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When Shakespeare met Raimi: David Mence's Macbeth re-arisen

by Ruben Benatti and Angela Tiziana Tarantini

1. INTRODUCTION

What would happen if Macbeth came back as a zombie? Melbourne-based playwright David Mence (2009) explores this possibility in his play *Macbeth Re-Arisen*. This article is divided into 6 sections: after a brief introduction to Mence and his work, we outline the plot of *Macbeth Re-Arisen*. In section 3, we explain the myth of zombies, its influence on cinema and popular culture, and on *Macbeth Re-Arisen*. In section 4, we look at the *Evil Dead* series by Sam Raimi, which was a source of inspiration for the work here examined. In section 5, we compare some themes in *Macbeth Re-Arisen* with those in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In section 6, we draw our conclusions.

Mence is an Australian writer and director, and winner of the 2011 Edward F. Albee Fellowship, awarded by Inscription and the Australian Writers' Guild. Mence's work epitomises Lawrence Venuti's view that "[e]very text is fundamentally an intertext" (Venuti 2009: 157). His theatrical and literary production is often a combination of different elements which catch his fancy. He conceives his work as playwright in terms of assemblage. Quoting Cormac McCarthy, who once said that "books are made out of books" (in Woodward 1992), Mence claims that this is true for his plays. For him writing is "a process of appropriation and recombination – as



opposed to an act of pure creativity – through which we find ways to speak back to those we most admire or most revile” (Mence 2014). In *Convincing Ground* (2013a), Mence combines his interest in whaling and in Melville’s *Moby Dick* with the story of the Convincing Ground massacre, which he discovered while researching the history of whaling and sealing in Western Victoria. In *The Gully* (2013b), he combines “the dark comedy of Harold Pinter’s *The Caretaker* with the post-apocalyptic worlds of *Mad Max* and *The Road*” (Mence 2014). All his work is rich in intertextual references, and Shakespearian references are not exclusive to *Macbeth Re-Arisen*. *Convincing Ground*, for example, starts with an intertextual reference to *Hamlet*. The whaler’s first line, upon sensing a presence in the hut, is, “Who’s there?” Bernardo says the same in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1.1.1) when he senses an alien presence. It is not clear, in *Convincing Ground*, whether Renanghi, a young Indigenous woman, is actually a ghost, or a projection of Dutton’s imagination, or whether the conversations they engage in are real. What is certain is that her presence is real to Dutton, much like King Hamlet’s ghost is real to Hamlet; in other words, her presence is functional to revealing the truth about the Convincing Ground massacre, much as the ghost’s presence in *Hamlet* serves the purpose of disclosing the truth about King Hamlet’s death.

In *Macbeth Re-Arisen* Mence combines elements of ‘high’ literary fiction with more popular genres such as B-grade horror movies. Following Peter Brook, the dramatist believes that Shakespeare’s work can be seen as tragicomedy, in the sense that “the essence of his style is [...] a roughness of texture and a conscious mingling of opposites” (Brook 1996: 170). Ironically, Mence asks, “if Shakespeare can do it, why can’t I?” (Mence 2014). Reviewer Jack Teiwes notices how, in *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, “Mence has penned the entire script in full-blown faux Shakespearian dialogue” and marvels at the fact that such “lyrical passages incorporate words such as ‘undead’ and ‘Necronomicon’, not to mention the plaintive moan of ‘Braaaaains!’” (Teiwes 2008).

Macbeth Re-Arisen was first presented at the University of Melbourne by independent theatre company White Whale Theatre in 2004. In 2006 it was performed in Scotland at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, where it was a huge hit. The success was replicated in Melbourne, in 2008, where the play had a sold-out season at Trades Hall. More recently, Mence’s Shakespearian zombies have reached Christchurch (New Zealand) and Cairns (Queensland) and, in 2017, they graced the stage at the 2017 Adelaide Fringe Festival.

