

## Flipping *Macbeth*: PTSD, gender, and generation in adaptations by Wolfert, Kurzel, and De Man

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### Abstract

In recent adaptations by Justin Kurzel and Lucas de Man, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is less a play about a courageous warrior driven to murder his king out of ambition than about a soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. This article links these interpretations of *Macbeth*'s motivation to Stephan Wolfert's one-man show *Cry Havoc!*, which also relates Shakespeare's plays in general to combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder. This article argues that all three productions are symptomatic of our era in addressing *Macbeth* from the perspective of current constructions of masculinity as deeply problematic.

### Keywords

*Macbeth*, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), William Shakespeare, Lucas de Man, Justin Kurzel, Stephan Wolfert

### Résumé

Des adaptations récentes de *Macbeth*, par Justin Kurzel et Lucas de Man, invitent à voir la pièce comme le drame non tant d'un guerrier courageux que l'ambition pousse à assassiner son roi que d'un soldat souffrant d'un trouble de stress post-traumatique (TSPT). Cet article relie ces interprétations des motivations de *Macbeth* au spectacle solo, *Cry Havoc!*, de Stephan Wolfert – pièce qui aborde aussi plus largement le théâtre shakespearien à travers le TSPT dans un contexte militaire. Nous avançons que ces trois réalisations sont représentatives de notre époque en ce que le regard qu'elle portent sur *Macbeth* reflète les constructions contemporaines d'une masculinité perçue comme profondément problématique.

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### Mots clés

*Macbeth*, trouble de stress post-traumatique (TSPT), William Shakespeare, Lucas de Man, Justin Kurzel, Stephan Wolfert

Suddenly, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has become a different play: in two recent adaptations, it is no longer a meditation on ruthless ambition and the guilt that attends its fulfilment, but a study on war trauma or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The adaptations in question are Justin Kurzel's film version (2015) and the Flemish-Dutch stage adaptation directed by Lucas de Man (2016). I will analyse these adaptations in tandem with a third, earlier performance featuring Shakespeare's veterans suffering from PTSD: Stephan Wolfert's autobiographical one-man show *Cry Havoc!* (2018), first produced in 2013, which links the experience of modern-day US veterans to Shakespeare's texts about war, including *Macbeth*. I argue that the current interest in PTSD in Shakespearean veterans, particularly in *Macbeth*, is a symptom of the crisis of masculinity in the Western world. Once men were regarded as the masters of creation: particularly in their role as soldiers, they were supposedly the protectors of women and children and of the nation, good and loyal comrades to their brothers in arms, and in control of their own fate. Since then, however, men have often come to be seen as vulnerable and, occasionally, aggressively out of control, precisely in the domain that for a long time was nearly exclusively theirs, the military. As gender-neutral toilets and the 'Me too' movement make clear, masculine supremacy in general is no longer taken for granted; it stands to reason that, in such a cultural climate, issues like PTSD, showing men's weakness, or more properly the drawbacks of traditional constructions of masculinity, are no longer ignored. *Macbeth*, though concerned with a warrior, is not the most obvious choice among Shakespeare's plays to address combat-induced psychological damage. Yet, its focus on gender constructions, on children, and on the interplay between fate and free will makes it a suitable starting point for such adaptations.

### PTSD in Shakespeare's texts

That Shakespeare's (former) soldiers occasionally exhibit symptoms like those of modern victims of war trauma is not altogether new. Ros King has argued that Pistol, from the *Henriad*, is a victim of shellshock or PTSD.<sup>1</sup> Nick de Somogyi agrees that Pistol is not just a comical braggart, but exhibits combat-related neurotic symptoms also known from modern veterans.<sup>2</sup> Glin Benet, a psychiatrist, argues that Hotspur, as described by his wife Kate in *1 Henry 4* (2.4.31–58), meets many criteria for PTSD and concludes that Shakespeare furnished 'one of the disorder's earliest descriptions'.<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Jonathan Shay relates Kate's speech to PTSD symptoms such as 'traumatic dreams, reliving episodes of combat, fragmented sleep'.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the Macbeths' symptoms such as sleeplessness and nightmares, sudden frights, hallucinations, and fits of extreme guilt can be attributed to PTSD, as Jonas Nesselhauf has suggested – be it with a major difference.

