Misled Good and Partial Truth:
Lady Macbeth’s Transformation from Certainty to Uncertainty

The use of vanishing points in film can provide new insights on certain aspects of art, such as, the way that truth influences a person’s decision making might become more interesting when including vanishing points as part of the art piece. Vanishing points in art leave room for the audience to interpret certain aspects of a play, painting, or film—especially perspective. Because vanishing points can greatly influence a character’s perspective, it is crucial to pay attention to them—if ignored, the author’s intended meaning could be missed. Vanishing points leave it up to the audience to decide what is beyond the unseen point of where the horizon disappears. In Justin Kurzel’s adaptation of William Shakespeare’s Macbeth, Kurzel uses vanishing points to explore the transformation of Lady Macbeth from certainty to uncertainty which resulted in her insanity. Lady Macbeth’s inability to see reality—more specifically, the way she perceives her relationships and the outcomes of her actions—as it actually is, skews her perception of truth. In order to expound upon this argument, I will explore Lady Macbeth’s sexual dominance over her husband, more specifically, I will look at how Lady Macbeth uses this dominance (a dominance she loses later on) to bend her husband to her will. In addition to sexual manipulation, her perception of truth in relation to that certainty is influenced by the unexpected
outcomes of the weird sister’s prophecy. More specifically, Lady Macbeth moves from certainty to uncertainty as the full outcome—her husband becoming excessively violent, more people dying, her guilt—of the weird sister’s prophecy comes to light. Ultimately, Kurzel’s use of vanishing point allows for a new insight of Lady Macbeth’s character because as her vanishing point shifts—it literally progresses from darkness to light—she becomes more disturbed by the truth.

To begin the analysis of Lady Macbeth’s transformation it is necessary to understand her motive. Lady Macbeth is seeking power by placing her husband on the throne. Stephanie Chamberlain, in her article “Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England,” describes Lady Macbeth’s search for power as a quest to undermine patrilineal outcomes—in other words, Lady Macbeth wants to stop the continuation of patriarchal lineage. Her ability to sexually dominate Macbeth in Kurzel’s adaptation only emphasizes Lady Macbeth’s frustration with the patriarchal society she lives in. Lady Macbeth has a piece of prophecy that might bring her allow her to accomplish this feat. As Chamberlain puts it, “Lady Macbeth’s engineered murder of Duncan engenders the unlawful succession of a bastardized Macbeth, altering, in turn, the patrilineal as well as political order within the world of the play” (Chamberlain 73). So Lady Macbeth’s desire—greater than her skeptical reasoning—results in her moving forward with a thirst for overthrowing her societies power structure and placing her husband as king. By doing so, Lady Macbeth, through her sexual dominance over Macbeth, has attained the power she desires. Unfortunately for her, she does not think the plan through to the end and Kurzel’s use of vanishing points emphasizes this greatly.
I have provided still frames of each of the two scenes that I will use to discuss Kurzel’s use of vanishing point. Each vanishing point serves multiple purposes in the interpretation of certain lines in the text. First off, I will look at the difference in lighting that these scenes display (fig. 1 and 2). In each of these vanishing points, Kurzel uses lighting to emphasize Lady Macbeth’s path from certainty to uncertainty. In the first scene, the only light that can be seen is provided by the candles, the room is entirely shrouded in darkness. This lack of light in the first scene represents Lady Macbeth’s inability to see all of the future evil that the single action of King Duncan’s murder will bring. In the second image, we can see that lady Macbeth is in the darkness of the chapel, but that light is pouring in from the outside. The light here symbolizes how Lady Macbeth now fully comprehends the consequences of her actions. The shot includes the cross in the top left part of the frame which is also a bright source of light. The light coming from the cross—a symbol of Christ—emphasizes Lady Macbeth’s guilt and suffering. A limited vanishing point combined with the darkness of the scene emphasizes Lady Macbeth’s inability to comprehend the severity of her desires. The open vanishing point combined with the bright natural light emphasizes that Lady Macbeth’s realization of the evil her husband has performed has left her uncertain of her decision to persuade Macbeth to kill King Duncan in the first place. Lady Macbeth literally sees the light and gives up her confidence and authority as she has lost entire control over her husband’s actions.