2. THE PLOT

Mence’s play starts exactly where Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* finishes. *Macbeth Re-Arisen* takes as its prologue Act IV, Scene 1 of Shakespeare’s original Scottish Play, in which the three witches perform “a deed without a name” (4.1.49). The second scene starts with Macbeth lying chained to a stake; he is headless, and his detached head lies beside his torso, while a crow is picking out his eyes. A shepherd finds the body and witnesses the awakening of the corpse. Macbeth puts his head back on his torso and walks away. He meets a character called Cripple No-Toes, to whom he announces his



revenge; and in scene 3, the cripple gives the message to the people assembled in the king's audience chamber. In Act II Scene 1, Macbeth meets with the witches, who tell him that he will be Lord of the Undead, and that he will lead an army of zombies with which he will conquer Scotland. Hecate gives him a chainsaw to use against his rivals. In the second scene of Act II, Macbeth plots against Macduff and Malcolm, while in the third scene he kills the king and deceives Angus, also framing Angus as the murderer, so that Ross kills Angus. In Act III, the ghost of Banquo appears to Macduff, warning him about Macbeth. Banquo gives Macbeth a 'golden bough' while reading a line from Virgil and tells him to go to the underworld. In scene 3, Macbeth is at the graveyard, raising Lady Macbeth from the grave. She happily joins him in his quest. The character of Lady Macbeth lacks the depth we find in Shakespeare's Macbeth. Act IV starts in the King's audience chamber, where a play is interrupted by zombies, who bite and devour the actors while screaming "braains", as in *Return of the living Dead* by Dan O'Bannon (1985). Even the actors who play Romeo and Juliet are eaten. The scene is very gory. A shepherd enters and announces that an army of zombies, guided by Macbeth, is going to destroy Scotland. In scene 2, MacDuff is near the entrance of the underworld, reading Virgil, whereas in scene 3 Macbeth and Lady Macbeth order their zombie legion to go and conquer Scotland. In Scene 4, the zombies enter the King's castle, and Macbeth kills Fleance. In Scene 5, MacDuff is in the underworld, and tells Virgil he is looking for the *Necronomicon*, the book of the dead. In Act V, Scene 1, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth meet Hecate, who gives Macbeth a chainsaw. He attaches it to his arm like Ash in *Evil Dead* (Raimi 1987). In Scene 2, MacDuff finally gets a hold of the *Necronomicon*, and in Scene 3 he fights with Macbeth. During the fight, Macbeth's chainsaw comes dangerously close to MacDuff's face, so he drops the *Necronomicon* on the floor. Lady Macbeth snatches the book. The stage directions read:

Macbeth and Macduff continue to struggle as Lady Macbeth invokes the demon. Just before she can finish the incantation Macbeth takes a mighty swipe at Macduff and, at the last instant, Macduff sidesteps the blow, the chainsaw rending into Lady Macbeth instead. She shrieks horribly and flings the book up in the air. Macduff catches it and, as Macbeth is trying to extract the chainsaw from Lady Macbeth's side, he opens the book and pronounces the words of the Banishing Spell [...] The spell unleashes a tremendous current of magical energy: different coloured bolts of chain-lightning sear the length of the hall accompanied by thunderous crackling noises. A hideous screaming is heard from Macbeth and Lady Macbeth ("I'm melting!") who writhe in agony on the floor. When at last the smoke clears Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and Macduff are revealed all dead on the floor. (Mence 2009: 41)

The play closes with an epilogue by Cripple No-Toe, before darkness falls on the stage.

Macbeth Re-Arised blends Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with the *Evil Dead* saga by Sam Raimi (1981, 1987, 1992). Comedy and horror are mixed: there are many jokes and references to make the popular culture buff rejoice. As in many zombie and horror films, the tone keeps shifting between gore and comedy, with many grotesque descriptions and situations similar to those we can find in Sam Raimi's films. Talking



about *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, Mence states that he wrote it as a combination of horror and comedy, as that was how Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* (Mence 2016). He views Shakespeare's play as one of the original works of the horror genre, even including reference to the 'walking dead', as in the following verses from III, 4:

the times have been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; *but now they rise again*,
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools
(3.4.77-81, our italics).

According to Mence (2014) "They rise again" can be read as a reference to the undead.

3. ZOMBIES

3.1 Etymology

The idea of raising the dead is as old as humanity (Frazer 1890). It is widespread in religion, and there are several novels and stories about raising the dead: Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is an example. It can be seen as a way to defy the order of God, or Nature. One of the most ancient myths, now very popular, is the myth of zombies. What is a zombie? They are so widespread in popular culture nowadays that everyone seems to know what they are without knowing where they came from. Let us cover the basics: slow, pale, rotten corpses which rise from their place of burial and walk the earth in search of brains and/or human flesh. Usually (but not always) the only way to kill them is to shoot them in the head. But the figure of the zombie is much older than the one we find in contemporary movies, videogames and comics. The *Cambridge English Dictionary* gives three definitions for the word *zombie*:

- (in stories) a frightening creature that is a dead person who has been brought back to life, but without human qualities. Zombies are not able to think and they are often shown as attacking and eating human beings [...];
- a dead person who is believed, in some Caribbean religions, to have been brought back to life by magic;
- [...] a person who has no energy, seems to act without thinking, and does not notice what is happening.
(Cambridge Dictionary 2017)



Izzi (1997) outlines a number of possible origins for the word zombie: *nvumbi* (a Fon word meaning “body without soul”) or *nsumbi* (“demon”); a contraction of the French *les ombres* (“the shadows”); or the Haitian Creole word *zemi* meaning “the spirits of the dead”. The *English Online Etymology Dictionary* dates the entrance of the word to 1871, from the Bantu languages Kimbundu and Kikongo:

1871, of West African origin, (compare Kikongo *zumbi* “fetish;” Kimbundu *nzambi* “god”), originally the name of a snake god, later with meaning “reanimated corpse” in voodoo cult. But perhaps also from Louisiana Creole word meaning “phantom, ghost,” from Spanish *sombra* “shade, ghost.” Sense “slow-witted person” is recorded from 1936. (Etymonline)

As McAlister writes, “[t]he word zombi appears in writing as far back as colonial Saint-Domingue, glossed by travel writer Moreau de Saint-Méry (1797) as the slaves’ belief in a returned soul, a *revenant*” (McAlister 2012: 459, original emphasis). Zombies are so popular that we frequently encounter them in spoken and written language, in sentences like “he is a zombie”, or “he looks like a zombie.” More recently, in philosophy, the concept of the *philosophical zombie*, or *p-zombie* has emerged. The *p-zombie* is a human being who lacks conscious experience.¹

3.2 *The origins of zombies and voodoo religion*

It is relevant to note that zombies are among the few horror characters who do not have their roots in the European tradition, unlike vampires or werewolves.

The myth of the zombie comes from Voodoo, a religion that is a sort of patchwork of paganism, Catholicism, African animism and black magic. It was imported by African slaves from Dahomey to the Antilles and, in particular, Haiti. The term Voodoo also comes from the Fon language and means “spirit” or, more literally, “sign of the deep”. If we consider its contemporary form, born between 1600 and 1700, as stemming from the original religion, Voodoo is one of the most ancient religions in the world. Today it has about 60 million believers and is considered the official religion of Benin and Haiti (Brivio 2012; Le Bris 2003). As in many syncretic religions, certain traditions or rituals are contradictory and not universally accepted. Voodoo priests are called *hungan* (if male) or *mambo* (if female). They are the mediums who interpret the messages from the *Loa* (spirits who are intermediary between our world and the after world). Voodoo priests usually have the positive function of medicine man and wise person. If their goals are selfish, instead, they are called *bokor*, and are considered masters of black magic. Zombies, in Voodoo myth, are created by the *bokor* or sorcerer. In contrast with the *hungan* (the sorcerer who practices ‘white magic’, with positive effect), the *bokor* is specialized in black magic, witchcraft, evocation of evil

¹ See, for example, the work of David Chalmers (1995, 1996, 2003, 2004). This is a form of reaction against physicality and materialism. The zombie argument can be seen as a version of the argument against physicalism developed by Saul Kripke (1980).



spirits and contact with the otherworld. In the Haitian tradition, the *bokor* are like evil men, always in search of other people's souls. The tradition is so strong that to this day children are told stories of *bokor* and are taught to be on guard against evil forces (Bellegarde-Smith & Claudine 2006). *Bokor* not only cast evil spells on people but also turn them into zombies. Usually this is for one of two reasons: revenge, or more frequently, personal interest (Bellegarde-Smith & Claudine 2006; Brivio 2012; Le Bris 2003). This premise is frequently exploited in cinema and zombies are often represented as a metaphor for an uncontrolled and merciless capitalism. According to the website of the Florida Museum of Natural History, in Haiti:

A zombi is someone who has annoyed his or her family and community to the degree that they can no longer stand to live with this person. They respond by hiring a Bokor, a vodoun priest who practices black magic and sorcery, to turn them into a zombie. (Florida Museum of Natural History 2017).

