"To be wrenched with an unlineal hand": The Temporality of Legacy in *Macbeth*

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Why does Macbeth order the murder of Macduff's family? Macduff is a threat to Macbeth's power, and Macbeth has been warned to beware Macduff. Although the murder of Macduff's family serves as an act of revenge for Macduff's resistance, Macbeth's order is an exercise of tyranny over the people and lineal successions—over the present and the future. Macbeth's tyrannical desire for greater power is a shared characteristic with Shakespeare's other tyrants. Particular to *Macbeth*, however, is the focus on inheritance and lineal succession. Macbeth's attempts to prevent the lineal rule of Duncan and Banquo, while simultaneously trying to establish his own hereditary dynasty, suggests the desire to extend his rule and power to a longer stretch of time—to a new scale. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the different scalar operations of time—temporality and eternity—are reflected in the different scalar operations of politics—the individual and the body politic. Macbeth's tragedy lies in his attempt and ultimate failure to cross the scalar threshold of temporal politics.

In this paper, I argue that the concerns with succession and the transition of power in *Macbeth* encompass a broader concern about the nature of sovereignty. I begin with an overview of the political concerns of England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries and how *Macbeth*'s concerns with stability and sovereignty gesture to this historical context. Scholars have long

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read *Macbeth* in the context of Jacobean politics and Elizabeth I's succession crisis. Though my argument is grounded in the question of succession within the play itself, this political context sheds light on Shakespeare's broader concerns with sovereignty. I then turn to an analysis of the play that focuses on the prophecy and Macbeth's relationship to lineal succession. My argument is indebted to the works of scholars who have analyzed the temporality of politics in *Macbeth* and who have specifically focused on the questions surrounding children in the play. Finally, I conclude with a brief look at Scotland's future at the end of the play. Whereas some scholars read *Macbeth* as cyclical and point out that Macbeth's defeat and Malcolm's bestowal of new titles echo the actions of Macdonwald and Duncan suggesting that the conditions for tyranny are not remedied, others argue that Malcolm's political reformation heals Scotland's corrupt body politic. I maintain that the disruption of lineal succession and the prophetic foreknowledge that Banquo's issue will be kings (indeed, James I's Stuart lineage claims descent from Banquo) leaves Scotland's future ambiguous and accentuates the precarity of sovereignty.

Macbeth's concern with stability and sovereignty, as exhibited by Macbeth's relationship to lineal suggestion, gestures towards the politics of England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The question of succession at the end of Elizabeth I's reign raised concerns about the transition of power. Though *Macbeth* was written after James I's crowning, this debate lingers in the background.[1] Elizabeth I's status as the Virgin Queen is key to the succession crisis; without an heir, who would succeed the throne upon her death? Elizabeth I's lack of a direct heir was a cause for concern because of the number of claimants to the throne. Despite James VI's of Scotland's stronger hereditary claim to the English throne, there were numerous rival claimants.[2] James VI therefore believed that he needed official endorsement of his right to succession from Elizabeth herself.[3] The explicit endorsement and confirmation by parliament has parallels to the system of tanistry that is seen in *Macbeth*. Despite James VI's status as the most likely successor and heir apparent, Elizabeth I refused to recognize him formally. Elizabeth I had legitimate political concerns for doing so, such as deterring Scottish policies that clashed with English interests, but her refusal (much like Macbeth's desire to hold on

to power without an heir) also indicates her desire to maintain her own position of power.[4] Arthur Bradley reads *Macbeth* as the story of a "power struggle no[t] merely over the ancient throne of Scotland but over possession of a sovereign future that clearly extends up to, and includes, the Stuart monarchy of Shakespeare's own time."[5] The parallel between the power struggle over who would succeed Elizabeth I to the English throne and Macbeth's power struggle to claim the Scottish throne is clear.