In analyzing these specific scenes and the vanishing points within them, new insight can be gained on Lady Macbeth’s power struggle with her husband. When Lady Macbeth first reads the letter foretelling of Macbeth’s fate, she is preoccupied with his ability to carry out the deeds that might be required of him in order to fulfill the Weird Sister’s prophecy. After reading the
letter that reveals to her Macbeth’s foretold future she states: “yet I do fear thy nature. / It is too
full o’ th’ milk of human kindness” (Shakespeare 1.5 ll. 14-15). These lines could mean several
different things depending on Lady Macbeth’s intended meaning of the word nature. Nature
could mean Macbeth’s nature of being which is emphasized by the following line: “milk of
human kindness.” Milk being a nurturing substance, this interpretation would make Macbeth
appear to be of nurturing nature—full of a good nature. This interpretation makes Macbeth
appear kind, loving, and noble. In Kurzel’s film, just a few scenes previous Macbeth has been
seen on the battlefield as ruthless and fierce. Macbeth shows no mercy to his enemies which
might suggest that he does not have a nature like the milk of human kindness—he is not
nurturing nor inherently good. Instead, Macbeth is seen to perform on the battlefield with great
authority, power, and shows no fear towards his enemies—so perhaps Lady Macbeth is referring
to his natural power rather than his natural goodness. However, because of these lines, I would
argue that Lady Macbeth is seeing her husband as weak and incapable of taking the action
necessary to fulfill the fate given him by the weird sisters. Macbeth’s nature, which his wife is
contemplating, is much more complex than him being powerful or him being inherently good.
Lady Macbeth is actually calling her husband weak—even feminine. In this passage, I argue that
Lady Macbeth is considering Macbeth’s natural ability to perform with authority—even the
nature of his masculinity. By stating that Macbeth is “full o’ the milk of human kindness,” Lady
Macbeth sees Macbeth as possessing feminine attributes. This “milk of human kindness,” is like
the breast milk of a nurturing mother. Lady Macbeth sees herself as having more masculine
authority than Macbeth—she dominates Macbeth sexually as seen in the church scene, she is the
one who must convince Macbeth to murder King Duncan, she is the one with the confidence
necessary to fulfill Macbeth’s fate. As Lady Macbeth gives up her sexual dominance, her power leaves her and her uncertainty grows.

The way Kurzel uses vanishing points to provide new insight on Lady Macbeth’s transformation from certainty to uncertainty also allows for additional insight into the way Shakespeare’s text views Lady Macbeth’s struggle for power as a female character. Rather than seeing her as merely insane, these vanishing points allow for the interpretation that Lady Macbeth failed in her struggle to control her husband. In the beginning of the play she wishes for the spirits to “unsex me here” (Shakespeare 1.5 l. 39). By requesting to be unsexed, she could be requesting several things: to be deprived of sex, to have her sexuality taken from her, or even to be given male authority—to have her female sexuality removed from her and be strengthened by masculinity. I argue that Lady Macbeth wished for her sexuality to be taken from her, that she desired to longer be driven by her sexuality. Lady Macbeth no longer desired to be a woman driven by sexual desire, instead, she wanted masculinity and power. Her power was limited to the that of controlling her husband—she only maintained her power through a proxy but she wanted more. Since Lady Macbeth could only have power operating under the image of her husband she needed a way to have masculine influence. As Lady Macbeth was unsexed, as she lost her ability to control her husband, as Macbeth became more violent and she more disturbed by guilt and sin, her ability to perceive truth had changed. Lady Macbeth’s ignorance before her transformation left her with a truth that she understood, thereby, allowing her to control her husband. After her transformation, seen in fig. 2, Lady Macbeth’s uncertainty left her with larger and fuller truths that were too painful for her to bear. Lady Macbeth thought herself capable of seeing Macbeth’s true nature, she thought that he was full of “the milk of human kindness,” and she saw in
Macbeth’s nature a partial truth—that he could only be successful with the authorial leadership of his wife. When lady Macbeth desired to take entire control she thought she saw the whole truth, yet, she was incapable of understanding the whole picture. She sought power before she sought the whole truth. With the truth, perhaps she may have succeeded in gaining permanent power of her husband and all of Scotland. However, her rush to power while remaining in darkness left her stripped of the control she once possessed over her husband.