A zombie can be created in two ways. The first is to deceive the victim into drinking a special potion. Anthropologist Wade Davis (1985, 1988) hypothesized that there could be some truth behind this superstition. He maintains that some *bokor* used a drug to destroy the will of their victims. He developed his theory in a book called *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) which inspired a homonymous film by Wes Craven (1988).² The second is a specific ritual: after choosing the victim, the *bokor* goes to their house, stands before the door, puts his mouth on the lock, inhales their soul and blows it into a bottle. The body, without its soul, dies after a few days. After the burial, the *bokor* goes to the tomb and calls the name of the person who, deprived of his or her own will, can do nothing but answer. At that point, the *bokor* has gained a spiritual slave. Despite what we see in modern movies, the traditional Haitian zombie is not a flesh eater. On the contrary, his master must keep him on a strict vegetarian diet. Animal or human flesh is believed to make the zombie aware of his/her situation. Zombies remain a strong tradition in Haitian culture. There is even an article in the Haitian constitution stating that drugs to simulate death, or to cast spells are illegal, which as far as we know is the only case of legislation pertaining to zombies (Galati 2015).

²The main ingredient of the potion was supposed to be tetrodotoxin. According to Lallanilla "[s]everal animals contain tetrodotoxin in their tissues [...]. High levels of the toxin [...] can cause death within minutes due to respiratory failure. But at sublethal doses, the toxin can leave a victim in a state of suspended animation [...]. According to Davis and other observers, a person who is exposed to a certain amount of zombie powder containing tetrodotoxin can slip into a vegetative state resembling death. Shortly after the person is buried, their body is exhumed by a bokor" (Lallanilla 2013). However, to this day there is no scientific evidence of such theories (Garlaschelli 2000).



3.3 Zombies in movies and popular culture

It would take too long to depict the whole zombie genre, so we will focus on the most relevant films, and on those that David Mence draws on in his *Macbeth Re-Arises*.³ The first zombie movie ever made was supposedly *White Zombie* (Halperin 1932) in which the legendary Bela Lugosi plays the role of a Western *bokor*. The best movie about Haitian zombies is probably *I Walked with a Zombie* (Tourneur 1943), which was quite successful, and for a while made zombies popular. In the McCarthy era, zombies became a metaphor for communism, depriving citizens of their free will. Thus, zombies started to take on a political meaning, a meaning that would later be reshaped by directors critical of capitalism. As McAlister observes:

zombie mythology [...] is taken up by early Hollywood in Caribbean settings, such as in *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). The horror of the Haitian zombie, for white Americans, was the image of the disfigured body dispossessed of its soul, will, agency, and hence its interiority and its very humanity. When set against Christian dualisms of body and soul that placed theological priority on the soul, these religious differences were terrifying. White Americans became fascinated with zombie mythology and reproduced it in writings on Haiti during the Marine Occupation between 1915 and 1934, usually overlooking its obvious articulations with slavery, capitalism, and political control. (McAlister 2012: 427)

The use of the zombie as a political metaphor has become widespread (see McAlister 2012: 458). The real watershed in the zombie genre was Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), where zombies do take on a political connotation. It is not difficult to discern which side the director is on: ordinary people rebel against American society and its rotten consumerist institutions (D'Agnolo Vallan 2001). In his subsequent films, Romero elaborated on this critique, particularly in *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Land of the Dead* (2005). As McAlister writes:

Romero's films are anti-establishment parables about the corruption and decay of the American way of life. *Night of the Living Dead* attacks the nuclear American family, patriarchy, and racism; *Dawn of the Dead* fastens its attention on the deadening effects of rampant consumerism; and *Day of the Dead* offers an indictment of militarism and American misuse of science and technology. (McAlister 2012: 473)

Romero made zombies mainstream and bequeathed them to other directors who pushed them in two (sometimes simultaneous) directions: extreme gore and comedy, like Wright's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004) and Fleisher's *Zombieland* (2009). One of the most famous examples of this mixture – and the most relevant for present

³For a more in-depth overview of zombie origins and on the evolution of zombies in popular culture, see Bishop (2010) and Castillo et al. (2016).



purposes – was the *Evil Dead* saga by Sam Raimi, in which the typology of the undead is represented in a different light. In Raimi's films, the undead are a mixture of zombies and Chthonic demons, reanimated by a magic spell whose origins lie shrouded in Lovecraftian mist (as in Mence's *Macbeth Re-Arisen*).

Before analysing Raimi's saga, and its influence on *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, it is worth underlining the considerable presence of zombies in recent popular culture, from literature to videogames. After a decade of 'crisis' of the zombie genre in the 1990s, the last 10 to 15 years witnessed a sort of 'Renaissance', as is underlined by Bishop (2010). In literature, books worth mentioning are Lindqvist's *Handling the Undead* (2009), and the ironic and funny *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003) by Hollywood screenwriter Max Brooks (son of well-known actors Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft). This book is full of tips which, according to the author, can save people's life in case of a zombie invasion. Videogames featuring zombies include *Silent Hill* (Toyama 1999) and the *Resident Evil* series (Iwao and Saga 1996), among others. Both games are so popular that Hollywood producers made movies inspired by them (see Sanna 2015). TV series about zombies are also very popular: examples being *The Walking Dead*, *Zombieland* (a series taken from the movie with the same name) and *Z Nation*.