Nesselhauf recognises that PTSD is often linked to war, but in his view the traumatic event that sets off the Macbeths' malfunctioning is the murder of Duncan.<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, before the murder, Macbeth seems a brave warrior, whose bloody deeds on the battlefield leave him unaffected; his wife is a forceful personality ruled by ambition. It is only in the run-up to the murder that Macbeth has his first hallucinatory experience, the dagger floating before him – which could be seen as a diabolical prompting engineered by the witches or, in modern terms, as a symptom of the stress caused by the enormity of the act that lies before him. Obviously, it is not the violence as such but the fact that it is against his liege lord, who also happens to be his kinsman and his guest, that is the most distressing aspect of the murder, as Macbeth himself indicates:

He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,  
Both strong against the deed; then, as his host,  
Who should against his murderer shut the door,  
Not bear the knife myself. (1.7.12–16).<sup>6</sup>

Critics, therefore, often view both his later behaviour and his wife's as caused by guilt rather than by combat-related PTSD. True, PTSD may be caused by other traumatic experiences than war, and feelings of guilt may be among the symptoms. My point, though, is that Macbeth's symptoms, like his wife's, whether referred to as guilt or PTSD, are not clearly due to his career as a soldier; at least, there is little textual evidence for this interpretation.

### **Stephan Wolfert's *Cry Havoc!***

Shakespeare's relevance to warfare and its effect on the combatants' minds was foregrounded by Wolfert's *Cry Havoc!*, in which he links his experiences as an American soldier to Shakespearean texts.<sup>7</sup> In a heavily physical performance, Wolfert mimes his reactions to stressful situations on the battlefield and elsewhere, and speaks or even shouts out several monologues from Shakespeare, which serve to illustrate and work through his traumas. These traumas include witnessing a comrade's death by friendly fire during an exercise. Wolfert's main argument is that Shakespeare's military men, such as Coriolanus, Henry V, and Hotspur, are like modern soldiers when it comes to their psychology. They have been trained to kill and overcome natural inhibitions: through relentless drilling, their thinking has been replaced by automatic reactions to perceived threats. Though such conditioning is essential to their survival and their success on the battlefield, it becomes a problem when they return to civil society without being reprogrammed or 'de-cruited' – innocent stimuli such as fireworks may trigger violent automatic responses towards bystanders. Also in combat situations, their violence may be extreme as a function of their drive for self-preservation and protecting their group. The only loyalty soldiers know, Wolfert suggests, is to their fellow soldiers, their comrades. In Wolfert's view, acts of gross cruelty towards the enemy, even war crimes towards civilians, are almost inevitable given the constant threats soldiers have to live under. When Henry V calls his men a 'band of brothers', Wolfert takes him at his

word, but also when he threatens the citizens of Harfleur with destruction, rape, and pillage (*Henry V* 4.3.60; 3.3.84–124). From his own military experience, Wolfert reads this speech not as idle rhetoric calculated to intimidate the enemy, but as a heartfelt threat.

Throughout, Wolfert stresses the importance of a masculine ethos to soldiers. For US soldiers, often from a working-class background, ballet or even theatre is an unmanly activity that interferes with their rugged, stiff-upper-lip manhood. For veterans suffering from PTSD, though, that macho self-image may be a hindrance, which keeps them from talking about their weaknesses or seeking psychological help. Throughout *Cry Havoc!*, while reliving his experiences Wolfert's persona asks himself 'What is wrong with me?', until he realises that the answer does not necessarily lie in himself, in insufficient manliness or self-control, but in the way he was trained and programmed for war and in the traumatic experiences he has undergone. Healing, in this view, comes with an acceptance of what he and his peers used to look down on as effeminate behaviour: role-playing and acting, expressing his pain through almost ballet-like body movements, and talking about it. Analogously, Wolfert's show serves as the basis for therapeutic drama training geared towards veterans, who may learn to work through their trauma, if not by speaking about it directly in their own words, then by speaking Shakespeare's words describing similar experiences.

