Birthing Death: A Reconsideration of the Roles of Power, Politics and the Domestic in *Macbeth*

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At curtain-rise on *Macbeth*, a king confronts an insurrection and is subsequently murdered by one of his subjects. At curtain-fall, a king has countenanced an insurrection and has recently been decapitated by one of his subjects. What varies between these two scenarios is the name of the king and the locus of the audience's sympathies: for or against him. Yet the bookended nature of the play should prompt inquiry into the instinctive desire to censure Macbeth and validate Duncan/Macduff. On closer inspection, Macbeth and Duncan are not so very distinct as kings,[1] nor are Macbeth and Macduff as king-slayers. Scotland is also as politically turbulent at the inception of the play as at its culmination. Removing Macbeth does not release the country from the clutches of a dangerous ideology of political power, and installing Macduff, a man implicated in the death of his wife, children, and mother, is certainly not an unqualified triumph.

Macbeth contains many conflicts, but almost all of them may be subsumed under the one between the political and domestic spheres. Shakespeare weaves multiple manifestations of this crisis, in the process profoundly critiquing the systemic validation of the former at the cost of the latter. Critics have long recognized the play as Shakespeare's vehicle for endorsing James I,[2] the myth of the Stuart genealogy, and the new monarch's particular fears and interests.[3] The play, for example, condemns regicide,

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substantiates the sacredness and authority of the anointed king, recognizes witchcraft, and demonizes equivocation.[4] However, a more exacting investigation rediscovers the play as itself a massive equivocation: it endorses neither kings nor kingship—instead, it appraises and contests the very nature of power. During his reign, James readily recited two opposing notions of power—one political and one domestic—to serve his immediate goals. These two notions were the major ones held generally by early modern English culture. *Macbeth* evokes these theories and examines what I shall call "domestic power" as the counterpoint to political power. The play seems not so much to argue for a union of the two as to warn that a divorce between them promulgates a sickened form of sexuality. That is, without the redressing force of domestic power, political might prompts a perverse maternity, one in which infertility begets death. *Macbeth*, I contend, illustrates that the king's competing notions of power are a formula for calamity.

Political force in Scotland is self-promoting and inevitably destructive; it is the Nietzschean will-to-power in its most negative sense or, as Shakespeare elsewhere defined it, a senseless yet instinctive urge to dominate. *Troilus and Cressida's* Ulysses, admittedly a self-interested schemer, is nevertheless one of the play's premier commentators on social mores. He characterizes political power as an appetite of cannibalistic and self-destructive dimensions: "Everything includes itself in power, / Power into will, will into appetite; / And appetite, an universal wolf, / So doubly seconded with will and power, / Must make perforce an universal prey / And last eat up himself" (1.3.119-24).[5] In *A Speech to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at Whitehall* delivered in 1610, James I upholds this appetitive and self-serving power as a rightful royal entitlement:

> Kings are justly called gods, for that they exercise a manner or resemblance of divine power upon earth . . . God hath power to create, or destroy, make or unmake, at His pleasure, to give life, or send death, to judge all, and to be judged nor accomptable to none, to raise low things, and to make high things low at His pleasure, and to God are both soul and body due. And the like power have kings: they make and unmake their subjects; they have the power of raising and casting down, of life, and of death . . . [and to] make of their subjects, like men of the chess, a pawn to take a bishop or a knight, and to cry up, or down any of their subjects, as they do their money.[6]

James's absolutist definition of monarchical right includes the right to expedient manipulation and exploitation of his subjects.

Robert P. Adams contends that this "myth of Machiavellianism" became one of the Renaissance's foremost concepts of power. This concept "was and is above all an expression of the realities and fantasies of those who actually control the power-to-destroy and of those, including real or potential victims, who sense that great men-of-respect do have such capabilities. By late Elizabethan times the myth was a force in being . . . [and it forced] the first modern century to forgo nearly all pretence that international law (itself a mythic and nostalgic medieval notion) had living force . . . As the worn-out myth of 'Christendom' collapsed, the normal relationship between European princes became one of warfare."[7] Adams argues that Renaissance dramatists, including Shakespeare, identified this Machiavellian, malevolent urge for power with usurper-kings, and the Christian, benevolent desire to guide with legitimate rulers. Alan Sinfield perceives the same dichotomy in Renaissance political culture, only terming it as one between Absolutism (as evident in early modern power states) and Feudalism (as was manifest in the Middle Ages). He observes that the conflict occupies a central role in Macbeth. The play, "like very many plays of the period, handles anxieties about the violence exercised under the aegis of Absolutist ideology. Two main issues come into focus. The first is the threat of a split between legitimacy and actual power . . . A second problem . . . [is] what is the difference between Absolutism and tyranny?"[8]

At risk of overly schematizing the early modern understanding of power, one can claim that the appetitive, Machiavellian, absolutist will-to-power was posited against an idealized concept of domestic, bountiful authority. Perhaps the best manifestation of this latter rule is to be found again in the language of King James I himself. In *Basilikon Doron*, James attempts to define a more benevolent and somewhat affective notion of command:

> A good King, thinking his highest honour to consist in the due discharge of his calling, emploieth all his studie and paines, to procure and maintaine, by the making and execution of good Lawes, the well-fare and peace of his people; and as their naturall father and kindly Master, thinketh his greatest contentment standeth in their prosperitie, and his greatest suretie in hauing their hearts,

> subjecting his owne priuate affections and appetites to the weale and standing of his Subiects, euer thinking common interesse his chiefest particular where by the contrarie, an vsurping Tyrant, thinking his greatest honour and felicitie to consist in attaining . . . thinketh neuer himselfe sure, but by the dissention and factions among his people, and counterfeiting the Saint while he once creepe in credite, will then (by inuerting all good Lawes to serve onely for his vnrulie priuate affections) frame the common-weale euer to aduance his particular: building his suretie vpon his peoples miserie and in the end (as a stepfather and an vncouth hireling) make vp his owne hand vpon the ruines of the Republicke.[9]

James here accentuates the domestic space in the rather sentimental rhetoric of parental self-sacrifice, emotionality, love, guidance, peace, happiness, and reciprocity. The affective poignancy is further heightened when the opposition between the "good king" and the "tyrant" is expressed as one between a kind, natural father, and a self-serving, exploitative stepfather, that is, one not related by blood.