4. THE EVIL DEAD SAGA AND MACBETH RE-ARISEN

The Evil Dead is a horror trilogy with many comic traits, particularly in the second episode, and fantasy traits in the third. The saga was directed and produced by Sam Raimi, a Michigan-born director also known for his *Spider Man* movies. The first *Evil Dead* (originally titled *The Book of the Dead* – Muir 2004) tells the story of a group of young people who decide to spend a weekend in a shack in the mountains. They find a book called *The Necronomicon*, which clearly signals Raimi's debt to H. P. Lovecraft (Abrams 2012). Interestingly, according to Krantz (2003), one of the philosophers who inspired Shakespeare's depiction of the supernatural was John Dee (1527-1608). Dee, in the mock biography of *The Necronomicon* written by Lovecraft, is represented as the first English translator of the book. Dee was a well-known Elizabethan 'magus' with an interest in all things occult. He was also an astrologist, a philosopher, and an occultist. Dee thus links Shakespeare to Lovecraft, Raimi, and Mence.

The influence of Lovecraft's work in horror and fantasy literature and cinema is noticeable. *The Necronomicon* is a *pseudobiblium*, i.e. a book which was never written, but is cited as real. It was invented by Lovecraft to provide a basis for his stories. It has been (and still is) quoted in several horror, fantasy, and sci-fi books. According to Lovecraft, *The Necronomicon* was written by a crazy Arab called Abdul Alhazred (Arabic title *Al Azif*). Alhazred allegedly lived in Yemen in the seventh century and died in Damascus in mysterious circumstances: broken to pieces by invisible forces, under the eyes of several terrified witnesses. The name 'Alhazred' might be a pun, built upon the English 'All has read' (Joshi and Schultz 2001).



Evil Dead is now considered a cult movie, despite being shot on a very low budget. It has been the object of several books, articles, and essays (e.g. Egan 2011; Muir 2004).

4.1 The *Evil Dead* series and *Macbeth Re-Arisen*

4.1.1 *The Evil Dead*

Five college students travel to a cabin in the woods. One of them finds a book with an inhuman face on the cover. At one point the door of the cellar flies open as if moved by an unseen force, and reveals a basement containing a shotgun, a tape recorder, a weird ceremonial knife, and a book. The students play the tape and, as the voice of the professor reads the book, an evil force awakens. All the students, one by one, will be turned into flesh eating zombie/demons, with the exception of the protagonist Ash. Unlike Romero, Raimi's zombies do not take on any political connotations. As Muir underlines, "Raimi is out to create a movie with a particular political or sexual agenda. This author believes no such thing is likely, firstly because Raimi tends not to work 'preachy' messages into his films, which, after all, would spoil the pure entertainment factor" (Muir 2004: 66). Talking about Raimi's *Evil Dead*, Egan states that:

[w]ithin the context of the story, [the zombie-demons] are also, inadvertently, responsible for the 'mischief gags' enacted upon Ash in the second half of the film, with the most memorable instance of this being the sequence where Linda [Ash's girlfriend] attacks Ash as he attempts to bury her. [...] anticipation is initiated by a series of shots that indicate the possible outcome of the gags. (Egan 2011: 81)

In his *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, Mence uses the same ingredients to mix horror and comedy in a sort of 'cartoonish' style.

4.1.2 *The Evil Dead II*

In *The Evil Dead II*, which is actually more of a remake than a follow up, "[t]he lone survivor of an onslaught of flesh-possessing spirits holes up in a cabin with a group of strangers while the demons continue their attack" (Needham 1990). The plot is the same as that of *The Evil Dead*, but, in *The Evil Dead II*, Ash ends up in the Middle Ages. In this movie, Ash's hand has a life of its own, as 'infected' by zombies/demons. It tries to hurt Ash in a very comic way. Ash then resolves to chop off his own hand with a chainsaw, and then his hand takes off, moving on its own accord. That scene shows the well-known mixture of horror, comedy and cartoons, common to Raimi and Mence. In *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, Macbeth chops off his hand and attaches the chainsaw to



his arm, while his own hand takes off. With the chainsaw attached to his arm, Macbeth will accidentally mutilate Lady Macbeth.

