

**“Not of Woman Born”:
Lady Macbeth’s Cesarean Section**

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At first glance, the plot of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is a simple one: the thane Macbeth receives a prophecy from a group of witches that contains a riddle: he will become king, but it will be another man’s children who will carry the line. Armed with this news, he then spends the play killing, first to secure the throne, and then to protect his position. Yet under this relatively simple framework is a profoundly psychological drama; Macbeth unexpectedly reacts to the witches’ news, not with excitement, but with fear, and he never seems to want or enjoy the throne once he has it. Instead, he focuses on that series of murder plots, and with each successive killing he becomes both more resolute and more horrified at his own actions. Intertwined within these plots is a series of repeated—and seemingly unrelated—concerns: trauma, mental illness, children, and witchcraft. Late in the play, an additional concern is added: what does it mean to be not “of woman born” (4.2.80-81)?¹

A handful of scholars have commented on the motif of children in *Macbeth*, a motif that seems out of place in a play that appears to be about the perils of unbridled

ambition to attain sovereignty. Most of these focus on Lady Macbeth and often involve an exploration of her invoking of sterility—her desire to be “unsex[ed],” for example, and her assertion that she has “given suck” (1.5.40; 1.7.54)—and her threats of infanticide. Following this line of thought, Stephanie Chamberlain and Jenijoy La Belle both argue that Lady Macbeth wishes to suppress her femininity in order to become more masculine and take the throne for herself.² Other discussions combine this motif with that of grief, which in this play is as enigmatic as the imagery related to children. Lynne Dickson Bruckner, who analyzes the play’s treatment of grief in act 4, scene 3, starts with the acknowledgment that “the dynamic between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth may also be driven by the loss of a shared child,” but ends her discussion of the Macbeths by saying that “the problem Macbeth suffers from is the one that he, in fact, has created. There is no time to mourn,” thus abandoning any exploration of how grief might serve as a motivation for this couple.³ Christine Couche, in “The Macbeths’ Secret,” goes a little further, establishing that there is an “unspoken” “obsession with a dead child” in the play; however, her study focuses more on proving the existence of a child than exploring how grief affects motivation in *Macbeth*.⁴ I believe that both Bruckner and Couche are correct in their assessments: that the Macbeths had, and lost, a child, and that the grief over that loss is a driving force in *Macbeth*.

Early in the play, Duncan and Banquo are approaching Macbeth’s castle, Inverness.⁵ Duncan comments about how pleasant it is, and Banquo responds with an anecdote about a bird living within:

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, . . .

* * *

Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,
The air is delicate. (1.6.3-10)

It's an odd and haunting moment: the Macbeths are childless, and yet Banquo focuses on a "pendent bed" and a "procreant cradle" that is "haunt[ed]." Banquo certainly was present during Macbeth's earlier encounter with the witches, and after Duncan's murder he will express concerns that Macbeth "play'dst most foully for [the crown]" (3.1.3.). Lady Macbeth enters before Banquo can continue his thought, but perhaps it is a warning to Duncan that the air is not so much "delicate," but fragile. Banquo, who sees through Macbeth from the start, quite possibly is explaining his history to Duncan, a history that involves a lost child whose presence still continues to affect those living at Inverness.

Of equal importance to an understanding of loss and grief is the matter of how the loss happened. *Macbeth* was written during a time of cultural upheaval in which many debates were occurring in essentially every sphere of human experience. Issues of female reproduction were, of course, part of the cultural discourse: ailments and events typically ascribed to witchcraft were being rebranded as medical conditions, complete with a revision of Galen's humoral theories. In *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*, Carol Thomas Neely explains how there was a cultural need to "distinguish bewitchment from the distraction caused by the uterine disease, suffocation of the mother, or wandering womb."⁶ However, while this debate about female reproduction was occurring, another arose surrounding the topic of the Caesarean section, which was intimately connected in the early modern mindset with witchcraft. These discourses regarding female reproduction—discourses which involved mental illness and bewitchment, and natural and unnatural birth—are some of the same concerns as are dramatized in *Macbeth*. Studies about hysteria and witchcraft in the play abound, but I'm not aware of any that explore the possibility that the play is a commentary on Cesarean sections, despite the explicit reference by Macduff that he was "from his

mother's womb / untimely ripp'd" (5.8.15-16). For us, the connections between Lady Macbeth and a potential Cesarean section may seem like little more than an undercurrent, but for those dealing with the realities of childbirth and infant mortality and the discussions of female reproduction, Shakespeare's commentary in *Macbeth* likely would have been much clearer to early modern audiences than our own.