Wolfert acknowledges the presence of female military personnel in modern Western armies, who may face additional causes of PTSD such as rape, even by men from their own side. Nevertheless, in *Cry Havoc!* his Shakespearean examples of combatants all feature men, for obvious historical reasons. In this show, as Wolfert suggests by the example of his own understanding wife Dawn, women are assigned the stereotypical role of soothing their veteran husbands and helping them overcome their traumas through patient listening.<sup>8</sup> Here, too, Wolfert quotes a Shakespearean analogue, Lady Percy, who tries (in vain) to get her husband, Hotspur, to talk to her about the traumatic nightmares about battle that disturb him at night (2.4.40–62).

Among Wolfert's battle-hardened Shakespearean soldiers who have overcome their natural fear of death at considerable risk to their psychological health is Macbeth, particularly as described by the bleeding captain:

For brave Macbeth [...]
   
Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel
   
Which smoked with bloody execution,
   
Like valour's minion
   
Carved out his passage till he faced the slave,
   
Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him
   
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th'chops,
   
And fixed his head upon our battlements. (1.2.16–23)

Wolfert violently mimes Macbeth's hacking his way to (and through) Macdonwald and likens him to a berserker, a Norse warrior who fought with incredible bravery and without any regard for personal safety. Natural instinct tells soldiers to avoid danger, but drilling has removed that impulse and converted them into seemingly invincible killing machines, aided by the camaraderie that makes them do anything to protect their fellow soldiers.

One issue that Wolfert perhaps wisely did not address in *Cry Havoc!* is the connection between Macbeth's battlefield bravery and his murderous streak after his return home. As discussed, *Macbeth* is not an obvious choice to discuss combat-induced PTSD, as the protagonist shows no clear symptoms of being out of control because of his wartime experiences, but rather because of his murder of Duncan; in other words, Macbeth (and his wife) may suffer from trauma as a result of their crime, but the trauma is not the cause of the crime. Particularly if we follow Wolfert's suggestion that a soldier's training replaces his natural inhibitions by violent automatic responses, Macbeth seems a bad example. He may aspire to such a state when he hears of Macduff's defection: 'Strange things I have in head that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned' (3.4.138–9), and '[. . .] From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand' (4.1.162–4). Yet this is a conscious decision to change his earlier, more thoughtful proceedings. Murdering Duncan is difficult for him as conscience holds him back. In Lady Macbeth's words, he is 'too full o'th'milk of human kindness' (1.5.16). This may seem at odds with the image of the ruthless berserker conjured up by the bloody captain, but it suggests that, once at home, Macbeth can in fact leave the battlefield behind him.

### Justin Kurzel's *Macbeth*

Nevertheless, it is precisely in this gap that the two recent *Macbeth* adaptations have situated themselves, by presenting Macbeth as a victim of combat-induced PTSD, whose murderous rage against Duncan and others finds its ultimate origins in his trauma rather than in his ambition. In directing his film, Justin Kurzel decided to

flip it so Macbeth is a product of war and that then plays into his ambitions to become king. The idea that the prophecy and the ambition of it is somehow a way of replacing a kind of trauma or a grief.<sup>9</sup>

Michael Fassbender, who plays Macbeth, adds that Shakespeare's text supports this reading:

We were going to treat Macbeth as a character who is suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and so already he is having hallucinations and there is a certain element of psychosis there which runs right through to the banquet scene where he says himself, 'If anybody knows me they know that I have these strange fits', so obviously that was something that was part of the man before we come to him in the play.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, the film sets out to portray Macbeth as a victim, driven not so much by ambition as by despair; ambition is his way of coping with his trauma. According to Fassbender, Macbeth is already malfunctioning because of PTSD before he murders Duncan, as we can see from his hallucinations in the dagger scene; in fact, says Fassbender, he suffers from 'strange fits' from the beginning of the play. Presumably, Fassbender is referring to two passages. First, there is Lady Macbeth's explanation of her husband's behaviour during the banquet scene:

Sit, worthy friends. My lord is often thus,  
 And hath been from his youth. Pray you, keep seat.  
 The fit is momentary. Upon a thought  
 He will again be well. (3.4.52–5)

Sometime later Macbeth excuses himself: ‘Do not muse at me, my most worthy friends. / I have a strange infirmity which is nothing / To those that know me’ (3.4.84–6). These statements are not necessarily to be taken at face value, as both speakers have good reasons to lie about the real reason for Macbeth’s ‘fit’; besides, the supposed ‘infirmity’ is not specified. Curiously, the film actually omits most of the first and all of the second passage so that Macbeth’s supposed history of mental problems is not highlighted here. Nonetheless, Kurzel’s *Macbeth* is modelled on these textual clues and behaves accordingly. As we have seen, Shakespeare’s text is not very helpful, as Macbeth’s comportment is not clearly dysfunctional before the regicide. Yet, Kurzel’s film supports this reading, partly by the way the battle against Macdonwald is shot and partly by compounding his PTSD with the trauma of losing a child.

As for the battle scenes, Kurzel’s *Macbeth* offers a bleak view of medieval warfare, in line with the blood and mud aesthetics that Kenneth Branagh brought to Shakespearean film in his *Henry V*: gritty, mean, far from glamorous, avoiding ‘clean’ ballet-like sword fights in favour of hacking and cutting throats, preferably from behind. Whereas Shakespeare does not stage the fight against Macdonwald but has a wounded captain report it, Kurzel shows its full horror. Shakespeare may mention gore and relentless violence, but focuses on the winners (at least in Act 1), while the victims, insofar as they are mentioned at all, are traitors whom we can easily dismiss. The film does show the human cost of war in terms of casualties, also on Macbeth’s side. First, we see Macbeth’s army preparing for battle (00:03:33–00:04:35).<sup>11</sup> Their fear is palpable: some kneel down to pray, and others nervously tie their swords to their wrists. The black camouflage stripes on their faces make them look like savages and hard to distinguish as individuals; yet we also sense their camaraderie. After the battle, we see how the casualties are removed from the field and buried (00:09:33–00:09:55).

Where camera techniques are concerned, the battle footage alternates between shots in real time and in slow motion, suggesting the combatants’ altered state of consciousness (00:04:36–00:07:00). Macbeth stands transfixed in the middle of the fighting and catches glimpses of three silhouettes on the outskirts of the battlefield, which sometimes look like the weird sisters and at other times like three warriors, as if he is just imagining the witches (00:05:48–00:06:51). These are the first indications that Macbeth is losing his grip on reality. Kurzel’s film, therefore, shows the full horror of war, but also suggests that it affects the psychology of the combatants – chiefly Macbeth, though others such as Banquo and Macduff may be seen as psychologically damaged as well.

In addition, Kurzel combines the suggestion of PTSD with another kind of trauma that affects Lady Macbeth: the loss of a child. The film begins with an interpolated scene showing the funeral of the Macbeths’ baby son (00:01:00–00:02:00). Both parents in turn approach the bier, and Macbeth puts stones on the dead child’s eyes. They then find consolation with each other for a grief that visibly goes very deep. The Macbeth child

returns in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene (5.1): after she has spoken the soliloquy ('Out, damned spot') sitting down, the camera reveals that she was addressing the ghost of her dead child sitting before her (01:19:30–01:22:18). This, then, is her trauma, which first makes her ambitious and then leads to similar hallucinations as her husband's.