4.1.3 *The Army of Darkness*

The third part of Raimi's saga may have been the most influential for Mence. *The Army of Darkness* (Raimi 1992) starts where *The Evil Dead II* finishes: Ash is accidentally transported to 1300 A.D., and the only way to return home is to fight an army of the dead and retrieve the *Necronomicon*, much like MacDuff in *Macbeth Re-Arisen*. As Egan underlines, however, there are differences in the way the protagonist interacts:

with the gags between the first movie and the film's two sequels. In the sequels, [the actor playing Ash] tends to work with the comedy rather than against it, crossing his eyes, enacting comedic falls and playing a character who is as mischievous and cartoon-like as the demons who he is fighting against. In the first film, by contrast, he continues to play the character as a normal, frightened, disturbed man throughout all the sequences where he is manipulated by the demons and turned into a comedy straightman for the evil gags. (Egan 2011: 82)

As in Raimi's saga, in *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, *The Necronomicon* plays a key role, as we shall see. In the first two *Evil Dead* movies, *The Necronomicon* is pinpointed as the source of the evil spell which reanimates the ancient zombie-demons. These zombie-demons are much harder to kill than those in Romero's films. Not only are they faster, but they are more dangerous: for example, they cannot be killed with a simple bullet to the head.⁴ As mentioned, like Ash, Mence's undead Macbeth finds it necessary to saw off his own right hand and attach a chainsaw to the bloody stump. And, much like in *Evil Dead II*, in *Macbeth Re-Arisen* (V, 4, 56-60) we find a hand that is able to move of its own accord. But the references are several, like the scene where Macbeth accidentally mutilates Lady Macbeth with a chainsaw, which is a quote from Zack Snyder's remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004).

Macbeth Re-Arisen also blends high literature with pulp horror. An example is the theme of the descent into the underworld. Mence draws on not only Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Dante's *Inferno*, and Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, but also Raimi's *Army of Darkness* (*Evil Dead III*) in which Ash must descend into hell to find *The Necronomicon*.

⁴Due to a 'revival' of zombies in almost every aspect of popular culture, it is common nowadays to distinguish between fast and slow zombies. For an analysis on the evolution from slow to fast zombies in Hollywood films, see Levin (2004).



5. CHARACTERS AND TOPOI: SHAKESPEARE VS MENCE

As already mentioned, Act IV, Scene 1 of Shakespeare's original Scottish Play functions as prologue to *Macbeth Re-Arisen*. Mence suggests that the "deed without a name" is the magic spell (or curse) that calls Macbeth back from the dead. According to Krantz, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* "[t]he paradoxes in the witches' language are a perfect expression of the essence of forces in the world that work against the rational order God created in the beginning" (Krantz 2003: 350). Mence exploits this in his *Macbeth Re-Arisen*. He needed to find a reason why Macbeth would return as a zombie, and found it in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In Shakespeare, the three witches cast a spell to summon the spirits Macbeth sees; in *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, the spell raises Macbeth as a zombie.

Macbeth's first question, much like the monster's in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is "Why am I alive?" He did not want to be brought back from the dead and is angry at the thought that someone has manipulated his fate. As in many great works of literature, the dream by scientists and/or magicians to defeat death turns into a nightmare.

5.1 *The witches*

In an early scene, Macbeth appears on stage as a headless corpse, having been beheaded by the victorious Macduff. After a shepherd arrives and discovers the corpse, Macbeth puts his head back on his stump of a neck and sits bolt upright, giving both of them a shock. Macbeth tracks down the witches and confronts them. He wants to know how they have resurrected him from the dead. The witches respond as follows:

WITCH 1 Hubble, bubble, a dead man's stubble,
Here meet three amongst the rubble.
WITCH 2 The dice is rolled, the dye [sic] is cast,
Our game's first hand is played and past.
WITCH 3 A life of evil hath now begun,
Macbeth Part One was just for fun.
ALL Macbeth, Macbeth, an Undead Lord,
The spell we cast doth fear no sword,
The blood, the blood, the streets it soaks,
This half-lit world our Mistress chokes.
Fair is foul and foul is fair,
Macbeth is dead yet breathes this air.
(Mence 2009: II, 1, 1-13)



The origin of the three witches lies in Holinshed's *Chronicles* and in Norse mythology. They have been also considered as 'evil agents' of temptations, lovers of Satan and as such historically have been persecuted (Levack 2016). They represent evil, darkness, chaos, and conflict. In Shakespeare's day, witches were seen as evil creatures that defy logic and are connected with the supernatural. For this reason, witches were considered "the most notorious traitor and rebel that can be" (Coddon 1989: 491). In *Macbeth Re-Arised*, the role of the witches is very similar to the one they play in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