The first vanishing (fig. 1) occurs in the church as Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to perform the murder of King Duncan. In this scene, both in the play and the film, Lady Macbeth is introduced as a confident character—she is powerful and rules over her husband. At this moment of dominance, her vanishing point is limited but her confidence is full. It is because of her inability to see the consequences of her husband’s future actions that she remains so confident. This moment represents her lack of understanding and shows how her confidence is a result of her ignorance. Lady Macbeth is incapable of seeing more than just partial truth because of the way she dogmatically accepts what she wants to be right. This dogmatic nature could be blamed on Lady Macbeth’s desire to seek a good life—one that she may have previously had. In act 1 scene 5, Lady Macbeth discusses the loss of a child and how painful it was for her being the mother [Shakespeare ll. 54-55]. I will use these explore the meaning of these lines later on, but here it is important to understand the impact these lines have when understanding Lady Macbeth’s thirst for power. Lady Macbeth is blinded by her own desire to fill the void of a missing child. The church is dark and the walls of the church surround the determined Lady Macbeth and the cowering Macbeth. The darkness leaves their vanishing point very limited—Lady Macbeth only sees the possibility of renewed happiness, something to dull the pain of her
lost child. During this scene, Lady Macbeth begins to seduce Macbeth and the two of them have sex in the church—lady Macbeth is clearly taking the initiative in this sexual encounter as she provokes Macbeth by reaching her hands into his clothing and as she seduces him she begins to lay out her plan. Not only is Lady Macbeth proving her dominance over her husband, but it is also possible that she might be seeing this new opportunity at attaining power as a new birth, figuratively. She and Macbeth are engaged in sexual intercourse, an action which can potentially create life, while simultaneously discussing the taking of life. At this moment, Lady Macbeth is the one who must convince Macbeth to follow through with the murder in order to fulfill the fate he has received from the weird sisters. Her sexual dominance is a symbol of her confidence, while the darkness and enclosure of the church is a symbol of her ignorance—her dogmatism, led by her desires for a better life. Because of her limited vanishing point, Lady Macbeth does not recognize that what may only result in one murder will result in the future evil Macbeth that her husband will eventually become. Her reality is clouded by what she desires rather than what pure truth and skepticism might have provided for her.

As Lady Macbeth watches her husband become consumed by his paranoia in the prophecy of the weird sisters, she must continue with him down the path of murder and deceit that she pushed him into. In order to help him maintain his power as King of Scotland, Lady Macbeth must also attempt to maintain her own dominance over Macbeth and this will only lead her down a path of greater moral ambiguity and deceit. Yet, as the Macbeth’s proceed with their evil plan and Macbeth becomes more willing to perform evil deeds—the murders of Banquo and Macduff’s family—Lady Macbeth is tormented with her own guilt as the realization of her deeds comes upon her. Lady Macbeth sees the deeds of her husband and her confidence is waned as she
realizes what she has started. Lady Macbeth’s vanishing point is no longer limited, instead, she can now see and understand the horror that her husband has wrought upon them. A new vanishing point can be seen when Lady Macbeth returns to the very church where she seduced Macbeth into murdering King Duncan (fig. 2). When Lady Macbeth gives her famous line, “out, damned spot!” (Shakespeare 5.1 l. 30), she is actually alone in Kurzel’s adaptation (rather than in the room with the doctor and gentlewoman as seen in Shakespeare’s text). It is in this moment when Kurzel creates an interesting commentary on Lady Macbeth’s certainty using vanishing points. Lady Macbeth is in the same place where she seduced her husband, where she was certain of their fate; however, now Lady Macbeth is ridden with guilt, and her realization of this guilt is tearing her apart. Although Lady Macbeth is still surrounded by the walls of the church, in this specific scene, the doors of the church are left wide open—her vanishing point extends out into the fog and mist outside. The fog and the mist could be seen to represent Lady Macbeth’s newfound uncertainty as she now sees the consequence of having led her husband down his path of sin.

