and lighten up a bit from all the tensions and tragic events that have been going on. Kurt Vonnegut Jr., the well known American writer, was once asked about the meaning of the science fiction elements in his novel *Slaughterhouse Five* and he said that the purpose of the extraterrestrials from the planet Tralfamadore in his novel is the same as the purpose of various clowns and innkeepers in Shakespeare's plays - to provide the readers / audience with relief^[1]. Shakespeare has not failed to supply *Macbeth* with such a character - the Porter who discusses with Macduff the mysteries of alcoholic drinks and other fluids^[2]. One can even find traces of black humor in the play when the First Murderer answers Banquo's comment on the weather ("It will be rain tonight.") with "Let it come down."^[3] obviously referring to the rain of blows that are just about to be delivered. Then there is the witty and humorous conversation between Lady Macduff and her son about their future life without the husband and father that precedes their murder^[4]. When the noblemen find out that their King has been murdered, Macbeth says

"There's nothing serious in mortality. / All is but toys."^[5]

as if he is writing a tagline for *Scotland, PA*. At every step, this "delightful black comedy" simultaneously provokes opposite reactions of laughter and discomfort, like in the case of the conversation between Mrs. McGuire and Malcolm

"Donald, is that you? / No. / How are you? / Lousy. / How's your father? / Dead. / Ooooo, hahaha..."

Transformations

As in Shakespeare's play, *Scotland* is the site of the main events that take place in Morrisette's film but the basic difference is that this

time a whole country gets reduced to a small town of the same name in the state of Pennsylvania. England becomes Atlantic City and the first part of the eleventh century becomes 1975. The world of the MacBeths has gone through many changes since the eleventh century and therefore Mac and Pat cannot emulate the methods of their predecessors even if they wanted to because it just would not work. One of the Hippies knows that and informs the other Hippy who thinks that Mac should kill McDuff's entire family that his idea would work only a thousand years ago (which is approximately the time of Macbeth's reign)

"These are modern times, you cannot go around killing everybody."

So castles turn into restaurants, horses into cars and swords into guns. A dark cave in which the Three Witches are making a magical concoction in a boiling cauldron becomes a tavern called "Witch's Brew" in which Mac, Banko and the others are enjoying the modern potions of equally intoxicating quality. While Macbeth waits for Birnam wood to come to him, Mac and Banko go hunting in the Birnam Woods and the heath where the Witches meet to deliver their prophesy transforms into a merry-go-round in a theme park. Not to forget the daggers and swords which are replaced by such murderous weapons as fridge doors, frying pans, fryers and crowbars. The tartan has however survived - there are tartan patterns on the short curtains in Duncan's restaurant, on Malcolm's armchair, on the suits of McKenna, McDuff and the hunters as well as on Mac's shirt and the pants of the customer that gets kicked out of the restaurant by Malcolm.

Characters

Morrisette's Macbeth is a fast-food restaurant worker Joe 'Mac' McBeth. Although it may seem like a serious degradation (for Macbeth was a General of the King's army), Mac is actually of the same rank if one takes into consideration the fact that the King has become a fast-food restaurant owner. Mac may no longer fight for his King on the battlefields of Scotland, but he is nonetheless fearlessly protecting his employer and his employer's "castle". The following description of Macbeth's bravery could very well describe the scene in which Mac jumps over the counter and ejects two troublemakers out of the restaurant

"But all's too weak, / For brave Macbeth - well he deserves that name! - / Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel / Which smoked
with bloody execution, / Like valour's minion / Carved out his passage till he faced the slave,"^[6]

Like Macbeth, Mac is a brave and ferocious champion of right over treachery, of table manners over the nasty habit of throwing food around the restaurant. That this is not an easy task is quite clear if one notices how frightened everybody else is during the incident - for example, Douglas McKenna (who is the assistant manager and should be in charge of such unpleasant situations) is hiding in the restroom - and how loud the ensuing applause is. While Macbeth's bravery on the battlefield is enough to earn him a new title, Mac's heroic performance has to be backed up by some snitching on Doug, which finally makes him a new assistant manager. Due to this turn of events, Mac experiences the same hesitation as Macbeth

"He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought / Golden opinions from all sorts of people, / Which would be worn now in their newest
gloss, / Not cast aside so soon."^[7]

Lady Macbeth cannot tolerate such words and immediately accuses him of being a coward, which finally does the trick and stops Macbeth's opposition. The same thing happens to Mac in the final scenes when Ed, the dim police officer, unintentionally provokes him by ordering "the little chicken McBeth with extra sauce" just after Stacy, the fortune-telling Hippy, wonders whether Mac can kill McDuff. Like in the play, Banko is Mac's best friend until he becomes too suspicious and Mac gets rid of him. They are so close that Mac always shares his ideas about the restaurant improvement with Banko (except the idea about the drive-thru which triggers off Banko's suspicion that something fishy is going on) the same way Macbeth shares his with Banquo

"The interim having weighed it, let us speak / Our free hearts each to other."^[8]

The Three Witches have an entrancing effect upon Macbeth, something that Banquo notices right away