Macbeth deploys these two concepts of power, political and domestic, to posit that without the redressing force of the domestic, the political turns all "signifyings" into nothing. Macbeth clearly learns this consequence, albeit too late, and is excoriated for his crimes. The real crux of the play, however, lies in the fact that Macbeth is but a scapegoat for a well-populated system. This system survives, hale and unblemished, at the finale. The tale is indeed idiotic, but it will be told again.

More significantly, the play seems to attribute gender identities to these two models of power. The privileging of such "masculine" elements as ambition (and similar impulses), violence, tyranny, and public success, induces an existence in which such "feminine" elements as altruism (and like sentiments), peace, fellowship, and private prosperity are stifled. More problematically, and herein lies the true peril of this fractious world, the male element perverts itself to the point where it becomes monstrously hermaphroditic.[10] That is, though the masculine is completely uncoupled from the feminine, it nevertheless manages to engage in a sickly reproduction. The annihilation of the feminine by the masculine gives rise to the central paradox of the play—it gives birth to death, it brings to life that which cannot live and yet continues to thrive. Political power becomes paradoxically self-

generating, yet simultaneously barren. Each element of *Macbeth* is encompassed within this single matrix.

The play manifests this conundrum at every turn: in its characters, symbols, actions, resolutions, and so forth. Whether they are male or female, anointed kings or murdering upstarts, the individuals who pursue political supremacy instigate a self-defeating infertility. Duncan, Macbeth, and Macduff are all points on a continuum, and by privileging the politics of might, they participate in engendering a system that can only "dis-engender," to coin a phrase. These three men, and countless others, propagate the unnatural condition where only death can thrive. Thus, no family survives intact in Scotland, and every configuration of familial relationship is made defunct.

The matrix is correspondingly played out in the women. Lady Macduff is its victim, while Lady Macbeth is proponent as well as victim. Scholarship has often emphasized Lady Macbeth's defeminizing. In actual fact, her pursuit of the masculine engages her in a perverse maternity, one that matures from and gives birth to political power; Lady Macbeth propagates destructive and unregenerative power. More pervasively, no aspect of the feminine sphere remains at the end of the play: all the wives beat their husbands to the grave, no mortal woman of child-bearing age is left alive, and the play is littered with dead babies and bloody children, in image and in fact.

Finally, the proffered solution does not augur promise. Macduff is simply a more perfect product of the Scottish system than is Macbeth. He is the true anathema, and the horror is exacerbated by the fact that Scotland, and ostensibly the play, perceive him as the savior. The play's final solution, a "family unit" constituted of Macduff, Malcolm and Fleance, is also severely flawed. The ultimate image is of a bizarrely perverse family, one composed entirely of men, rendering the hope for Scotland's renaissance immensely ironic, and serving only to confirm the ubiquitous masculinity of the play.

But first, the nature of power: attaining power status is a systemic impetus in Scotland. This impetus is evidently contrary to nature, as emphasized by the attire imagery attached to it: "Why do you dress me in borrowed robes?" (1.3.107); "new honors" are like "strange garments" (1.3.146-47); "Was the hope drunk wherein you dressed yourself?" (1.7.36-37).[11] These metaphors reveal power as a deliberately assumed and artificially constructed

function, an external ornamentation rather than an integral element of the "unaccommodated man." The play also rarely offers rationales for exploits of might. It never stipulates why the Norweyans or the rebels assail Scotland, nor indeed why Macbeth desires the kingship or Lady Macbeth craves it for him. Thus, power does not simply lack justification, it often lacks meaning beyond the *per se* ownership of it.

Every initiated act of force, be it by Duncan, Macbeth, Macduff, Lady Macbeth, Siward, Malcolm, or others, has as objective the securing of the throne, the ultimate symbol of power.[12] Those already in occupancy dedicate every deed to safeguarding it. Macbeth's own search for status and subsequent destruction are blatant enough not to merit further discussion. More interesting, precisely because more covert, and because advanced as better alternatives, are the vaulting ambitions of the secondary characters.

The historical sources of *Macbeth* foreground the fact that the Scottish system of royal succession was at the time negotiating change from election to primogeniture. Shakespeare deploys this issue to query the ambiguous nature of power. What he engages is not which of the methods is superior,[13] but rather, how making political muscle more important than family sentiment is solipsistic annihilation. Duncan designates his son as successor to secure the throne and his, that is Duncan's own, station. When he decrees, "Sons, kinsmen, thanes, / And you whose places are the nearest, know / We will establish our estate upon / Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter / The Prince of Cumberland" (1.4.35-39), he is engaging in a political act rather than merely a spectacle of ritual. He is constructing and articulating—that is, speaking into being—his dynasty. It is manifest that the drive to power substitutes for love when a man's unique depicted interaction with his son is limited to a single political performance.