Lady Macbeth’s uncertainty, brought about by the new vanishing point in the scene just mentioned, along with other scenes in Kurzel’s adaptation, lead to a new interpretation of several lines in act 1 scene 5 (these are the same lines I mentioned earlier where Lady Macbeth mentions having experienced the loss of a child). The lines I wish to expound upon occur when Lady Macbeth is calling out Macbeth for wishing to back out on their plan to murder King Duncan. She states the following: “I have given suck, and know / How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me. / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn / As you have done to this” (Shakespeare 1.7 ll.
At this moment, Lady Macbeth has been pulled over a line into a territory of moral ambiguity, more so, a mental state in which she would be capable of killing her own child. She feels justified in this immoral claim because of her husband’s sudden cowardice. Macbeth has sworn to carry out the plan to murder Duncan and he is suddenly trying to back out. Lady Macbeth puts her morality on the line to show Macbeth that he cannot go back on his word—just as she would never go back on hers even if it resulted in murdering her own child. This brutal imagery of her bashing her own child’s head solidifies her commitment to the task. While this harsh language moves Macbeth to action, it also adds great meaning to Lady Macbeth’s path towards her loss of control. To assist in this argument, I will draw from two scenes specific to Kurzel’s adaptation which emphasize Lady Macbeth’s actual loss of a child—furthering the power of lines 54-59.

Kurzel’s adaptation opens with the funeral of a child (fig. 3). This child, implied to be the Macbeth’s, is seen later by Lady Macbeth in the second church scene (fig. 2). I introduce this first scene, not to introduce another vanishing point, but in order to recognize the emphasis Kurzel is making on line 54, “I have given suck, and know.” By solidifying the possibility that Lady Macbeth did raise a son with this scene, it makes Lady Macbeth’s thought of considering losing her son again even more intensified. She wants to see the weird sister’s prophecy fulfilled and she is willing to dash her already dead son’s brains out in order to do so—even after having lost him once. She becomes dogmatic in her certainty as this path to power through murder becomes the only way to achieve what she believes to be a good life for her and Macbeth. The partial truths that the witches have revealed to Macbeth become her reality and in her certainty,
she quickly moves towards dogmatic acceptance. It is in the later church scene (fig. 2) that Lady Macbeth’s disturbed thoughts of what she has done come back to these lines in act 1 scene 5.