Unlike Macbeth's accession to power, James VI's transition to power was relatively peaceful. Once in power, James I emphasized his hereditary right. The Act of Recognition made clear James I's stance on his hereditary title.[6] In doing so, James I emphasized both his hereditary right and the establishment of his own legacy. James I's inheritance of the English crown was not his inheritance of the Tudor legacy (much like Macbeth's inheritance of the Scottish crown is not his inheritance of Duncan's legacy). James I instead constructed his own Stuart legacy to legitimize his inheritance of the English crown as well as that of Scotland.[7] James I's emphasis on establishing his own legacy indicates his desire to extend his rule and influence beyond his individual reign. Inheriting the Tudor lineage would make James I part of someone else's original line, whereas establishing a Stuart lineage would make James I the founder of a new legacy. Macbeth's attempt to establish a legacy reflects Shakespeare's commentary on James I's move. But *Macbeth* cannot be reduced merely to this one, specific historical moment. The play itself is thinking through contemporary early modern political debates through the story of a medieval king.

Succession and the transition of power in *Macbeth* encompass a broader concern about the nature of sovereignty. Shakespeare's depiction of the instability in Macbeth's Scotland is, at its core, about the stable transition of power. But the questions of who succeeds and is fit to rule implicate the nature of sovereignty itself. The emphasis on Macbeth's violence and tyranny foregrounds the fear that an individual might attempt to exceed the body politic. The political concerns of *Macbeth*, then, are scalar because of the nature of the individual and the body politic. The individual represents a portion of the body politic, but the institution (in this case the monarchy) is an encompassing whole. Macbeth's concern with legacy is reflective of his concern with extending his

individual rule beyond temporal existence. Thus, the political is analogous to the temporal; the individual is to temporality as the institution is to eternity. Macbeth's tragedy lies in his attempt and ultimate failure to cross this scalar threshold; he is always bound by his scale.

From the moment of the Weird Sisters' prophecy, Macbeth is already thinking about the future and his political legacy. When the Weird Sisters disappear after their initial interaction with Macbeth and Banquo, Macbeth is the first to refer to the prophecy. The first thing that Macbeth says to Banquo about their prophetic greeting is in reference to Banquo's issue: "Your children shall be kings" (1.3.87).[8] It is significant that the part of the prophecy that Macbeth chooses to mention first is not about himself, but rather is about Banquo's issue—about his countryman's legacy. Banquo himself will not be king, but unlike Macbeth, Banquo has been promised a future. Macbeth is already thinking about the limits of his role as king; he will necessarily be bound to his time as ruler without the ability to extend his rule through a monarchical dynasty. All that Macbeth can achieve is a temporary hold on power, be it as king or thane. But a temporary hold on power is not a political achievement for Macbeth. He is always thinking about his future, and this is evident when Macbeth and Banquo realize that aspects of the prophecy are true. When Macbeth is informed by Ross that he is now the Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth realizes that one part of the prophecy is already fulfilled. All that remains is the kingship. Macbeth, ever future-minded, again refers to Banquo's issue: "Do you not hope your children shall be kings, / When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me / Promised no less to them?" (1.3.120-122). Macbeth cannot eagerly anticipate being named king because he knows that it will be a temporary rule. It is Banquo who will have a lasting legacy.

Despite knowing that his time and influence as king will be limited, Macbeth shows signs of a desire to rule. This desire is indicative of Macbeth's wish to seize control of the prophecy. Macbeth believes that if he can ensure the prophecy, then he can also prevent parts of the prophecy. In an early aside, Macbeth regards the prophecy as neutral: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (1.3.132-133). The prophecy "cannot be ill" because it has given Macbeth "earnest of success / Commencing in

a truth" (1.3.134-135) by telling him that he is Thane of Cawdor. When Macbeth considers that the prophecy "cannot be good," however, he exhibits a murderous intent:

> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
> Against the use of nature? (1.3.136-139)