5.2 Hecate

Hecate is the goddess of magic in ancient Roman and Greek religion (Latin *Hecata* or *Hecate*, Greek Ἑκάτη, Hekátē). Hecate was a psychopomp divinity, capable of travelling between the world of men, the world of gods and the underworld, the reign of the dead. Because of that she is often represented with a torch in her hands, accompanying men to the world of the dead. Her origins are not well known. Hesiod considers Hecate daughter of the titan Perse and of Asteria, implying that she is of titan heritage. She has also been associated with lunar cycles, together with other divinities like Diana or Phebe (crescent moon) and Selene (full moon). Hecate represents the waning moon, and is also the goddess of witchcraft. As we have said, in *Macbeth Re-Arised*, Hecate gives Macbeth a gift (the chainsaw). This is a very common topos according to Propp (1968), who notes that in legends and fairytales a 'donor' is often present. The 'donor' is a character who prepares the hero or gives him/her a magical object, sometimes after testing them (Sica 1997).

5.3 Lady Macbeth

The characterisation of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and in *Macbeth Re-Arised* is quite similar. In Shakespeare's play, Lady Macbeth is a tormented character. In *Macbeth Re-Arised* she is still a conflicted character. However, consistently with Mence's pastiche of high literature, horror, and comedy, she is more like Macbeth's 'partner in crime'. Mence's Lady Macbeth shows signs of some sort of inner conflict, as the following lines from Act IV, Scene 3 reveal:

LADY MACBETH For you, my mass of mouldy flesh,
My stomach churns with butterflies that make
Me think 'tis they, not slugs, inside my gut.
Let us claim a position atop yon nearby mount
That we may deliver unto our gathered force
A sermon that kindles in them a merciless rage.
Macbeth and Lady Macbeth exit their tent and address their minions.
LADY MACBETH Attend unto these words, thou brain-starved ghouls!
If thou comest across a cherub-like babe,



That lifts its eyes all meek in innocent horror:
Dash its brains out on the rocks and feast
Upon that tender treat. If thou comest
Across a coy maiden, all wrapped in robes
Of purest virginal white: enforce on her
Licentious violation, then feast o'the brains.
If thou comest across a peaceful man
That claims to shirk the butchery of war:
Rip off his limbs and employ him as a shield,
Then feast upon his brains. Let there be
No quarter! I would the sooner send my precepts
Unto Leviathan, that in the yawning ocean
Gulf doth wage rambunctious war with Heaven,
And ask that he should come ashore and sup,
Than have a single one of thee return
(Mence 2009: IV, 3, 48-70).

Several studies on the character of Lady Macbeth have been carried out. For example, Calef (1969) analyses Freud's approach to the character of Lady Macbeth, and writes that:

[i]n his paper on character types [...] Freud wished to understand the doubting cowardice of Shakespeare's soldier, Macbeth, and the subsequent illness of Lady Macbeth. He says that the crime of Macbeths was a violation of the laws of geniture (infanticide and regicide) and the punishment was their childlessness (Calef 1969: 529).

Calef underlines that in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, the author made his first comment about Macbeth, stating that while *Hamlet* deals with the relationship between parents and children, *Macbeth* is concerned with childlessness (Calef 1969: 531). The children issue appears in *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, as the following lines reveal:

Nevermore let us be apart, hand in hand
We'll walk the endless fields of waste and ruin,
Each night we'll warm our bones besides an open
Fire – a towering inferno of human corpses –
And when our undead children inquire of us,
'Why is the sky red?' we'll say to them,
'Because your mummy and daddy made it so.'
MACBETH Thou speakest my most subterranean desires.
(Mence 2009: III, 3, 71-78).

Lady Macbeth is childless, but from this dialogue the audience understands that she indeed craves for maternity. In both plays, Lady Macbeth has great power and influence over Macbeth. Like in Shakespeare, in *Macbeth Re-Arisen* Lady Macbeth has a sort of "dramatic boast to her husband" (Calef 1969: 536). Another common feature of



the two couples (in *Macbeth* and in *Macbeth Re-Arisen*) is that both couples suffer from the same sort of criminal illness (Calef 1969), and both long for power. Generally speaking, we can say that “Shakespeare was eminently a great ‘creator of characters’. So extensive was his knowledge of the human heart (so runs the popular opinion) that he was able to project himself into the minds of an infinite variety of men and women and present them ‘real as life’ before us” (Knights 1979: 270). While the characters in *Macbeth Re-Arisen* show the same range of passions, in Mence’s play everything is imbued with a mix of gore and comedy.