The reading of the Macbeths as a couple suffering from childlessness has a long history. The textual evidence is contradictory but suggestive: Macduff claims that Macbeth (or possibly Malcolm) 'has no children' (4.3.217), and Macbeth himself complains of his 'fruitless crown' and 'barren sceptre', and fears that he has murdered Duncan for the benefit of Banquo's progeny: 'No son of mine succeeding' (3.1.62–71). Combined with the lack of any visible heirs in the *dramatis personae*, this strongly suggests that the Macbeths are childless; yet Lady Macbeth says that she has 'given suck' (1.7.54). As Lars Kaaber has suggested, Kurzel's take on the couple's childlessness appears to go back to Sigmund Freud, who stated that Macbeth's murderous rage as well as his wife's neurosis are caused by their lack of an heir, which means that they have murdered Duncan for the benefit of Banquo's progeny.<sup>12</sup> We should note, however, that Freud locates this realisation, which leads to a change of character, after the murder; ambition still comes first, and Macbeth still expects his wife to bear him children at first, as when he tells her to 'Bring forth men-children only' (1.7.72).<sup>13</sup> Freud even suggests that, by an ironic twist of fate, Macbeth remains childless precisely because he has murdered Macduff's children and left Fleance fatherless:

It would be a perfect example of poetic justice in the manner of the talion if the childlessness of Macbeth and the barrenness of his Lady were the punishment for their crimes against the sanctity of generation – if Macbeth could not become a father because he had robbed children of their father and a father of his children, and if Lady Macbeth suffered the unsexing she had demanded of the spirits of murder.<sup>14</sup>

Once more, the film thus inverts cause and effect by suggesting that the couple's childlessness causes their ambition, which in turn leads to the series of murders. In fact, even before Kurzel, critics too had sometimes 'flipped' this chain of causality. In Jonathan Bate's concise summary, the Macbeths have apparently lost a child in the past, and this motivates their ambition: 'Is power in the end a substitute for love, ambition nothing but compensation for the sorrow of childlessness?'<sup>15</sup> Bate points at Shakespeare's own biography, particularly the loss of his only son Hamnet some years before, which was compensated for by a brilliant career as a playwright. Similarly, William Kerrigan argues that the Macbeths' ambition is caused by the 'block[ing]' of their 'desire to procreate', the alternative to fame and worldly success.<sup>16</sup>

As some critics have noted,<sup>17</sup> the latter interpretation is also invited by the film. When Macbeth and his wife discuss his reasons for wishing to murder Banquo, whose children will inherit his crown (3.2), he turns his phallic sword towards her womb, as if accusing her of sterility (00:51:05–00:51:35); this is then followed by passionate love-making, as if to give it one more try (00:52:20–00:53:08). If Bate notes the ubiquity of male children in Shakespeare's text, the film, too, is full of children, and of both sexes: the witches are accompanied by a young girl, and Duncan's victory celebration features a children's choir, led by Lady Macbeth (00:23:55).<sup>18</sup> Children, and in particular boys, arouse

Macbeth's envy: when he speaks to Banquo the last time before ordering him murdered (3.1), he glances over the latter's shoulder at Fleance, here a boy of about 12 years old, who in the film accompanies his father (00:53:47–00:55:20). Macbeth of course realises that the witches' prophecy about Banquo as the father of kings is likely to be fulfilled through Fleance. That the murder of Lady Macduff and her children is partly a retribution for Macbeth's own lost child is visually underlined by the unusual choice of having them publicly burned at the stake, with Macbeth himself lighting the fire (00:71:33–00:73:12). As Claire Hansen points out, this is a visual echo of the funeral pyre on which the Macbeth child was burned during the opening shots (00:01:50–00:01:56).<sup>19</sup>

Kurzel's film, then, combines two kinds of trauma, that of battle and that of the death of a son, as the ultimate motivation for ambition, and at least in the case of Macbeth, for his persecution of children in particular. As Gemma Miller puts it, '[w]hile Lady Macbeth is haunted by memories of her dead baby, Macbeth is tortured by memories of warfare, made manifest in the figure of a ghostly boy soldier'.<sup>20</sup> Still, the gender difference suggested by that phrasing is only partially applicable: Macbeth, too, is shown grieving for his son and envious of other people's children. Besides, during the opening battle, his trauma is compounded by the death of a young soldier who he sees as a substitute son. Before the fight, he singles out this particular boy, who is hardly more than a child, and ties his sword to his arm and regards him with fatherly concern as a kind of 'surrogate son' (00:03:48–00:04:22).<sup>21</sup> Afterwards, he buries him, putting stones on his eyes in a visual recapitulation of the funeral of his son (00:15:03–00:15:30).<sup>22</sup> For Macbeth, therefore, the two kinds of trauma of war and childlessness are closely related.