The suggestion that Macbeth imagines is murder, for he cannot become king without Duncan's death. Macbeth's unfixed hair and erratically beating heart suggest that he fears the temptation to do evil. Indeed, while the Weird Sisters are giving the prophecy, Banquo notices Macbeth's discomfort and asks, "Good, sir, why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (1.3.52-53). From the moment he hears the prophecy, Macbeth cannot help but think about murder. For him to "yield to that suggestion" is to desire to take matters into his own hands. In the Weird Sisters' prophetic greeting to Macbeth, the only title yet to come is that of king. Macbeth at the moment of his encounter with the Weird Sisters is already the Thane of Cawdor, although he does not yet know it. But his kingship lies in the future: "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter" (1.3.51). The title of king is the only one Macbeth can act to achieve. And if Macbeth can become king, then perhaps he can prevent Banquo's issue from becoming kings. Whatever the case, Macbeth must first work through his concerns about taking action. Though Macbeth has not yet suggested murder, that "horrid image" is already present in his imagination. His fears about the thought are so strong that they "[shake] so [his] single state of man / That function is smothered in surmise" (1.3.142-143). Macbeth claims that he cannot act because of his fear. Yet he professes that "[p]resent fears / Are less than horrible imaginings" (1.3.139-140). That is, Macbeth's fear about his temptation to murder Duncan is more terrifying than the act itself. While this reveals Macbeth's moral conflict, it also reveals his ambition because if the act is less terrifying, then Macbeth is more easily swayed to commit murder and more willing to yield to temptation to achieve political power. What, then, are the conditions of Macbeth's early inability to act?

Is Macbeth unable to act because of his conscience or because of his concerns about controlling fate? In other words, is Macbeth unable to act because his conscience tells him that murder is wrong?

Or is Macbeth unable to act because of a concern that should he take control of fate and rush the prophecy (an act that disrupts the institution), then so too could Banquo rush the prophecy of his children becoming kings (an act that shortens Macbeth's rule)? This distinction is important. In the former, Macbeth's morality and adherence to the institution is greater than his individual desire, whereas in the latter, he prioritizes his rule and legacy over the institution. If Banquo can act, Macbeth must prevent him from acting against him. In either case, Macbeth's present ambivalence about murder results in his relinquishing control to time and fate: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.146-147). Donald W. Foster reads this short aside as a spur to regicide because if Macbeth is crowned king by chance, then he will have gained "[o]nly that which was foretold, a fruitless crown and barren sceptre. But he will have lost much."[9] Foster reads Macbeth as one who needs to "create *himself* as King, that he be crowned not passively by the hands of time and chance, but actively, by his own mortal hands" so that he is not "simply time's slave."[10] Though Foster's reading of him is compelling, it is unclear why Macbeth would not lose much even if he chooses to act. Even by acting to become king, Macbeth is nonetheless "time's slave" because he yields to the future promised by the prophecy. Macbeth's decision not to act is, instead, related to the psychological effects of the prophecy. The foreknowledge of the prophecy—that Macbeth will be king—results in evil that tempts him to commit regicide and the psychological undoing of himself as he wrestles with his imagination and reality: "nothing is, but what is not" (1.3.144). Leaving matters up to chance clears Macbeth's conscience should fate make him king. But if chance will not crown him, then perhaps chance will not crown Banquo's issue either. Leaving the prophecy to chance temporarily absolves Macbeth of the pressures of foreknowledge, particularly that of his failed legacy.

But this relief is fleeting: Macbeth cannot escape concerns about his legacy because the idea has already been planted. When he and Banquo meet Duncan, the king tells Macbeth, "I have begun to plant thee and will labor / To make thee full of growing" (1.4.28-29). Duncan has "begun to plant" Macbeth by naming him Thane of Cawdor. According to the logic of the prophecy, if

Duncan were to name Macbeth his heir, then Macbeth would be "full of growing." During the historical Macbeth's reign, Scotland was not a hereditary monarchy. Instead, Scotland practiced the Celtic system of tanistry, which allowed for an element of choice if several close relatives were eligible to succeed. As kinsman to Duncan, Shakespeare's Macbeth is as eligible as Malcolm is to succeed the king. But if Macbeth pinned his hopes on tanistry, those hopes are unfulfilled. Duncan instead names Malcolm his heir: "We will establish our estate upon / Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter / The Prince of Cumberland" (1.4.37-39). His choice of Malcolm as heir gestures to Scotland's gradual transition, in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, to a hereditary monarchy based on primogeniture.[11] Although Duncan promises that similar honors will be bestowed upon others—"But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine / On all deservers" (1.4.41-42)—these honors matter not because Macbeth desires that which has been bestowed upon Malcolm. Macbeth is now more inclined to fulfill the prophecy because of this unforeseen obstacle:

> The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
> On which I must fall down or else o'er-leap,
> For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires,
> Let not light see my black and deep desires;
> The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
> Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4.48-53)

To be king, Macbeth must either be named heir (i.e., Prince of Cumberland), or he must "o'er-leap" and give into his "black and deep desires"—murder. Since Malcolm has been named heir instead, Macbeth believes his only option is murder. But this decision does not resolve the question of why Macbeth would now choose to act, whereas before he would let "[c]ome what come may, / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day" (1.3.149-150).[12] Why does Macbeth not continue to wait for chance to crown him king?

Before Macbeth did not have to worry about Duncan establishing his legacy because there was always the chance that Macbeth could be named heir. Malcolm becomes an additional obstacle to Macbeth. Even though Malcolm is childless, Duncan has now set the precedent for a hereditary monarchy. Michael Hawkins argues that "Duncan attempts to impose not a hereditary

succession by primogeniture, but a *nominated* one: these are not identical even if the eldest son is nominated, since the whole point of nomination is that he need not be."[13] However, this overlooks the fact that in naming his son as heir, Duncan favors a patrilineal succession regardless of whether it is hereditary or nominated. Rebecca Lemon notes that the nomination of Malcolm satisfies both systems: "as both the nominated Prince of Cumberland and Duncan's son, Malcolm appears to satisfy two systems of inheritance: tanistry, the traditional, Scottish system of indirect inheritance, and primogeniture, the newer system based on direct succession."[14] Thus, Duncan's nomination of Malcolm attempts to move toward the later system. And if Duncan seeks to establish his legacy through Malcolm, then that prevents Macbeth from establishing his own. To do so, Macbeth would have to disrupt the pre-existing legacy, and such a disruption would show that he believes himself to be greater than the institution. This disruption and overshadowing of the institution is, in effect, an act of usurpation.[15] For the individual to be greater than the institution usurps it and the body politic as a whole.

Although the prophecy plants the seed, Macbeth's unfulfilled desires go beyond kingship. Indeed, he has no heir to carry out his legacy. While discussing their plan to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth alludes to motherhood: "I have given suck and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.54-55). Whether the Macbeths ever had children is unclear; what is clear is that the babe she references is not a part of their lives.[16] Luke Wilson draws attention to how Macbeth "never directly complains about being childless, never thinks about how he might beget an heir."[17] As Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth, she should "[b]ring forth men-children only; / For [her] undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1.7.72-74). Wilson argues that Macbeth "seems to see no relation between 'Bring forth men-children only' (1.7.72) and the idea that [Lady Macbeth] might bring forth his men-children, his heirs."[17] But why else would Macbeth focus on male children? Although his remark points to Lady Macbeth's masculine strengths and ambitions, Macbeth needs male heirs to extend his power through legacy. He cannot pass on his titles of Thane of Glamis and Thane of Cawdor because he has no sons who can succeed him. Yet, even greater than such legacy

is the Scottish throne. After Macbeth is crowned, his primary concern becomes the kingship, and his biggest threat is Banquo.

Banquo is threatening for two reasons; he knows about the prophecy, and he has a son. After the murder of Duncan, Banquo suspects Macbeth's wrongdoing: "Thou hast it now—King, Cawdor, Glamis, all / As the weird women promised, and I fear / Thou play'dst most foully for't" (3.1.1-3). Macbeth, however, does not fear Banquo's knowledge of the prophecy; nor does he suspect that his friend knows of his role in Duncan's murder. Instead, Macbeth focuses on Banquo's legacy: "They hailed him father to a line of kings" (3.1.60). Banquo is a threat not only because the prophecy states that his heirs will be kings, but also because Banquo already has a son. Macbeth's enemies are his enemies precisely because they are fathers and he is not, and this is especially the case with Banquo.[19] Macbeth says that "[t]here is none but [Banquo] / Whose being [he does] fear" (3.1.54-55), imposing his own ambitions onto Banquo. Macbeth dared to be king and acted upon that ambition. If Banquo desires the same for his heirs, then Macbeth fears that Banquo will take action, directly threatening Macbeth's life and power. While the prophecy does not state when Banquo's issue will be kings, Macbeth nonetheless fears this eventuality:

> Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
> And put a barren scepter in my grip,
> Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
> No son of mine succeeding. (3.1.61-64)

The descriptions of a "fruitless crown" and a "barren scepter" indicate that Macbeth rages against the temporality of his rule. While "fruitless" and "barren" are markers of fertility, they also represent a promise of the future. Macbeth possesses no heirs: "no son of mine succeeding." Thus, Macbeth's crown is "fruitless" and his scepter is "barren" because without any heirs to succeed him, he will be unable to establish a political dynasty.[20] By leaping over Malcolm and murdering Duncan to become king, all Macbeth has succeeded in doing is making "the seeds of Banquo kings" (3.1.70). Even so, Macbeth retains the delusion that he can challenge the prophecy, evidenced by his desire for fate to come "into the list / And champion [him] to th'utterance" (3.1.71-72). Whether or

not Macbeth views fate as his champion, he hopes that he can overcome the part of the prophecy that foretells Banquo's legacy is.

Macbeth's desire to pick and choose what comes true from the prophecy is an oversight because it operates outside of his temporal scale, which is the present.[21] Prophecies mediate between temporality and divine truths in a way that makes them both accessible and inaccessible to the individual. Macbeth can thus try to speed up or prevent the prophecy because of its temporal nature, but foreknowledge is inaccessible because the future is unknown to the temporally bound. Macbeth's attempts to control the prophecy lead him to inadvertently yield to the prophecy. He acts to become king, thinking that he can prevent Banquo's heirs from achieving their legacies. Despite his orders for Banquo's and Fleance's murders, Macbeth cannot free himself from Banquo's issue. Banquo may be killed, but Fleance's escape guarantees Banquo's succession. As Sarah Wintle and René Weis suggest, "Children (or sons) not only guarantee a man's natural humanity, as they do for Banquo and Duncan and Macduff; they do this precisely because they also guarantee succession, the continuity of the human bond through time, both in the domestic family and in the state."[22] Macbeth, although initially distressed when he hears of Fleance's escape, comforts himself by proclaiming that "the worm that's fled / Hath nature that in time will venom breed, / No teeth for th' present" (3.4.30-32). Fleance is not a present threat and cannot yet put an abrupt end to Macbeth's temporal power. Macbeth rationalizes that he has time before Banquo's issue will be kings—time to establish his own legacy. Alternatively, Joseph Campana reads Macbeth's commitment to destroying Banquo and his heirs as a gesture that "is not merely one of self-preservation; rather, it seeks to destroy the unfolding futurity of paternity by which, ultimately, the sovereignty of a king extends into a dynasty."[23] This is true only insofar as the paternity which extends a king's sovereignty references only Banquo. If Macbeth seeks to destroy another king's extension of sovereignty, it is because he desires to establish his own dynastic succession.

Macbeth's reaction to the dumbshow of Banquo's issue that the Weird Sisters show him suggests that he is concerned with preventing the futurity of others. His agonized reaction stems from the realization that whatever he does, he cannot escape the prophecy:

> Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo. Down!
> Thy crown does sear mine eyeballs! And thy heir,
> Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first.
> A third is like the former. –Filthy hags,
> Why do you show me this? –A fourth! Start, eyes!
> What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?
> Another yet? A seventh! I'll see no more.
> And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass
> Which shows me many more; and some I see
> That two-fold balls and treble scepters carry.
> Horrible sight! Now I see 'tis true,
> For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me,
> And points at them for his. (4.1.111-123)