5.4 Love overcoming death

The theme of love overcoming death in zombie movies is not new, but to our knowledge, it is more common in movies depicting parents and children. At least two zombie movies deal with this topic: *Return of the Living Part 3* by Brian Yuzna (1994) and the trash low budget film *Zombie Lake* (Rollin 1981), which tells the story of the love of a zombie father towards his daughter. The Oedipus complex is dealt with in another trash horror film by Andrea Bianchi, *Zombie Horror*, aka *Nights of Terror*, aka *Burial Ground* (Bianchi 1980), where a zombie child bites off his mother’s breast. In Act IV of *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, Mence mingles different traditions: Romero’s zombies, fast zombies, traditional zombies, and Raimi’s demons. The scene where the play *Romeo and Juliet* is represented in the King’s palace shows a zombified Romeo killing Juliet. This is consistent with the above: the person you love turns into a zombie and kills you. This occurs in the very first modern zombie movie, *Night of the Living Dead* (Romero 1968), where a girl turns into a zombie, and then eats her mother.⁵

5.5 Rationality vs. Passion; Order vs. Chaos

As is often the case, the villain Macbeth is a more interesting character than the hero MacDuff, since the former represents passion and creativity, while the latter is the embodiment of reason and order. Here the prototype is Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (Milton 2000) in which Satan is a captivating orator and heroic actor, but ultimately not an exemplar for human conduct. Romantics such as William Blake, however, would take issue with this interpretation, and suggest that in fact Satan is the hero of the piece (Blake 1868). Something similar happens in zombie films, such as in Romero’s more recent films, where the zombies have become the ‘heroes’ in contrast with the greedy and selfish desires of ordinary people (D’Agnolo Vallan 2001). Blake is also explicitly present in Macbeth’s self-description “I am too much the tiger, burning bright” (Mence 2009: III, 3, 17).⁶

⁵For the theme of love and family in zombie movies, see Rutheford (2013).

⁶C.f. William Blake (1901: 51).



Mence claims that in his fictional world, MacDuff equates with God, whereas Macbeth equates with Satan (Mence 2016) and, as is usual in these sorts of narratives, reason must be subjugated (if only partially) to passion. In *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, Macbeth is the 'sexy' rebellious hero, but as the play progresses it becomes evident that his reign would be a reign of terror. Mence thus works with the Romantic notion of Satan as a 'hero' but ultimately rejects it as an insufficient foundation for a political philosophy. As Hibbs and Hibbs write, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* "[e]ach time that Macbeth refuses an opportunity to turn from evil, he makes such a conversion more difficult and more unlikely. But the possibility of repentance and conversion remains and is a constitutive feature of the drama of the play" (Hibbs and Hibbs 2001: 280). Macbeth's imperfect virtue renders him vulnerable to temptation. In Mence's play, by contrast, Macbeth has put his tormented psychology and moral foibles behind: he is dead, so why not embrace his role as an agent of chaos? Moreover, like other zombies, he has an insatiable hunger for human flesh – a hunger that is only matched by his instinct for revenge.

6. CONCLUSIONS

As already noted, in Mence's *Macbeth Re-Arisen* MacDuff represents order, while Macbeth represents chaos. While at the beginning the audience may side with Macbeth, in the end we realize that his victory might not be the best outcome. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the witches' lines in the first act: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11-12) establish a sense of moral confusion (Frye 1987). Indeed, the play is filled with situations in which evil is depicted as good, while good is rendered evil. The line "Double, double toil and trouble" communicates the witches' intent clearly: they seek only to increase trouble for the mortals around them. Though the witches do not deliberately tell Macbeth to kill King Duncan, they use a subtle form of temptation when they inform him that he is destined to be king. By placing this thought in his mind, they effectively guide him on the path to his own destruction. Macbeth indulges the temptation, while Banquo rejects it (Frye 1987). In *Macbeth Re-Arisen*, the witches' "deed without a name" is what will turn Macbeth into Lord of the undead, and the line "Double, double toil and trouble" fulfills an analogous function of increasing trouble for the mortals by bringing in the undead. The final outcome, however, more than a battle between good and evil, and a psychological struggle between what is morally right and wrong, is a pastiche of high literature, horror, and comedy, for the entertainment of the audience. After all, as Peter Brook writes, "[a] play is play" (Brook 1996: 175).



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