The young soldier returns in Macbeth's hallucinations, as if to cheer him on in his road to perdition. Right before the dagger scene, a close-up shows Macbeth's face, which is followed by images of fighting that go through his mind, including the young soldier's death (00:32:10). Next, the boy appears to him, offering him the dagger (00:32:35–00:33:27). During his second visit to the witches, Macbeth is again transported to the battlefield in a kind of hallucination and sees the young warrior approaching: Macbeth smiles in recognition and wants to embrace him as a friend, but the apparition dispassionately speaks the words of the 'bloody child': 'Be bloody, bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth' (4.1.95–7; 01:07:10–01.08:04). He appears again during the final duel between Macbeth and Macduff (01:35:15–01:35:16). Clearly, then, for Macbeth the loss of his son is repeated symbolically in the first battle, and both traumas together are relived in his hallucinations throughout the film; together, they motivate his relentless ambition.

The film offers no obvious cure for PTSD: both Macbeths are far too traumatised to help each other and end up mutually reinforcing their self-destructive behaviour. Rather than helping her husband overcome his masculine reticence, Lady Macbeth prays to be unsexed herself and to become totally ruthless, so as to drown her sorrow in the achievement of her ambition. She appeals to his masculinity by sexual play, in order to make him do the deed (00:29:35–00:30:40). Witnessing the execution of Lady Macduff and her children does affect her, though, unlike her husband, and sends her into a spiral of self-destructive madness (01:11:40–01:12:40).



A further twist to the child motif is added in another interpolation at the end of the film, suggesting the psychological damage suffered by children in addition to bodily harm. Whereas the young soldier was killed in the opening battle, another even younger one literally takes up the sword in the final battle. Kurzel's film ends with the figure of Fleance walking, then running, away from the battlefield, turning his back on the camera and facing the setting sun, carrying a sword that he has pulled from the earth – as Miller points out, like Excalibur, suggesting the drive for kingship (01:41:08–01:41:56).<sup>23</sup> The scene therefore suggests the perpetuation of the cycle of destruction, as Fleance, traumatised and hardened to violence by witnessing his father's death and tainted by the compensatory ambition that earlier beset the Macbeths and even Banquo, sets off to fulfil the witches' prophecy by usurping Malcolm. Earlier, Fleance's escape from the scene of his father's murder had been engineered by the witches (00:57:19–00:57:45); now the audience understands for what purpose. The final scene is, in fact, an ironic reversal of that in Julie Taymor's *Titus* (1999). Taymor had ended her film on a hopeful note by showing Lucius, a young boy, walking away from the camera towards the sunrise, carrying Aaron's baby to safety: the boy has become disillusioned with his own warlike games by seeing the reality of war in the tragedy he has witnessed (02:27:33–02:30:47).<sup>24</sup> Kurzel's traumatised child soldier makes Taymor's vision seem almost sentimental. Agnieszka Rasmus interprets Fleance's transformation into a young warrior in the light of the recruitment of child soldiers by Islamic State,<sup>25</sup> but similar practices had of course occurred during earlier conflicts as well, such as the guerrilla warfare by the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda.

The theme of children in Kurzel's *Macbeth* may seem to be a separate issue from PTSD. At first sight, it might seem as if the Macbeths' original motivation of relentless ambition had to be replaced by not one but two otherwise unrelated, alternative reasons for killing Duncan. Yet, in Kurzel's film, they are in fact interwoven, not least because Macbeth's murder of children, out of envy of other men's heirs, infringes a central principle at the heart of the traditional military ethos, as soldiers are meant to protect their communities and in particular women and children. What if, instead, they harm their communities and in particular the children, physically or psychologically? The domestic problems besetting many returned veterans are well-known: Wolfert gives the example of how he (or his persona) almost lashed out at a young child when she threw a cake at him, in an automatic response to a perceived threat. Hardly anything is more damaging to the masculine self-image than the awareness that the supposed protector may himself be the main threat.