The line "will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom" is especially telling. Life is necessarily temporal; there is a beginning and an end. The same is true for positions of power, such as the title of king. An individual's reign has a beginning and an end. But the kingship, the institution, exists beyond the individual, and for a legacy to last until the "crack of doom" is to get as close to eternity (within the bounds of temporality) as possible. And it is not just that Macbeth sees Banquo's issue one by one. As Douglas Burnham notes, "Macbeth sees all the Stuart kings in the mirror *at the same time*. This is a preordained time – a time that, even from within it, is *sub specie aeternitatis*."[24] The preordained time of Banquo's issue is represented in relation to the eternal. Unlike Banquo, Macbeth is, for Burnham, in exile himself. Macbeth is exiled from eternity because he cannot establish a legacy. The apparitions remind him, in fact, that he has no future, and he cannot bear to see Banquo's legacy when he has none. As Wintle and Weis argue, "All these children, and descendants, bloody or not, cruelly emphasize the fruitlessness of Macbeth's predicament, the fact that his childlessness ensures that his achievement has no future. The visions themselves represent the future, that future which Macbeth has tried in vain to make for himself, but in this play making the future legitimately depends on the making of children."[25] If Macbeth's achievement (i.e., murdering Duncan to become king) promises no future, then what is the point? Macbeth is satisfied neither with his reign nor the confines of the present. It is at this point where time and life lose all meaning for Macbeth because he

knows that he cannot escape the bounds of temporality. He knows that without a future all that he possesses has no meaning.

Despite this meaninglessness, the only thing Macbeth can do is hold onto the power that he has. Thus, he acts to prevent the prophesies from coming true. This is clear in his dealings with Macduff. Macduff is suspicious of Macbeth from the beginning. Upon the discovery of Duncan's murder, Macbeth kills Duncan's chamberlains and claims that he did so out of "fury" (2.3.103). Macduff is the only one to question Macbeth's actions and demand an explanation: "Wherefore did you so?" (2.3.105). Macduff's obvious suspicion of Macbeth continues when he does not go to Scone to see Macbeth invested; rather, he claims that he will go home to Fife. Macduff's unstated rebuke is repeated when he chooses not to attend Macbeth's celebratory banquet. Noting his absence, Macbeth asks Lady Macbeth, "How say'st thou that Macduff denies his person / At our great bidding?" (3.4.130-132). These are two public instances where Macduff refuses to support Macbeth. Instead, Macduff flees to England to solicit Malcolm's aid. Despite this and Macbeth's earlier worry that they "have scorched the snake, not killed it" (3.2.13)—that they are safe from enemies—Macbeth does not take action until the Weird Sisters warn him to beware Macduff. Yet the actions he takes are against Macduff's issue:

> The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
> Seize upon Fife, give to th'edge o'th' sword
> His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
> That trace him in his line. (4.1.149-152)

Macduff is in England, so Macbeth harms all "[t]hat trace [Macduff] in his line." Margaret Omberg notes Macbeth's decision to murder Macduff's issue: "Yet the ruthlessness of these murders seems out of proportion to Macduff's offence or the threat he poses, particularly as he had no claim to the throne. Seen in the context of Macbeth's preoccupation with his own childlessness, however, his revenge on Macduff is more understandable and has been well prepared for during the first two scenes of Act IV."[26] Key to Omberg's reading is that the young Macduff is "murdered on stage, accentuating the priority of disposing of the heir, while Lady Macduff is killed off-stage … [This] is a visual manifestation of Macbeth's uncontrollable fury of his own barrenness which will

mean the extinction of his own line."[27] Macbeth tyrannically lashes out against his inability to produce heirs by attacking those who have children. By doing so, Macbeth's tyranny transcends temporal bounds; tyrants become enemies of the future. Stephen Greenblatt argues that "[t]yranny attempts to poison not merely the present but generations to come, to extend itself forever."[28] Nowhere is this more true in Shakespeare's plays than in ones where tyrants target children to prevent sovereign succession, as is the case in *Macbeth*. Macbeth's attacks on his enemies are actions against the future. But like a king's reign, a tyrant's reign is temporal. Even tyranny is a temporary transcendence of temporality; Macbeth's tyrannical actions in the present target the future, but once he is gone he is unable to target the future. That is, Macbeth's tyranny ends with his defeat.