There is no affection, intimacy or even informality present in this one interaction between Duncan and Malcolm. Shakespeare depicts Duncan as he secures the throne for his son, but not as he expresses love or even friendship towards him. When Duncan and Malcolm discuss the death of Cawdor, Duncan speaks generally; and while Malcolm does address Duncan specifically, he does so as subject to king, not son to father. He refers to him as "my liege" and "your highness"; any of the thanes could have spoken his lines (1.4.1-14). This is, in fact, the play's only direct exchange

between Duncan and either of his children. Indeed, in number it is one more than between the brothers, Malcolm and Donalbain, after Malcolm accepts the mantle of monarch. In Scotland, power and family are mutually exclusive, and power is primary. Duncan is more affectionate and paternal with Captain Macbeth, the most successful enforcer in his power stratagems, than he is with Malcolm or Donalbain.[14] By dividing the political from the domestic, Duncan renders both meaningless and, ironically, fails at both. He is not a present father, and as king he is slaughtered by the very man he treated more like a son than his own.

The Siwards replay how the pursuit of might diminishes the parental bond. As in Duncan and Malcolm's case, the Siwards' political agenda has the goal of securing the crown. Similarly also, Siward and his son share scenes, but never engage in either rhetorical or affective exchange. When informed of his son's death, Siward asks, "Had he his hurts before?" (5.8.46). He finds comfort in the fact the young man died honorably, that is, executing an act of force. Certainly Siward may be assuming a brave front, but his ensuing pun on *hairs/heirs,* in "Had I as many sons as I have hairs / I would not wish them to a fairer death" (5.8.48-49), nevertheless demonstrates a curiously disengaged and flippant reaction to the loss of a child. Macduff's earlier response to the reports of his murdered family serves as the play's cue to a more natural and impassioned reaction. In fact, Malcolm calls attention to Siward's response as being inadequate: "He's worth more sorrow, / And that I'll spend for him." Siward, however, is adamant: "He's worth no more" (5.8.50-51). This small incident, positioned at the play's denouement, and depicting the rescuing forces and Scotland's future, is fraught with significance. It confirms that when power is its own goal, it destroys the domestic and paradoxically engenders barrenness. Siward, after all, has no heirs.

Banquo, contrarily, has an heir, and one on whom he dotes. He is a devoted father, and the only one from those proffered by the play who ever speaks directly to his son. One of Banquo's functions in the drama is to hold a mirror up to Macduff in his role as father. Like Duncan and Siward, Macduff does not communicate with his son; he does not even merit one scene with him. Fleance never appears without his father. Banquo dies for his son, while the young Macduff dies for his father. Even so, before his brutal death, Banquo symbolically hands his sword, dagger and belt to his son (2.1.4-5), allocating to him the trappings of the violent

world they inhabit. Banquo nevertheless privileges the domestic elements above the political ones. He refuses to entertain the hints of insurrection that Macbeth offers (2.1.20-30), he interacts with his son, and he dies to save him. Sadly, Banquo's more calibrated life and understanding are not sufficient to rescue him from the destruction that thrives in Scotland. Banquo is perhaps more a victim of the conundrum than a creator. Nonetheless, he pays the heavy debt that results from favoring the political; all father-son relationships in the play collapse.[15] The fault cannot be simplistically laid at Macbeth's door alone: Duncan, Siward, Macduff and their *façons d'etre* predate Macbeth.

A system that highlights power over love and politics over domestic, gives birth to decimation, and there is no better embodiment of that paradox than Lady Macbeth. Like the men mentioned above, Lady Macbeth does not comprehend masculine right action, "glamorizing" the need for violence and power, as D.W. Harding, Richard Kimbrough, and many others have rightly argued.[16] Her definition of manhood, like Duncan's, Siward's, Macduff's, and the rest of Scotland's, turns on achievement of power: "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1.7.50-52). Because she lacks discernment between political and domestic good, she fails, like the rest of them. The paradox becomes particularly highlighted in her only because her gender is the one to which the feminine elements "should" be integral. The play, however, finds men and women equally culpable for equivocating between political and domestic goals, power and love. It is the power system itself that creates the fissure between masculine and feminine principles.

Lady Macbeth primarily identifies herself in terms of female agency. Her conduct can always be subsumed under one of the three Renaissance designations of woman—wife, hostess and mother. However, because she aims all her energies towards the accession of power, she vacates each of these domestic roles of any significance. In line with the criterion of wife or helpmeet, Lady Macbeth's actions stem not for her own glories but those of her spouse. She never makes mention of personal profit, and even in soliloquy, her profoundest deliberations and resolutions for action are for his betterment. The conception of murder is initially Macbeth's (1.3.135-43), and her role, as she perceives it, is to gestate his "courage" to obtain what he deserves and desires.

As good wives ought, she discerns her husband's character well and yearns to aid him in what she asserts to be the right course for him. Although she wishes he had more "mettle," she perceives her contribution not in terms of supplanting him, but of bolstering him with the "valor of [her] tongue"(1.5.23)—with speech or nagging, typical female attributes. Lady Macbeth cajoles, she entreats, she bullies, but she never does. Unfortunately, all her domestication is insufficient to redress the imbalance in Scotland because, paradoxically, its ultimate intent is procuring power and status.