### **Lucas de Man's *Macbeth***

De Man's modern-dress stage production also features a Macbeth who suffers both from PTSD and from losing a son, and both are clearly linked.<sup>26</sup> In Jamal Ouariachi's loose adaptation of Shakespeare's text, ambition hardly plays a role at all. This Macbeth is, in fact, one of the more responsible characters, a commander who deeply cares for his men; in this respect, he is contrasted with his glib fellow general Banquo, the wily politician Macduff, the superficial pacifist Malcolm, and the dithering monarch Duncan. Yet it is

his very adherence to the masculine soldierly ethos that makes him vulnerable to trauma in an otherwise cynical world, particularly when he loses his son in battle. The lost son is evoked from the start by a young boy sitting on the edge of the stage, playing with a blood-red toy airplane, symbolising the mechanised, impersonal modern warfare that the production problematises. It soon emerges that the boy is a ghost, Macbeth's hallucination, or a memory of his son. By the time the action begins, this son had grown up to become a young recruit himself and had been killed in a war under his father's command. This interpolation of the commander-in-chief losing his own son in battle was based on the real-life case of General Peter van Uhm, the commander of the Dutch armed forces, whose son was killed in Afghanistan in 2008 by a roadside explosive device.

The loss fills De Man's Macbeth with a sense of guilt: he says he has failed in his chief duty as a man, that of protecting his own child. In addition, we gradually learn, he has taken vengeance by having the entire village where the attack took place exterminated by an airstrike. In *Cry Havoc!*, Wolfert tells similar stories of war-time retaliatory actions that, he implies, from the safety of one's armchair at home, can easily be denounced as war crimes, such as the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, but that he sees as the inevitable outcome of the soldiers' training. In De Man's production, however, the involvement in a war crime compounds Macbeth's guilt after his return home.

Apart from guilt, there are symptoms of PTSD. As in Wolfert's performance, this is brought out most strongly in the actor's physique. Stripped half-naked, Mark Kraan, the very masculine and muscular bald-headed actor who plays Macbeth, suffers from fits in which he shudders, writhes in agony, and howls like a beast, as the stage machinery produces battle sounds or possibly a thunderstorm, suggesting the tempest that is raging in his mind. One acknowledged symptom of PTSD is 'persistent, distorted blame of self or others about the cause or consequences of the traumatic events'.<sup>27</sup> Macbeth blames himself, but even more so King Duncan, whom he holds responsible for the high losses incurred during the war. Having relied for too long on ineffective airstrikes, Duncan had finally sent ill-equipped troops into this neo-colonial war, where they suffered needless casualties. Indirectly, this makes Duncan responsible for the death of Macbeth's only son.

Nevertheless, the one man whom Macbeth can never kill, despite his aggressive outbursts, is the king. He explains his hesitation not as a matter of moral qualms, but as an issue specific to modern warfare: certainly for a commander, violence is a matter of pushing a button, calling in an airstrike, not of hand-to-hand combat. This modern Macbeth feels incapable of killing an enemy with his own hands.

Lady Macbeth, too, appears very different from the character in Shakespeare and Kurzel. She is a strong woman with a career of her own and who tries to support her husband. She shares one aspect of his trauma – the loss of their son – and tries to make him talk to her about it in order to overcome his obsession, particularly with Duncan. Far from being a temptress, she sees killing Duncan as a therapeutic act that might release her husband from his demons, and thereby save their marriage. As he refuses to talk to her, she regards killing the 'real' culprit as the only way out. When Macbeth proves unable to do this, acting more like a self-lacerating Hamlet than like Shakespeare's warrior-protagonist, she takes matters into her own hands and shoots Duncan herself, offstage, and returns with bloodied hands. But this forceful action does not help: her

husband is now completely ungovernable and starts to murder all of the other thanes. When the tide of war turns against him, and the castle is about to fall to the enemies, Lady Macbeth once again acts decisively: she shoots her husband at short range, in a kind of mercy-killing.