Thus, the more that Macbeth resists the prophecy, the more meaningless does life itself (and thus the future) become. Once Macbeth is informed that the English forces are upon him, he displays signs of inner defeat:

> I have lived long enough. My way of life
> Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have, but in their stead,
> Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
> Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not. (5.3.22-28)

Macbeth knows that his time is coming to an end. His only legacy is a cursed one for he will forever be known as a tyrant. From regicide and withholding Malcolm's political birthright to the murders of Banquo and Macduff's wife and children, Macbeth's crimes against the people and the state are tyrannical and unjust. Scotland is a "suffering country / Under a hand accursed" (3.1.49-50). Macbeth describes the people's curses as "not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath," or whispers, and he claims that "the poor heart would fain deny and dare not." Although he recognizes that he is viewed as a tyrant, Macbeth contends that fear will keep them at bay. His tyranny is, instead, met with resistance, and the people's support of Malcolm demonstrates a commitment to justice. When Malcolm claims he would be a greater tyrant than Macbeth, Macduff

proclaims: "These evils thou repeat'st upon thyself / Have banished me from Scotland" (4.3.113-114). Macduff flees tyranny to resist it. Macbeth's continued tyranny is thus unquestionable, and he fears both failing to establish a legacy and being remembered as the tyrant he has become.

Cursed with the reputation of a tyrant and unable to achieve a political legacy deeply trouble Macbeth. Life becomes meaningless because Macbeth realizes that his attempts to transcend the bounds of his temporal scale are, and always have been, futile:

> Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,
> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
> Signifying nothing. (5.5.19-28)

Life is "but a walking shadow" in the grand scheme of "the stage," or the entire stretch of time. Similarly, the king's rule is a "walking shadow" in the grand scheme of the institution. Macbeth's time as king is limited to the "hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more." Whereas another king may have successors to inherit the "hour upon the stage," Macbeth does not. Macbeth's lack of heirs means that the hour cannot be repeated. An heir would enable Macbeth to repeat the hour in name. Thus, his tale of being king is "full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing" because his rule cannot constitute the start of a monarchical dynasty.[29] The "sound and fury" of Macbeth's reign are his tyrannical attempts to establish a legacy in spite of the prophecy and the well-being of the body politic. Because Macbeth fails, his attempts signify nothing because they do nothing to extend the future. It is not just "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" that "creeps in this petty pace from day to day, / To the last syllable of recorded time." It is also kings that creep in from reign to reign, to the end of monarchy or to the end of time. The issue for Macbeth is that it will not be his heirs that creep in from reign to reign; it will be those of Banquo.

In the end, it is not Macbeth who wins, but time. The more he tries to control the prophecy, the more he guarantees its complete

fulfillment. When they meet on the battlefield, Macduff tells Macbeth that he will live on to be remembered as the tyrant that he is:

> Then yield thee, coward,
> And live to be the show and gaze o'th' time.
> We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,
> Painted upon a pole and underwrit,
> 'Here may you see the tyrant'. (5.7.53-57)

Macbeth's desire to transcend both his temporal and political scalar bounds ends with Macbeth's curse: he will be "the show and gaze o'th' time." Rather than transcending temporality's bounds, Macbeth will permanently be confined by them. The cruelty of time that Macbeth has thus far experienced is the condition of temporality and his inability to establish a successive legacy. The cruelty of time that Macduff promises is that Macbeth will forever be known as a tyrant. Macbeth's response that "[he] will not yield / To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet, / And to be baited with the rabble's curse" (5.7.57-59) is indicative of his desire to prevent the tyrannical reputation that Macduff promises. Despite all odds, Macbeth "will try the last" (5.7.62) to delay this fate. When Macbeth inevitably falls, Macduff enters holding his severed head, proclaiming: "[t]he time is free" (5.7.85). The time is free because Macbeth can no longer inflict his limited temporality onto all others. The time is free because the political system is free. Macbeth's inability to create a legacy of hereditary succession proves disruptive. As Malcolm Smuts notes, "Uncertain rules of succession are disruptive because they disrupt the bonds that connect societies to the past and the future, rendering political achievements transient and futile".[30] Indeed, this disruption usurps the political system. When Macbeth disrupts the transference of power, he destabilizes Scottish monarchy itself. Rhodri Lewis notes that it is not until Macbeth's defeat that he is referred to as a usurper: "Macbeth is thus recast as a 'usurper,' not because his election was illegitimate or because he murdered Duncan, but because he has interfered with what is now implied to be the naturally patrilineal succession of the crown from father to eldest son."[31] He attempts to prevent, in other words, a monarchical dynasty.