Lady Macbeth illustrates the Scottish system's endemic failure also in her role as hostess. She "entertains" to facilitate her husband's promotion, and in a grim distortion of the welcoming chatelaine, greets "the entrance of Duncan under [her] battlements," if only because it is "fatal" (1.5.35-36). Joan Larsen Klein has pointed out the "frightening perversion of Renaissance women's domestic activity" when Lady Macbeth makes preparations for the assassination and "cleans up" after it.[17] She also establishes the domestic conditions to facilitate her husband's success by providing the poisoned wine. The further in political blood she wades, the more she equivocates the distinction between power and love, right and wrong, sane and insane, waking and sleeping.

Lady Macbeth's personification of the play's paradox is most manifest in the instances when she perceives her identity in terms of mothering. When she begs the spirits to "unsex" her (1.5.37), she pleads not to be made male,[18] but rather, a "generator of evilness," an "anti-mother," to coin a phrase. Her blatant cravings for strength of purpose, and her ultimate goal of political power, are ironically expressed in feminized metaphors. The speech articulates the play's matrix: when the masculine sphere is validated over the feminine, both become meaningless. The disjunction between the masculine goal and the feminine method of attaining it is borne out by the paradox of the speech's central metaphor—giving birth to destruction.

In a perversion of the acts of intercourse and impregnation, Lady Macbeth asks the spirits to invade her body, and "fill [her] from the crown to the toe topful" (1.5.38) with the cruelty to which she hopes to give birth. She pleads for the thickening of blood, a reference to the constitution of foetal matter. The speech culminates, "Come thick night, / And pall thee in the

dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, / Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark / To cry 'hold, hold!'" (1.5.46-50), the allusions echoing the cutting of the umbilical cord, the emerging of the child, and its first cry. Once her cruelty is born, she nurtures it with poison. Whether one interprets the lines as indicating that the milk of human kindness should be replaced by gall, or concurs with Moelwyn Merchant, who argues they mean "bewitch my milk for gall,"[19] or with Janet Adelman who suggests that "perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk as gall, to nurse from her breasts and find in her milk their sustaining poison,"[20] the prevailing image is a perverse one: a mother breastfeeding for death, not life.

Lady Macbeth gives birth to death here, but this is neither her, nor the play's, only instance of coalescing death and children. When she employs "the babe that milks [her]" (1.7.56) to convey her censure of Macbeth's vacillation over his accession to power, she chooses the most atrocious crime she can imagine to assert what she would *never* do: "I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash'd the brains out, *had* I so sworn as you / Have done to this" (1.7.57-60, emphasis added). Lady Macbeth's frame of reference and self-image continue to be articulated in feminized language. Nevertheless, her choice of analogy is against nature, and the play once more enunciates the perversion that results from valuing the political over the domestic.

This incident moreover raises a silent query about the babe's whereabouts. The question remains unanswered and it hovers over the play, complete with the sinister and disturbing implications of its possible responses. Children do not survive in Scotland, and Lady Macbeth's "pep-talk" exacerbates the play's deliberate presentation of dead offspring. The play is littered with dead babies, in reference and in deed. The witches' hell broth contains the "finger of a birth-strangled babe" (4.1.30), the second apparition is a "bloody child" (4.1.76), and the Macduff "pretty chickens" (4.3.219) are slaughtered. Macduff's son is furthermore the youngest child in the Shakespeare canon to be so violently massacred on stage.

Integral to the action while Macbeth wavers, Lady Macbeth becomes expendable once his fully-fledged masculinity and dedication to power are wholly gestated. Ironically, but in line with the central paradox of the play, the cruelty and death to which

she gives birth are her undoing, and when she takes her life, she is but finalizing an action she herself set in motion. To blame her entirely, however, is to disregard the fact that she embodies an alienation between domestic and political that is exists on a larger plane.

It is common knowledge now that the patriarchy of the early modern era viewed the female body and female bodily functions as, at best, lacking or mysterious beyond comprehension, or at worse, deformed and incomprehensible because illogical. The tendency in the culture to prioritize masculinity over femininity has prompted modern day scholars to suggest early modern literature presented the Caeserean birth as a way of resolving the issue. Children born in this fashion represent a deliberate liberation from the containement of the female body and element. *Macbeth*, with its "fiendish queen" and bearded malevolent hags, is also perceived as playing into this binary. Janet Adelman, for example, suggests that the play solves the problem of the female in the action of Macduff's "untimely" birth, "a ruthless excision of all female presence [and the play's] own satisfaction of the witches' prophecy";[21] and Richard Wilson comments, "Cesarean section recurs in the tragedies and histories, then, as a final solution of the female puzzle and fulfillment of the *Lex Caesare*, the Roman inheritance law that decreed the womb to be a place where the infant was merely 'imprisoned,' and from which, and by whatever means, an heir was justly 'enfranchised' into 'light'" (*Titus Andronicus* 4.2.124-25).[22] I contend, however, that at least in *Macbeth*, the Caesarean birth serves to emphasize rather the opposite; when the feminine principle is subjugated to the masculine, what triumphs is a true perversion of nature. This perversion is best perceived in Macduff.

As perverse as Lady Macbeth is, then, she is by no means the most disturbing character. Macduff, tendered as the savior who dismisses the fiendish couple to redeem Scotland, is, I argue, a more complete expression of the death-bringing conundrum. The play culminates by punishing the Macbeths and ostensibly validating the scourging force of Macduff. Scotland's happy future is massively equivocated, however, by the fact that this liberator is a man who conceivably (pun intended) occasioned his mother's "untimely" death and who most certainly is implicated in his wife and son's demise. Macduff is undoubtedly not as egotistically motivated as Macbeth, but his unblinking dedication to the political demands of his country leads him to sacrifice the domestic aspects of his life in an astonishing way.