Thus, De Man's adaptation foregrounded not ambition, and perhaps not even childlessness or PTSD as such, but rather the problem of masculinity. Because of his masculine ideals about his duties as a father and a responsible commander, Macbeth commits war crimes when thwarted. His masculine ideals then prevent him from talking about his trauma ('generals don't cry') and turn him into a nervous wreck. His wife does her best to help by talking to him, but fails. In a desperate effort to save him, she kills Duncan herself: by removing her husband's obsession with the king, and coming to share his own guilty condition, she hopes he will talk to her now. When this stratagem fails and Macbeth becomes increasingly ruthless, Lady Macbeth shoots her husband herself. Though well-intended, these actions signify her failure to control his masculine destructiveness, either by what would traditionally have been seen as feminine strategies of soothing or by appropriating traditionally masculine strategies of violence.

As the final scene reveals, however, the Macbeths are ultimately just the puppets of the witches. In this play, these take the form of three disembodied voices, two male and one female, speaking the language of international capitalism. Their interest is only in profits and political influence, not in justice or in gendered conceptions of honour. In the opening scene, the voices discuss ways of getting rid of Duncan, who was planning to conclude peace with the rebels and as such rob them of their profits. The voices thus conclude that Macbeth might be a useful tool to them. In the final scene, they address the new king, Malcolm, who earlier in the play had voiced his objections to war in simplistic slogans that visibly appalled Macbeth and Banquo. But Malcolm's pacifist principles melt away quickly when he is talking to the voices, and he ominously ends up asking them for their advice. Ultimately, therefore, De Man suggests that the male soldierly ethos is no longer the main force in the modern world: the Macbeths have been used by the anonymous forces of global capitalism, and such forces speak with male as well as female voices. After using up the Macbeths, they turn to a far-from-warlike Malcolm instead, to ensure that their interests will be safeguarded by whatever means.

## Toxic masculinity

The fact that there were three Shakespeare-related productions within one decade, all focusing on PTSD and two of them featuring the somewhat unlikely example of *Macbeth*, suggests that this may not have been mere coincidence. I suspect that these three productions influenced each other: that Kurzel was aware of Wolfert's *Cry Havoc!*, and transferred the notion of a traumatised warrior to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* by 'flipping' the plot, explaining the Macbeths' ambition from their trauma, rather than the reverse. De Man, who sees Shakespeare as a treasure trove of myths that we can use and modify at will to address modern-day concerns,<sup>28</sup> may well have taken his ideas of the traumatised soldier, the lost son, and the boy killed in war, from Kurzel's film, and combined them with the real-life story of General van Uhm.

Whether these productions influenced each other or not, however, is less important than that they were all conceived in an age that rapidly demolishes its ideals of masculinity. It is true that Rasmus has argued that the Kurzel film was informed by contemporary wars in the Middle East, the refugee crisis, and (somewhat anachronistically) by Brexit, and that this was reflected in its imagery.<sup>29</sup> Although there may be a great deal of truth in this, one might argue that nearly all Shakespeare films and productions tend to reflect the spectacular images that dominate the newsreels of their period. Yet, what sets apart Kurzel's film, De Man's theatre adaptation, and in a different way Wolfert's *Cry Havoc!* is that they go beyond a simple anti-war stance, by questioning the male ethos that they hold responsible for the world's conflicted state: what is called, in modern parlance, toxic masculinity. The epitome of the masculine ideal is the soldier: the powerful protector of women and children, the maker of his own fate. What these productions suggest, each in their own way, is that the soldier is at the mercy of his own self-doubt and the demons of PTSD; that he may be manipulated by forces beyond his control, such as indoctrination by army drills or even (in De Man's adaptation) by global capitalism; that rather than protecting children, he risks harming them, physically or psychologically; and that his stoic perseverance in suffering may be in need of some acceptance of his weakness, to make him talk and thus work through his trauma. *Macbeth* may not have much to say about PTSD, but among Shakespeare's plays, it does uniquely bring together the themes of childlessness and the murder of other people's children, the construction of gender, and the question of who controls one's fate. That makes it a text for our time, too.


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### Notes

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