Although they were not referred to as such until the sixteenth century, Cesarean operations have been performed since antiquity. Our current name for such a procedure derives from the belief that Julius Caesar was delivered in such a manner. During the Middle Ages, Cesareans were performed exclusively by midwives—men were not allowed in the delivery room until the eighteenth century except in very rare circumstances—and the goal was not to save the mother, but instead to ensure the baptism, and thus salvation, of the infant. Given this intent, according to Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, in *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture*, midwives not only came to be seen as walking the line between life and death, but were also in charge of knowledge not condoned by the church, such as abortifacients and contraceptives.⁷ Over time, the midwives who performed these operations became associated with witchcraft in the popular mindset: an Inquisition document, which was far more popular in secular courts than in religious ones, *Malleus Malificarum*, even dedicated an entire chapter to "midwife witches," and asserted that such individuals sacrificed infants to their demonic patrons to sustain their powers.⁸

In 1500, we see the first reference to a Cesarean performed on a living woman by Jakob Nufer in Switzerland. It was a dramatic affair: Nufer, who was a pig gelder, had to obtain permission from both the local government and the church, as well as enlist the services of midwives who would be willing to risk their careers should the operation fail. As a result of the anticipation surrounding the operation, which

was successful—both the woman, who was Nufer's wife, and the child survived—news spread and a debate began, which culminated in 1581 with Francois Roussett's publication of *The Hysterotomotokie or Caesarian Birth*, which argued that in particularly difficult deliveries, a woman might have a better chance of surviving surgery than childbirth, and so surgical intervention should be considered as a viable option.⁹ Roussett's work was not well-received: a contemporary of his, and preeminent French surgeon, Jacques Marchant, said of his work, "How easy it is to hallucinate, . . . and thus to become the source of all errors. And this is what you have become, the creator of this plague which is sweeping Europe."¹⁰ The debate soon reached England, it would seem; Simon Forman, a contemporary of Shakespeare who is reputed to have slept with his "Dark Lady," and known to have reviewed several of his plays, including *Macbeth*, speaks of the womb as a country that must be colonized in his 1596 gynecological essay, "Matrix, and the Pain Thereof."¹¹ It seems possible, then, that Shakespeare might have heard discussions or rumors of Cesarean sections and chosen to comment on them in *Macbeth*.

Notably, Cesarean sections—and the related concerns pertaining to the witches—are a concern in *Macbeth*, something which is explored both explicitly and implicitly. Towards the end of the play, the second apparition utters a strange part of the prophecy: "None of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.2.80-81). In the final scenes, Macbeth repeats this line four times, and most scholars seem content to conclude that he is just trying to work through the riddle. However, it is notable, I think, that Shakespeare did not invent the phrase: it was a term used to refer to a child born of a corpse, and in this period, likely born of a Cesarean section.¹² Language pertaining to Cesarean sections appear elsewhere; Ross, speaking of Scotland, says "Alas poor country! / . . . It cannot be called our mother but our grave" (4.3.164-66), comparing Scotland to a mother dying

in childbirth and its inhabitants as the children of such a corpse. While less explicit, the Sergeant's description of Macbeth having "unseam'd [Macdonwald] from the nave to the chops" (1.2.22) is also potentially a very early reference to a Cesarean section.¹³ While such procedures typically involved a horizontal incision across the lower abdomen, the illuminations in the Middle Ages and Renaissance were imprecise, and generally showed a large vertical incision, out of which the child was lifted.¹⁴ Additionally, a woman who had undergone such a procedure would naturally have to have the incision sutured, which would look much like a seam. Each of these sets of lines—the witches' warning to Macbeth, Ross's concerns about his country, and the description of Macbeth's defeat over Macdonwald—all evoke descriptions of the unnatural or supernatural. Scotland—where "fair is foul, and foul is fair," and where witches take the place of the expected religious authorities—is a country of reversals, where the unnatural supersedes the natural, and where potentially a mother survives an operation in which she should have died, and the child dies instead. Like Forman's matrix, Scotland is a "wordle of yt selfe," which "by the helpe of arte . . . cast[s] out all filthiness that is in her," a process that can only be achieved when one "joine[s] arte and nature together."¹⁵ This perhaps explains why Malcolm refers to Lady Macbeth as "fend-like" and why only Macduff, who was not "born of woman" can defeat Macbeth and restore the "grace of Grace" to Scotland (5.8.82, 85).