In his eagerness to recruit Malcolm and raise an army, Macduff abandons his wife and children in a country run by a man who has amply demonstrated his enthusiasm for damaging the innocent and defenseless. Lady Macduff herself is certainly sentient of a desertion when she remonstrates that it is not "wisdom . . . to leave his wife, to leave his babes, / His mansion, and his titles in a place / From whence himself does fly" (4.2.6-8). Indeed, she imputes that he "loves [his family] not," and charges him with lacking the "natural touch," i.e., the domestic sentiment, "for the poor wren, / The most diminutive of birds, will fight, / Her young ones in her nest, against the owl" (4.2.8-11). Simply put—it is instinct to protect one's young. Macduff undoubtedly acts out of what he holds to be right reason; but this politicized "right reason" is misguided, for how natural is it not to attempt to prevent the slaughter of one's family? When Macduff places political demands in a superior position to domestic ones, he again reveals the meaninglessness of the Scottish system. The play raises several questions: Has not Macduff placed the cart before the horse? Is killing Macbeth more exigent than saving his own family? For whom does he save the country? Is Scotland, that nebulous concept for whom he sacrifices his family, anything more than a collection of families?[23]

The English scene insists that Macduff was alert to the repercussions of his actions when he undertook them. When Ross enters, Macduff solicits in two separate instances after his wife and son. Ross confirms their welfare, but Macduff cannot credit the response: "The tyrant has not battered at their peace?" (4.3.179). Ross guarantees their security, but still Macduff cannot rest: "Be not niggard of your speech. How goes't?" (4.3.181). Ross changes the subject, but later admits that he has some woe that pertains to Macduff; the latter exclaims, "Hum! I guess at it" (4.3.204). The development of the scene accents Macduff's suspicion that Macbeth would assume the conduct he ultimately did, and it underscores his decision to decamp as deliberate and cognizant. It also demonstrates Shakespeare's superb audience manipulation. By highlighting Macduff's response in line 204, one wonders if Shakespeare did not intend the audience to react by thinking, "If you 'guessed at it,' why not take precautions?" When Ross delivers the "newest grief," Macduff rejoins, "And I must be from thence!" (4.3.213). Once more, the unintended disingenuousness of the statement, in the face of what was blatantly clear, even for

Macduff himself, raises the silent accusation, "But you expected it."

The death of Lady Macduff is most significant on the symbolic level. With it, the ability to generate children, that is, Scotland's posterity, is devastated. Lady Macduff is the one remaining mother in Scotland, or so it seems. However, even before the action opens, Duncan and Banquo's wives are absent. After her death, the women who remain are either old, interested in birthing cruelty, or "unnatural hags," both female and male, natural and metaphysical, flesh and air.[24] The play covertly proposes that the decease of natural and healthy births predates Macbeth. True, he perpetuates a system that is divorced from the domestic, but it is a system essentially not of his making. The system will also post-date him. In an ironic continuation of his alignment with Macbeth, Macduff also participates in perpetuating the system, and at the cost of his own family.[25]

Harding argues that Macduff had no other meaningful choice. He "has turned to political and military alliance with other men as the only means of restoring his country and re-establishing a right order. His dilemma consisted in the choice between living out his wife's fantasy of the dauntless protector with an impotent gesture of manliness, and playing an effective part in the real world of men."[26] But even if such reasoning were to elucidate Shakespeare's choice for Macduff, it does not address Macduff's choice for himself. Macduff has too many possible alternatives to exculpate his decision to leave: he could have taken his loved ones with him, he could have taken steps to conceal them, and he could have posted protectors for them. But Macduff takes no steps towards thwarting what he is certain will transpire. Macduff indeed "plays an effective part in the real world of men," but the critique of the play is levelled precisely at what Scotland constitutes as the "real world of men," as well as Macduff's acquiescence to it, rather than at Lady Macduff's affective "fantasy" understanding of manhood.

Macduff is implicated in the death of his wife, his child, and because of his untimely birth, possibly his mother. Vincent F. Petronella posits that when Macduff kills Macbeth, the man who had hoped to "clear the way to political and military security by eliminating pertinent fathers and sons and even mothers," he has "stopped the malignancy." Macduff "becomes the most important literal father-figure of the play."[27] Such a figure, however, has to be supremely ironic. For to one extent or another, Macduff is guilty

of causing deaths as a son, father and husband. And he is the cause of the death of a mother, infant son, and wife. The feminine element is much in danger with Macduff, and as much as he is well intentioned, he is also not desirable. He may be a better alternative than Macbeth, but he is certainly not a good one.[28]

Act 4, scene 3 does proffer one moment of hope that the self-breeding system of destruction will be halted. The optimism is offered tantalizingly, only to be dashed within a few lines. Malcolm counsels Macduff to "dispute [the news of his family's demise] like a man" (4.3.221), urging Macduff to turn for comfort to the masculine realm—revenge, politics, punishment, violence, and so forth. Macduff's response, "I must also feel it as a man. / I cannot but remember such things were, / That were most precious to me" (4.3.223-25), fleetingly redefines right behaviour and what it is to be "a man." The male principle cannot deny the female one if it is to be truly successful or truly male. In this one moment, Macduff makes a nod towards the coexistence of the political and powerful with the domestic and affective.