"My noble partner / You greet with present grace and great prediction / Of noble having and of royal hope, / That he seems rapt withal."^[9]

Mac also "seems rapt withal" not only because of the message he receives but also because of the large quantities of liquor that he has consumed at "Witch's Brew". While the world around him is spinning, the Hippies seem as real to Mac as the Three Witches seem real to Macbeth

"Into the air, and what seemed corporal / Melted as breath into the wind."^[10]

The supernatural world overlaps with the real, physical world - the first time Mac meets Hippies Hector and Jesse, he is offered some marijuana which he accepts, and the last time he sees them, they are eating the burgers he has prepared for them. Both Macbeth and Mac are suffering from "the heat-oppressed brain"^[11] - they keep seeing daggers, ghosts and even Hippies wearing a deer costume. In such a condition, anything is possible

"Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak,"^[12]

They die alike, fighting to the very end

"At least we'll die with harness on our back."^[13]

The harness on Macbeth's back is his armor, whereas the equipment that holds Mac in place are the decorative horns on his car.

The two "fiend-like queens"^[14], Lady Macbeth and Pat McBeth are alike in the sense that they desperately seek power, money, social status and some real estate. As Stacy tells Mac

"Now, honey wants the money."

The Macbeths and McBeths are two loving couples (Mac and Pat are making out anytime and anywhere) but the wives know that their husbands will not make their dream possible unless they influence them

"Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round"^[15]

The "golden round" is what Pat is expecting too. She does not want to be an underachiever anymore and is not satisfied with being an assistant manager's wife. She tells Mac that they have to aim higher and that is what they do. When the husbands start to act on their own, without communication with them, the guilty visions start to haunt Lady Macbeth and Pat McBeth alike. They suffer a nervous breakdown the manifestation of which differs only slightly. Lady Macbeth keeps rubbing and washing her hands since she thinks they are still covered by Duncan's blood while Pat is constantly rubbing and cooling her burned hand. Although the burn has healed a long time ago, her habit of buying a lot of ointment for her hand on a daily basis is a source of confusion for her pharmacist. They both commit suicide

"Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life"^[16]

Although Pat uses her right violent hand to cut off her left one, the final effect is the same.

The Three Witches become the Three Hippies in Morrissette's film even though the hippie culture fades towards the middle part of the 1970s. Shakespeare's Witches are attended and assisted by their familiars such as a gray cat, a toad, a hedgehog and a harpier. The Hippies do not enjoy the company of such critters, but rather seek the assistance of the familiar called "wacky tobacky". The ability of the Hippies to know the future is quite accidental and funny - Hector and Jesse get Mac's name by pure chance while Stacy, instead of a cauldron and a great variety of sinister ingredients, is using a Mattel toy called the *Magic 8 Ball* for her fortune-telling.

King Duncan turns into Norm Duncan, a fast-food restaurant owner, whose castle is his restaurant. His noblemen are his employees and his throne is his office chair on which he reigns over the world of his dreams. Norm is a father of two sons who is not particularly interested in finding a new mother for them although Joan McNulty would gladly acquiesce to such a proposal. Like King Duncan, Norm named his first-born son Malcolm and his second son Donald, which seems to be a good decision because such a name as Donalbain would only create additional problems for such a youngster as Donald. Since the throne of Scotland was not hereditary at the time of King Duncan, he was allowed to appoint his successor from among his relatives and usually made him Prince of Cumberland at the same time. Both King Duncan and Norm Duncan choose their son Malcolm, the only difference being that Norm's Malcolm does not want to take over the restaurant. Donald does not care about the restaurant either and the brothers are only glad to sell it as soon as they inherit it. Malcolm is a young rebel who plays bass guitar in a band. He smokes, drinks and has witnessed nudity in the striptease clubs in which his band plays, being guilty of at least some of the vices that Shakespeare's Malcolm is making up in order to test Macduff^[17]. Unlike his brother, Donald lives in a different world, a world of cabarets and Liza Minnelli. Because of his father's wish, he is a member of the football team but is the only player with a clean jersey. He is even given a really dull number - 14.

Emie McDuff is a vegetarian detective sent to Scotland to solve the murder of Norm, which is not far from the task Macduff is given in the play

"They were suborned / Malcolm and Donalbain, the King's two sons, / Are stol'n away and fled, which puts upon them / Suspicion of the deed."^[18]

Unlike Banquo, Anthony 'Banko' Banconi is a hard drinker whose drunken state prevents him from joining Mac and hearing the fortune-telling. He does, however, appear as a ghost in the crowd to shake his "gory locks at"^[19] Mac. King Duncan's two chamberlains are the first to be accused of Duncan's murder and their counterpart in Morrissette's film is Andy, the homeless guy who, according to Malcolm, is actually not homeless since he lives in a garage. Lady Macbeth helps the chamberlains to get drunk whereas Andy does not need such an encouragement since he and the bottle are old friends. The words Lady Macbeth uses to describe the chamberlains could be easily applied to Andy - "his spongy officers" or "their drenched natures"^[20]. While Andy is "in swinish sleep,"^[21] Norm's jewelry is planted in Andy's hands instead of a bloody dagger.