At the grim banquet, Macbeth, in a moment of panic, says that "murthers have been performed / Too terrible for the ear" (3.4.76-77). It is unlikely that he is referring to the murders of either Duncan or Banquo, as Macbeth speaks at length about each of those, and thus the "murthers" here must refer to something else. However, if the witches were the midwives present at Lady Macbeth's delivery, then that might explain the murders to which Macbeth refers; notably, after the banquet, Macbeth seeks out the witches, and not

the counsel of his kinsmen, implying that he believes that the witches would have a unique solution to his problem unavailable elsewhere. Moreover, his letter to his wife starts with a pronoun, implying familiarity with the witches to whom he refers:

They met me in the day of success: and I have learned by the perfectest report, **they** have more in **them** than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question **them** further, **they** made themselves air, into which **they** vanished. Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it, came missives from the king, who all-hailed me “Thane of Cawdor”; by which title, before, these weird sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time, with “Hail, king that shalt be!” (1.5.1-13, emphasis added)

It is as if Macbeth cannot bring himself to name the witches, but equally importantly, the use of pronouns suggests that Lady Macbeth would know of whom he was speaking, even before referring to them as the “weird sisters.”¹⁶ Such familiarity would make sense if the witches were the midwives present for Lady Macbeth’s delivery. Earlier, in his “fatal vision,” Macbeth says that “witchcraft celebrates / Pale Hecate’s offerings, and wither’d murder,” which very well could be a reference to the murder of infants to sustain the powers of witches, and Macbeth’s “eternal jewel” has already been “given” to the witches “to make them kings—the seed of Banquo kings” (3.1.68, 70). If Lady Macbeth was the survivor of a Cesarean section, the experience would have been immensely traumatic for her, as such operations would obviously have been performed without anesthesia, and as such would have been painful in the extreme. But, worse yet, the uterus would not have been removed during the operation, meaning that if she were to become pregnant again she would likely have had to undergo a similar operation, just as is the case today. As such, her request for sterility would have been quite understandable, and her threatened infanticide could

be an attempt to separate herself from her fertility, which would have been a mortal threat to her. For Macbeth's part, watching his wife recover would also have been traumatic, as would the lack of closure—as a man, he would not have been allowed in the delivery room, and thus would not have had the opportunity to meet his child, nor would he have had the chance to say goodbye, and he would have had to face the reality that he could never have the child that he so desired. Moreover, the repeated reminders of children—Duncan's children, the "sleepy grooms" (2.2.49), Fleance, and Macduff's children, the "lily-livered boy" (5.3.15), and Young Siward—as well as his exposure to the witches, would only serve as painful reminders of his loss.

Undoubtedly, a Cesarean section would have been traumatic—not only for Lady Macbeth, who would have been conscious during the surgery—but also for Macbeth, who would have had to deal with both the death of his child and the threatened death of his wife. Cathy Caruth, whose *Unclaimed Experience* is considered the basis for trauma theory, writes of the paradoxical nature of trauma, explaining how the mind is often unable to deal with the trauma directly, and so "the return of the traumatizing event appears in many respects like a waking memory . . . it can nonetheless only occur in the mode of a symptom or a dream," and yet the mind "can do nothing but repeat the destructive event over and over again."¹⁷ Such symptoms might be somnambulism or hallucinations, both of which are experienced by the Macbeths. This creates a vicious cycle in which life is a living nightmare of repetitions and flashbacks of a trauma that the mind cannot handle.

If she had undergone a Cesarean operation, then we should expect that elements of the operation would be unconsciously recreated by Macbeth and his wife. Cesarean sections, as they were portrayed in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, often showed a woman lying on a table, with a large vertical incision (or a hole) in the abdomen out of

which the child was removed. Such a procedure would have been completed, again, without anesthesia, and so Lady Macbeth would have been conscious and would have had a very limited view of what was happening. What she likely would have been able to see would have been things that were raised above her abdomen and into her line of sight: the bloody infant, the knife used for the operation, and the bloody hands of the midwife.

Bloody children are twice explicitly portrayed in the play. The first time is Lady Macbeth's threatened infanticide, where she says that she would have "dash'd [the infant's] brains out" (1.7.58), an image that is impossible to imagine without blood. The second occurrence comes when Macbeth visits the witches after the banquet and they summon an apparition of a bloody child, which seems to affect Macbeth viscerally. While Cesareans were performed using surgical tools, all of the illuminations of the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance illustrated daggers and knives as being used in such operations.¹⁸ It is notable, then, that in his "fatal vision," Macbeth envisions a "dagger" with "gouts of blood" (2.1.35, 38, 46); that Lady Macbeth, at the end of her "unsex me" speech, speaks of a "keen knife" (1.5.42, 53); and that daggers are used to kill Duncan and the grooms. Additionally, after Lady Macbeth leaves to "gild the faces" of the grooms, she comments that her hands are as bloody as her husband's, recreating the bloody hands that she would have seen during her operation. And, of course, bloody hands are a focus of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, where even in sleep, she is haunted. While this speech portrays her guilt at being complicit in Macbeth's stream of murders, it also re-imagines elements of her operation, not only with bloody hands, but with the pen used to (presumably) write her confession, which would be shaped much like a dagger. Finally, much of her speech in this scene seems to be directed at a child, rather than her husband: she gives the advice that he should "wash [his] hands; put on [his] nightgown; [and] look not so pale"