To conclude this new insight on the lines in act 1 scene 5, Kurzel places a hallucination of Lady Macbeth’s son in this final church scene just before Lady Macbeth ends her life (fig. 4). The same vanishing point is in play—all of the truth, the consequences, the guilt revealed. Because of her decision to push her husband in the direction of murder and power, the partial truths that once led her with certainty have brought her to this position of insanity. She cannot see the reality of Macbeth’s actions and she will die before she sees him carry out the rest of the weird sister’s prophecy. In the adaptation, she mutters to this hallucination of her child: “What’s done / cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed” (Shakespeare 5.1 ll. 57-58). Lady Macbeth is alone in this adaptation (whereas in the actual text she is found with a doctor and gentlewoman). This example of transposition—the doctor and gentlewomen’s lines are removed and Kurzel maintains meaning through other means—is significant because of how Kurzel wishes to use this scene in order to further explicate the previous lines mentioned in act one scene five. After all of the murder that has taken place—by Macbeth—Lady Macbeth is unable to continue with what she had sworn to Macbeth. She had “given suck and [known]” what it was to lose a child. She was ready to lose her own child again if it meant fulfilling the witches’ prophecy. But now, she is guilt-ridden, horrified by her loss of control, defeated by her dogmatic certainty, and she is unsure of everything save what she sees in front of her: her dead son. The presence of Lady Macbeth’s dead son, in this scene, makes up for the absence of the doctor and gentlewoman. In Shakespeare’s text, just after Lady Macbeth has gone to bed, the doctor states: “more needs she the divine than the physician. / God, God forgive us all! Look after her” (Shakespeare 5.1 ll. 64-
65). The doctor can sense the horrible sin and guilt that is tearing lady Macbeth apart and is hoping that God might forgive her. By using Lady Macbeth’s dead child, instead of the doctor and gentlewoman, Kurzel creates this same sense of guilt and sin as it causes Lady Macbeth to reflect on her vicious words from act I: “I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn” (Shakespeare 1.7 ll. 56-58). Lady Macbeth sees her child and her regret of these words feel her with guilt. As the light pours into the chapel, the full truth is revealed to Lady Macbeth and she chooses to ignore it. She gives up her vanishing point for something false, for a child that is not really there. As Lady Macbeth stares into the hallucination of her dead son, she commands him to go to bed and that nothing else can be done to fix the mess she has caused. She is unwilling to fulfill her part of the bargain she made with her husband because what she now accepts as her reality is the boy sitting in front of her and she refuses to kill him once more—her insanity has revealed a new truth to her. She sends her son to bed, she protects him from her own oath. This false reality has become Lady Macbeth’s truth, but it has brought her guilt and regret to a fullness as the thought of having to murder her child, and watch him die yet again, sinks in. Lady Macbeth ends her life unsure of everything except that which is not real—she sends her dead boy to bed.

Lady Macbeth’s loss of reality—her inability to accept the truth her circumstance and her inability to accept her own actions—led to her downfall. Her uncertainty at the end of her life was a result of her inability to put the importance of truth above maintaining power alongside Macbeth. In conclusion, Lady Macbeth’s downfall comes down to the issue of how a dogmatic perspective of truth restricted her ability to understand good. Morality, ethics, and the overall happiness found in life, for Lady Macbeth, was distorted by the grief and loss of a mother. As
Lady Macbeth was unable to see the whole truth, primarily due to her motives, she was incapable of being skeptical of the weird sister’s prophecy, she insisted on pursuing partial truths to justify her terrible actions. She allows Macbeth to convince her to cross a moral line—by plotting the murder of Duncan—and after crossing that line her perception of truth became a new reality, one which the weird sisters had created through their prophecy. By the time Lady Macbeth’s vanishing point in the church is opened, as soon as the light pours in and the truth is seen, it is too late for her to change her actions. Her reality is unclear, in fact, she cannot even see the light pouring in through the doorway of the church. Her dogmatism has led her to a false perception of reality, her own kind of madness. As she sits in the chapel she sees the child that she and Macbeth lost. She can no longer be certain of what is real and what isn’t and shortly after takes her own life. Lady Macbeth began as a healthy pursuer of good (morality) and truth—before the witches’ prophecy. By the end, she could not even see partial truths. “Unsex me here,” was a cry for power, a desire for a better life. Her once empowering certainty led her to think dogmatically about the possibility that the weird sister prophecy might lead her to find a better life, and in pursuing that possibility she found uncertainty and guilt. Lady Macbeth’s perception of truth was in relation to her certainty. With her certainty gone, her perception of truth—her reality—was flawed and she was incapable of recovery.
Fig. 1 (*Macbeth* 30:42)

Fig. 2 (*Macbeth* 1:23:05)

Fig. 3 (*Macbeth* 01:48)
Fig. 4 (*Macbeth* 1:26:08)
Works Cited