Bad Company

Instead of different sounds (thunder, sounds of fighting, etc.) and music (hautboys, sennets, bells, etc.), the soundtrack for Morrissette's film consists mostly of the songs performed by an English rock band called *Bad Company*. Although Morrissette allegedly decided to purchase that catalogue because it "was surprisingly cheap to buy", these songs work quite well in the film for several reasons. The group was founded in

1973 and was very popular during the 1970s. The soundtrack includes only those songs which can be found on the group's first two albums, *Bad Company* (June 26, 1974) and *Straight Shooter* (April 2, 1975), which is consistent with the year in which the story is set. So it is very likely that in 1975 (the decade during which the rock music developed some new subgenres and was still very popular), the inhabitants of Scotland, Pennsylvania would listen to such songs as *Ready For Love*, *Bad Company*, *Rock Steady*, *Can't Get Enough*, *Feel Like Makin' Love* and *Shooting Star*. Some of these song titles and lyrics even highlight the story. The song called *Bad Company*, for example, is a case in point. It is most strongly associated with Mac, since it is he who plays it by kicking the jukebox in *Witch's Brew* after he hears from Banko that Doug is stealing money. It almost seems that the song is written for Mac, especially the parts "Bad, bad company / Till the day I die" and "Chose the gun / And threw away the sword" - indeed, he throws away Macbeth's sword and chooses the gun for his final battle.

Fast-food restaurant

Billy Morrisette allegedly came to the idea of setting his namesake's (for Billy is a short form of William) play in a restaurant instead of a castle while working in a *Dairy Queen* restaurant - a chain of fast-food restaurants famous for its soft serve ice cream (a recurring motif in *Duncan's* and *McBeth's*). During the Middle Ages, the castles were places where banquets were held, where overeating was a common phenomenon and where one could devour large quantities of meat and all kinds of sweet dishes - meat and sugar being the basis of modern fast-food restaurants. Another American chain of fast-food restaurants could also have given Morrisette the idea of merging castles and restaurants into something completely new - *White Castle*. It is arguably the first fast-food restaurant chain founded in 1921. The *White Castle* restaurants really do look like castles on the outside, with their walls, turrets and everything. Even one of their slogans fits Shakespeare's play perfectly - it sounds like it is coming out of the mouths of the Three Witches, summing up the whole play

"The more you crave, the more we serve."

The restaurants in the film, however, remind of probably the most famous American fast-food restaurant chain - *McDonald's*. Even the name of this symbol of globalization and the American way of life sounds "Scottish". In 1940, Dick and Mac McDonald (notice the name of the second brother) open their first restaurant. In 1948, they reopen their restaurant focusing on hamburgers and *McDonald's* is founded. Until Ray Kroc turns up as their nationwide franchising agent, *McDonald's* is similar to *Duncan's*. With Ray Kroc and the *McBeths*, the business expands - the Golden Arches are introduced (Mac and Pat also put a giant letter M which forms an arch); clown Ronald McDonald appears for the first time in 1966 (a clown is something that every court needs); and in 1975, the first drive-thru is opened in Sierra Vista, Arizona to cater for the soldiers from Fort Huachuca (again there is a connection between a restaurant and a fort). Whereas *Duncan* runs a family restaurant in which the employer and the employees know each other, the *McBeths* run a restaurant which expands to such a degree that Mac and Pat cannot even remember the names of all the new employees (Pat keeps calling Robert Richard). It is interesting that *McDonald's* opened their first drive-thru in 1975, the same year that the *McBeths* open theirs. As Mac tells Norm, a drive-thru with an intercom is the future and Norm has to be murdered before he starts talking, or even worse, doing anything about it.

Macbeth the butcher

Morrisette's film and to a certain degree Shakespeare's play as well deal with the implications of meat digestion. Meat eaters are identified as rough, greedy, wild and blood-thirsty. When Ross and the Old Man talk about *Duncan's* "beauteous and swift"^[22] horses, the best of their kind, they say that they have gone back to being wild and

"'Tis said they ate each other."^[23]

The final description of Macbeth is given by Malcolm who calls him a "dead butcher"^[24] - he has indeed excelled in selectively chopping large bodies of meat into smaller pieces on the battlefields of Scotland and some other places. Macbeth is a tough carnivore and not like those "epicures"^[25] back there in England. Mac is no different. He is in meat business and even his car is decorated with bull's horns. His kingdom is based on meat and the intercom innovation has only made the distribution of meat faster and more efficient. Even his wife decides to cut her hand with a cleaver. Mac is contrasted with McDuff, a vegetarian whose habits of avoiding meat and driving a German car make him as strange and foreign (the habit of playing tapes that help him discover his inner self make things even worse) as the common peasantry (who rarely had the opportunity to taste meat due to their poverty) must have seemed to medieval noblemen. Angry and drunk, Mac sums it up when he says

"Just us vicious carnivores think mean thoughts."

However, the final confrontation between Mac and McDuff reveals that even a vegetarian like McDuff is ready to have his pound of flesh in order to defend his feeding habit.

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