(5.1.64-65), advice that sounds much like a bedtime ritual for a scared child. Her final lines perhaps demonstrate this sense of a parent speaking to a child even more clearly: "To bed, to bed! there's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand," she says; "What's done cannot be undone.—To bed, to bed, to bed!" (5.1.67-70). The repetition of simple imperatives and the gesture of intended comfort increase the sense that the end of her sleepwalking scene is meant for a child, tying together the three likely things she would have seen during the operation.

Earlier, I mentioned how Roussett's *Hysterotomotokie* was not well received by contemporaries or by Europe in general. If an experienced surgeon was admonished for advocating or intervening in a difficult delivery before the mother had passed on, then one can only imagine the backlash that individuals might face should the mother survive the child after such an operation. Given the already contemptuous view of midwives and their association with witches, it's not hard to imagine how a couple might be perceived by the community after such an experience; in addition to the loss of a child and the very real possibility of the woman dying from the operation, the couple would likely have been seen as having convened with unnatural forces, if they were not themselves seen as unnatural. This perhaps explains why the Macbeths shy away from their community after they take the throne and why they go to such lengths to maintain a role that they seem not to want; if they're already positioned outside the community as a result of circumstance, then the best place to be is on top.

Early moderns generally viewed grief as dangerous, precisely because it could cause madness, which was often called *distraktion*—perhaps the most well-known example of which is in *Hamlet*, where Hamlet refers to his mind as a "distracted globe" and where Ophelia is notably "distract"—a condition in which sufferers lost their humanity and were reduced to their baser selves. According to Erin Sullivan

in *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England*, unlike other passions or forms of sadness in the Renaissance, grief could not be treated medically: physicians of the time “stressed the limitations of physical remedies.”¹⁹ Malcolm’s suggestion that they should “weep [their] sad bosoms empty” (4.3.2) also would have been ill-advised by most physicians, since many believed that expressions of “excessive and prolonged” grief could have dire consequences.²⁰ Instead, treatment focused on managing the condition through reason, diversion and counsel; in essence, the medical advice for grief was very similar to the advice that the Scottish doctor gives to Macbeth: “Therein the patient / Must minister to himself” (5.3.45-46). Given the nature of the Macbeths’ loss, it is unlikely that they could properly express their grief, nor would they be able to find counsel for a tragedy without precedence, compounding an already impossible situation.²¹ Perhaps then, two of Shakespeare’s most notorious villains are best understood not so much as seeking sovereignty over a country, but instead over their own minds and lives.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all quotations from Shakespeare’s plays are from *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. Ann Thompson, David Scott Kastan, Richard Proudfoot, rev. ed. (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2011).

2. Stephanie Chamberlain, “Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England,” *College Literature* 32, no. 3 (2005): 72-91, accessed October 25, 2016, <http://jstor.org/stable/25115288>; and Jenijoy La Belle, “‘A Strange Infirmary’: Lady Macbeth’s Amenorrhea,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1980): 381-86, accessed October 24, 2016, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2869201>>.

3. Lynne Dickson Bruckner, “Let Grief Convert to Anger’: Authority and Affect in *Macbeth*,” *Macbeth: New Critical Essays*, ed. Nick Moschovakis (New York: Routledge, 2008), 196, 199.

4. Christine Couche, “The Macbeth’s Secret,” in *Rapt in Secret Studies’: Emerging Shakespeares*, ed. Daryll Chalk and Laurie Johnson (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010),

163. Couche's argument is very similar to an earlier draft of this study, although I read hers after completing my own. However, I think that our arguments differ in two crucial ways. First, early on in her study, she says that her approach is historical, rather than psychological, whereas my approach is cross-disciplinary with a heavy psychological slant. Second, her focus is on proving the existence of the lost child—for which I am indebted to her—and mine looks more at how the grief stemming from that loss, a repressed grief, serves as a form of motivation in Macbeth. However, because the two studies are similar, I wanted to take a moment to acknowledge this fact. It is my hope that they complement and support each other, rather than compete.