But immediately Malcolm counsels Macduff to form his grief as "the whetstone of [his] sword" and to "convert it to anger." When he urges him to "blunt not the heart," the seat of emotion, but to "enrage" it (4.3.30-31), he instructs him to transmute his heart into a weapon.[29] There is perhaps no better image of the imposition of aggression on love in this play, and Malcolm's advice is a not very distant echo of Lady Macbeth's instructions to the "murdering ministers" and her "woman's breasts" (1.5.42-43). Macduff's anger, perhaps even guilt, will simply be invested in furthering the violence, and once more the system rebirths itself. Macduff's next statement indeed underlines the opposition of gender principles, not their coexistence: "O, I could play the woman with mine eyes / And braggart with my tongue! But, gentle heavens, / Cut short all intermission. Front to front / Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself" (4.3.232-35). Malcolm concurs: "This tune goes manly" (4.3.237).

In fact, the end of the play propounds a "manly" trio as the pledge for the future. Macduff (who rids the country of Macbeth), Malcolm (who takes over the throne), and Fleance (who was identified by the weird sisters as the fountainhead of the royal line) constitute a "family" composed entirely of men. When observed closely, this androcentric family is most problematic, both in terms of the unit as a whole and in terms of the individuals who

comprise it. As a unit, this family of men does nothing to redress the absence of the female element in the country or the system. Pearlman notes that both Macduff and Malcolm are "each in his own way as free from contact with women as can be imagined. It is as though we were in the presence of some primitive rite of the sort that anthropologists recover from the darker ages, where the warrior must preserve his strength by abstaining from contact with women before battle. In order to overcome Macbeth, who has fallen under the influence of the witches and their agent, the hero must be free of women, whether mother, wife, or mistress."[30] Pearlman is right to note the absence of the female element in the final solution, but not quite right in his celebration of it. For the feminine element will be absent even after "the battle," and the play has consistently demonstrated the danger and hopelessness of a single-gendered world. This family of men makes the paradox manifest one more time: the female-less world has found a way to propagate its own, diseased nature.

The family is also perverse in terms of its individual components. On the one hand, as argued above, Macduff enacts a mature and extreme masculinity that is not healthy. On the other, Malcolm embodies an inexperienced and feminized masculinity that turns out to be equally insufficient. Pearlman perceives Malcolm's inexperience as symbolic of the spring of Scotland's future: "Duncan's reign . . . was on a symbolic level a green and fertile experience. Macbeth's is the opposite. He is a frost giant, and his way is the sere and yellow leaf. There is no more potent image of the succession of the seasons and the triumph of fertility in all literature than the spring that comes to Scotland when Birnam Forest picks itself up and conquers the sterile and discontented world of the winter king. Malcolm's youth is a logical focus of this symbolic movement."[31] But this triumph is itself greatly equivocated, for this Birnam wood has been deracinated, and it is a dead nature, in fact, a killed nature, that is coming to impose itself upon Dunsinane. Literally and symbolically, there is little difference between the dead wood of the forest and the dead wood of the castle walls. Moreover, it is not happenstance that it is Malcolm who is at the root of the plan to hew down the wood (5.4.4-7); the promise of his youth and his nurturing qualities are thus quibbles that participate in the overriding paradox.

In addition to his inexperience, Malcolm's feminization makes him implausible as a solution. In contradiction to the other

Scotsmen, he is curiously passive, even though it is his father who was slain and his throne purloined. In effect, of all the play's men, he has the most obligation and justification to resort to action, and yet he relinquishes that duty to others. The one direct feat he undertakes serves rather to confirm his submissiveness—he flees to England where he fleshes out his feminization. Once there, he "put[s] [himself] to [Macduff's] direction" (4.3.123). His self-identification further emphasizes an inexperienced and inactive modesty: "I am yet / Unknown to woman, never yet was forsworn, / Scarcely have coveted what was mine own, / At no time broke my faith, and would not betray / The devil to his fellow, and delight / No less in truth than life" (4.3.126-31). It seems that Malcolm is chaste, silent, and obedient. Indeed, he appears to possess the feminine elements necessary to accompany the masculine. But such is not the case. First, as king, he is the one man who *should* be more politically vigorous. Second, in this family unit, the man who occupies the position of "husband" has already been responsible for the demise of one, if not two, families, which does not auger well for the new family. Third, if Malcolm is virgin, and representative of the feminine because no women remain, then at least on the symbolic level, this other, necessary element, will also not be reproduced. Malcolm cannot fulfill the requirements of the domestic sphere.

The final member of the family, Fleance, the real hope for the future, has no physical or even referential presence in the play's finale. He is a final missing baby in a play full of missing babies. Symbolically, the future is absent and silent. Thus, Macduff is culpable in the death of his own family, Malcolm has so far withdrawn from the flawed masculine world that he is but a symbol of the pervasive barrenness of Scotland, and Fleance is puny and missing from the action. This masculine family, representing a powerful father, a virgin mother, and a missing child resonates, of course, as a final huge and ironic equivocation of another family. The early modern period understood this family as responsible for rebirthing an entire world. Scotland, it seems to me, will not be as lucky. Splitting the domestic from the political has created a devastating system. The most dangerous thing about this system is that it has mutated to the point where it reproduces itself. The end of the play darkly insists that this situation is not an aberration; it is the state of affairs. This play does not so much endorse James I as

send him a covert message regarding the dangers of equivocating between the two notions of power.

Notes

1. In the few short scenes during which Duncan is alive, he is under siege and taking steps to confirm his royal position. The gentle and nurturing language attached to him belies his ruthless and self-interested nature. He joys in vicious punishments upon the rebels and promotes only the strongest, fiercest, and most bloodthirsty men. He is autarchic in his authority, and despotically craving to "be safely thus," names his son as successor. Except for placement of the son, and only because he is childless, this description can be applied in its entirety to King Macbeth. Certainly the similarity between the two kings is not a novel observation. Alan Sinfield, for example, in "*Macbeth*: History, Ideology and Intellectuals," *Critical Quarterly* 28 (1986): 63-77, comments that the play "break[s] down the antithesis . . . between the usurping tyrant and the legitimately violent ruler" (69).