5. In the First Folio, as in Holinshed, Inverness is spelled "Enuernes," potentially pronounced as "inwardness." Shakespeare, being the lover of puns that he was, might have been commenting on the necessity of looking inward, an interpretation that would further support the notion that the castle is, in a sense, their heart and soul.

6. Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004). See also Joanna Levin, "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," *ELH* 69, no.1 (2002): 21-55, accessed October 25 2016, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30032010>, which explores Macbeth through the lens of both witchcraft and hysteria to show how one essentially replaced the other. Hysteria, which was also referred to as "The Suffocation of the Mother," was thought to be caused by either unsatisfying sex, or more often, a lack of children. As the language of illness was shifting, apparently "suffocation of the mother" was eventually shortened colloquially to "The Mother." This means that in early modern England, "mother" could refer either to a woman who had borne a child, or to one who had not.

7. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

8. Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (Digireads, 2009), quoted in Blumenfeld-Kosinski, 93-115. Kramer's work was first published in 1486 and went through 20 editions by 1520. Summers's translation dates from 1928.

9. François Roussett related the Nufers' experience in *The Hysteromotokie of Caesarian Birth*, ed. Thomas F. Baskett, trans. Ronald M. Cyr (London: Cambridge University Press, 2010), quoted in Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*, 39-43.

10. *Ibid.* 45.

11. Because of the differences in Forman's review and the F1 version of *Macbeth*, his review has long been discredited as unreliable. However,

two recent articles in *Notes and Queries* by Ingrid Benecke Stuttgart argue compellingly that Forman's accounts are likely accurate, and that Forman saw a different version of the play than the one with which we are familiar. If true, this is exciting news for Shakespearean scholarship, as it would provide evidence into how revisions of plays might have been handled on the Jacobean stage. Ingrid Benecke Stuttgart, "Simon Forman's Notes on *Macbeth*—The Alternative Reading," *Notes and Queries*, 57.3 (2010): 389-93, doi:10.1093/notesj/gjq101, and Ingrid Benecke Stuttgart, "The Shorter Stage Version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* as Seen through Simon Forman's Eyes," *Notes and Queries*, 61.2 (2014): 246-53, doi:10.1093/notesj/gju068. Forman's entire essay is quoted in Barbara H. Traister, "'Matrix and the Pain Thereof': A Sixteenth-Century Gynaecological Essay," *Medical History* 35, no. 4 (1991): 436-51.

12. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*, 1.

13. Shakespeare borrowed this "unseaming" image from an early play of Marlowe's, *Dido, Queen of Carthage*, where the context is a rather dramatic description of Priam's murder (2.1.56). This image, then, is one that would have been associated with Pyrrhus, who is at least partially credited with the fall of Troy.

14. Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*.

15. Shakespeare, of course, will mimic Forman's phrasing in *The Winter's Tale*, also in a moment discussing reproduction, at least in a sense. The full quotation pertaining to art and nature is as follows: "But yf any of the vaines or ceells of the matrix be stopte then againste this tyme youe muste labor to vnstop them that nature maie haue his course that when the course dothe com, the matrix and nature by the helpe of arte may thorowely exempte her selfe and cast out all filthines that is in her. . . . Ther is alsoe a purging of the matrix by medison which is done violently and artifically. The other 3 manners of the purging of the matrix is naturally, but this artifically. Therefore we oughte wisly to ioine arte and nature together." Barbara H. Traister, "'Matrix and the Pain Thereof': A Sixteenth-Century Gynaecological Essay," *Medical History* 35, no. 4 (1991): 442-44.

16. For a much more thorough discussion of naming, particularly moments in which *Macbeth* cannot name people or things, see Carmine G. Di Biase, "'I Am as I have Spoken': The Act of Naming in *Macbeth*," *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance Et Réforme* 25, no. 1 (2001): 23-44, *MLA International Bibliography*, EBSCO host (accessed September 30, 2017).

17. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 60, 63.

18. Blumenfeld-Kosinski, *Not of Woman Born*.

19. Erin Sullivan, *Beyond Melancholy: Sadness and Selfhood in Renaissance England* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23.

20. Lynne Dickson Bruckner, "Let Grief Convert to Anger: Authority and Affect in *Macbeth*," *Macbeth: New Critical Essays*, ed. Nick Moschovakis, (New York: Routledge, 2008), 193.

21. An exploration of the early modern concept of grief and how it informs this interpretation of *Macbeth* is the topic of another essay of mine, which is currently unpublished: "To Cure this Deadly Grief: Grief and Loss in Early Modern England."