2. There is some debate that the play was even written for a special performance at James's court. See Lily B. Campbell, "Political Ideas in Macbeth IV.iii," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 2 (1951): 281.

3. During the last years of her reign, there was a general sense of dissatisfaction with Queen Elizabeth. A rational, self-controlled, unextravagant male ruler was touted as the resolution to that unease. Henry Hooke, for example, a rector from Lincolnshire, articulated that desire in 1601 or 1602: "What corruptions in iustice, what blemishes in religion, the infirmitie, and inconueniency of woemanhead, would not permitt to discouer and discerne, the vigor, and conueniency of man sytting as king in the throne of aucthoritie; maye diligently search out, and speedylie reforme" (*Of the succession to the Crowne of England*, British Library Royal MS. 17 B XI, fols. 1-19; quoted in Katherine Eggert, "Nostalgia and the Not Yet Late Queen: Refusing Female Rule in *Henry V*," *ELH* 61 [1994]: 523-50; 525). This manuscript was dedicated to James I, although the dedication was probably added after James's accession to the English throne. On the face of it, in *Macbeth* Shakespeare seems to participate in this flattering approbation of James I as a most fitting king for England's particular needs. Jane H. Jack, for example, insists that "James exerted a considerable influence on *Macbeth*, and my thesis is so far from being a handicap which Shakespeare had to surmount, the writings of the King were a positive help to him as he wrote the play" ("*Macbeth*, King James and the Bible," *ELH* 22 [1955]: 173). See also George Walton Williams' "*Macbeth*: King James' Play," *The South Atlantic Review* 47 (1982): 12-21; and more recently, Christopher Wortham's "Shakespeare, James I and the Matter of Britain," *The Journal of the English Association* 45 (1996): 97-122.

4. When Guy Fawkes was arrested for his participation in the Gunpowder Plot (1605), he was tortured to name his conspirators. One name he mentioned was that of Henry Garnet, a Jesuit Father. In truth, there was little evidence against Garnet, but *circa* 1598 he had authored *A Treatise of Equivocation*, a text that purported to teach Catholics how to respond truthfully to inculpating questions without self-incrimination. The idea was not to tell the truth without actually lying, or to say one thing while meaning another. Renaissance equivocation was a way of splitting a sign from its signifier, or a word against its intent, and it

reveals the underlying slipperiness of signification. Garnet offers a variety of methods of equivocation, one being to "use some equivocal word which hath many significations, and we understand it in one sense, which is true, although the hearer conceive the other, which is false . . . [For example, if I were] asked whether such a stranger lodgeth in my house, . . . I should answer, 'he lieth not in my house,' meaning that he doth not tell a lie there, although he lodge there" (in William C. Carroll, ed., *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts* [New York: Bedford / St. Martin, 1999], 266). Because of the infamy of the Gunpowder Plot—after all, its aim was to decimate James I and much of his parliament—"equivocation" became a catch phrase in English culture during the early years of the seventeenth century. In *Macbeth* the Porter uses it in 2.3.6: "Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale," and Macbeth calls the witches' prophecies diabolical "equivocations" (5.5.43). See also *Hamlet* (5.1.138).

5. William Shakespeare, *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Arden Shakespeare Third Series*, ed. David Bevington (London: Thomson Learning Center, 1998; reprint 2003).

6. James I, *A Speech to the Lords and Commons of the Parliament at Whitehall* (1609) in *Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles H. McIlwain (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1918), 307-8.

7. Robert P. Adams, "Opposed Tudor Myths of Power: Machiavellian Tyrants and Christian Kings," in *Studies in the Continental Background of Renaissance English Literature: Essays Presented to John L. Lievsay*, ed. Dale B. J. Randall and George Walton Williams (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977), 67-90; 68. Adams argues that this Machiavellianism had little to do with what Machiavelli actually espoused. Rather, it was a myth abstracted, or perhaps even constructed, by the late Elizabethans based on their understanding of the Florentine's writings. The goal behind creating the myth was to open up a forum in which to voice their dissatisfaction with absolutist power.

8. Alan Sinfield, "*Macbeth*: History, Ideology and Intellectuals," 64-65.

9. James wrote several treatises on right rule, including *Basilikon Doron or His Majesties Instrvctions To His Dearest Sonne, Henry the Prince* (1599), *The Trew Lawe of Free Monarchie: Or the Reciprock and Deutie Betwixt a Free King and his Naturall Subjects* (1598), and several speeches to Parliament. See *Political Works of James I*.

10. Robert Kimbrough, "*Macbeth*: The Prisoner of Gender," *Shakespeare Studies* 16 (1983): 175-90. Kimbrough perceives "a fierce war between gender concepts of manhood and womanhood" in this play, holding that this war is eventually resolved in a conflated and inclusive concept of gender, a concept he terms "humanhood" (176). This androgynous gendering is what Shakespeare ultimately promotes, Kimbrough suggests, with Macduff achieving "humanhood." I agree with Kimbrough on the detrimental effects of divided gender-concepts, especially as articulated in understandings of power, but not with his contention that the play finally secures a positive understanding of androgyny. Rather, as argued below, Scotland's alienation of gender characteristics engenders a freakish, perverseness that is suspected by the play and the playwright. Moreover, it is not resolved by the play's conclusion.

11. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts* (The Bedford Shakespeare Series), ed. William C. Carroll (Boston: Bedford / St. Martin's, 1999). Line references to *Macbeth* are from this edition.

12. The one individual with power who employs it towards something other than itself is Edward, whom Malcolm serves when he escapes to England. His healing ability to cure the "King's Evil" (4.3.147-60) stems from his divinely sanctioned, political authority as king. Edward, however, is significantly missing from the action and never actually appears in the play. He appears to have transcended the self-defeating human drive for power, but only by transcending both humanity and the play itself. Power, as manifest in this play, is always self-motivated and barren.

13. It is intriguing that the laws of primogeniture themselves politicize affective bonds and turn family units into active power structures. It would be intriguing, but beyond the scope of this article, to assess if Shakespeare indeed does have a preference for a law of succession.

14. It is not accidental that Duncan speaks to Macbeth as a father who is interested in the "plant[ing], . . . labor . . . [and] growing" of a son in the very same scene in which he hardly addresses his biological son (1.4.28-29). Duncan has three sons, two parented with a woman, the other parented with violence and the need for supremacy. Shakespeare underlines the irony of the promotion of the aggressive at the cost of the affective when the non-biological son eventually murders his "father."

15. The husband/wife relationship between the Macbeths also becomes enfeebled as the play progresses, and precisely because of the valuation of power over love. Ironically, the best example of love between adults is that of Lord and Lady Macbeth. Each one wants the best for the other, and there is no competition between them. Rather, affection and intimacy are at the root of their exchanges. However, as Macbeth's milk of human kindness dries up and his lust and ability for power flourishes (a transference initially desired by his wife), his relationship with his wife also wanes. Following the banquet scene they do not appear together on stage, and when informed of her death, he can only comment on its inevitability. While Lord Macbeth had love, King Macbeth is denied even the expressions of sorrow and a sense of loss.

16. See, for example, D.W. Harding's "Women's Fantasy of Manhood: A Shakespearean Theme," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20 (1969): 245-53.

17. Joan Larsen Klein, "Lady Macbeth: 'Infirm of Purpose,'" in *The Woman's Part*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 240-55; 245.

18. Many critics perceive Lady Macbeth to be masculinized to some extent. Coppélia Kahn, for example, interprets Macbeth's injunction to "bring forth men-children only" (1.7.73) as an indication that he views his wife "as a kind of man . . . as though she were a sole god-like procreator, man and woman both" (*Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981], 173). See also E. Pearlman, "Malcolm and Macduff," *Studies in the Humanities* 9 (1981): 5-10, and Kimbrough, "*Macbeth*: The Prisoner of Gender," 181, 187.

19. W. Moelwyn Merchant, "'His Fiend-Like Queen,'" *Shakespeare Survey* 19 (1966): 75-81; 76.

20. Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays*, Hamlet *to* The Tempest (New York: Routledge, 1992), 135.

21. Ibid., 91.

22. Richard Wilson, "Observations on English Bodies: Licensing Maternity in Shakespeare's Late Plays," in *Enclosure Acts: Sexuality, Property, and Culture in Early Modern England*, ed. Richard Burt and John Michael Archer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994). 121-50; (132).

23. Phyllis Rackin, "Staging the Female Body: Maternal Breastfeeding and Lady Macbeth's 'Unsex Me Here,'" in *Corps / Decors: Femmes, Orgie, Parodie*, ed. Catherine Nesci et al. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 17-29. I am grateful to Dr. Phyllis Rackin for pointing out that historically wives were often left to guard castles when husbands were at war. In the fictional sphere, however, the context forces judgment on Macduff. John F. Hennedy, in "Macduff's Dilemma: Anticipation of Existentialist Ethics in *Macbeth*," *The Upstart Crow* 18 (1998): 110-17, underlines Shakespeare's deliberate depiction of Macduff's actions as being discrepant within the play's moral parameters: "Departing from his Holinshed source in providing the perspective of Macduff's abandoned wife, Shakespeare casts grave doubts on any justification for her husband's departure" (110; see also n. 6).

24. The realm of anti-nature is integrally tied to the conundrum under discussion. The false division between masculine and feminine, political and domestic, causes fissures in every element of the world, including between natural and unnatural dominions. The witches' weird conflation of opposites is related to Scotland's equally weird division of principles that should co-exist. The two realms and two states of affairs are two sides of coin.

25. Vincent F. Petronella, "The Role of Macduff in *Macbeth*," *Etudes Anglaises* 32 (1979): 11-19. Petronella argues that the "principal reason for Macduff's inward suffering is his ability to love deeply. In presenting him as such Shakespeare distinguishes him from nearly all the characters in the play" (15). Macduff undeniably does love deeply, but significantly, so do the Macbeths. In these and other cases, the search for power procures the loss of love. When Macduff chooses country over family, he essentially makes the same mistake as Macbeth—although for better and less selfish reasons. Macduff is more effectively read as an ironic reflection of Macbeth, not as clearly distinctive from him.

26. Harding, "Women's Fantasy of Manhood," 249.

27. Petronella, "The Role of Macduff in *Macbeth*," 14.

28. In fact, I would argue that Macduff is a more menacing alternative. In Macbeth's case, the danger is overt and obvious, and the man is excommunicated from society. In Macduff's, the danger is covert and more subtle, and the man is lauded as a lynchpin of society.

29. The fact that this statement comes from a man who has only just aligned himself with Christ, with the lamb, with feminine modesty, love and patience, makes the scene only that much more ironic.

30. Pearlman, "Malcolm and Macduff," 8.

31. Ibid., 9.