Although Macbeth's defeat frees Scotland from tyranny, his disruption of the political system leaves open the question

of Scotland's future. Alisa Manninen argues that "the lineages of the play remained focused on disturbances, not natural continuities."[32] Macbeth's tyranny has disrupted the future lineages of the remaining characters. Macduff is left without a wife and children. Malcolm will indeed be crowned king, but Malcolm, like Macbeth before him, has no sons. Moreover, Malcolm's lineage will necessarily be disturbed because it is Banquo's issue that will reign. David Scott Kastan notes the uncomfortable ending of reestablishing sovereignty through Duncan's lineage and argues that *Macbeth* "at once demonizes the disruption of 'lawfull discent' and seemingly insists upon it, valorizes the concept of legitimacy and discloses its instability."[33] Alternatively, Philip Goldfarb Styrt reads Scotland's future in a positive light and focuses on Malcolm's political reforms: "Malcolm's reforms represent a change in the political structure of Scotland that promises an internal Scottish solution to the troubles that have plagued the country under kings both good (Duncan) and bad (Macbeth)."[34] Styrt focuses on how the transformation of thanes into earls helps develop feudalism in Scotland, and he argues that the potential for tyranny is reduced by strengthening the nobility. Malcolm's new earls are "hereditary lords, with full power over their lands and the freedom to know that their heirs will inherit after them."[35] Moreover, all earls would be bound to counsel the king, which "decreases the degree to which the fate of Scotland lies in the hands of the king alone and increases the collective power of the former thanes."[36] Although the introduction of counsel is a compelling argument in favor of increased stability, what promises that this change to the political system in Scotland will be successful and peaceful? Shakespeare's plays are full of tyranny and violence despite the counsel of (indeed, often with help from) the nobility. Why is Malcolm any different than, for example, Richard II, whose poor counselors do not mitigate tyranny? While Malcolm's reforms may very well eliminate tyranny, the play's ending is ambiguous. Much more compelling, then, is Alisa Manninen's reading of the continued disturbances in *Macbeth*: "The play ends as it began, with the killing of a thane of Cawdor and the granting of new titles to loyal nobility. These strategies failed to contain Macbeth's treason."[37] This is not to say, however, that the play's Scotland will be plagued by tyranny. Kastan's reading of the duality of the

ending (which demonizes descent and valorizes sovereignty) best points to the ambiguity of Scotland's future. Although the promise of James I's rule and relative stability is realized in Shakespeare's present, the violent disruptions of lineal succession in *Macbeth* are not easily resolved. The play thus ends with an emphasis on the precariousness of sovereignty.

The political is scalar because of its relation to the temporal. The individual and the institution are analogous to temporality and eternity. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, these scalar operations are disrupted. Macbeth's desire to establish a dynasty at the expense of all others, including the institution itself, is his attempt to break free from his scalar bounds. Macbeth aims to place himself in a mock eternity—an existence outside of temporality—where he will reign and establish a legacy, while simultaneously reducing everyone else to temporality. But in doing so, Macbeth seeks to become larger than the whole—the body politic. The issue is not that Macbeth cannot establish a successive legacy. The issue is that because Macbeth cannot do so, he seeks to prevent others from doing so as well. The former is Macbeth's tragedy, whereas the latter is his tyranny. His tyranny is the disruption of a temporal, political process. He disrupts the succession of Malcolm, and in doing so, disrupts the institution itself. The instability of Macbeth's rule seeks to prevent the succession of all political or hereditary positions in an attempt to reduce everyone to the individual and the temporal. By disrupting succession, Macbeth seeks to prevent it. Such a disruption is chaotic because it breaks the socio-political bonds that exist across time. Indeed, Macbeth seeks to prevent those bonds from forming in the first place. But as the rebellion against Macbeth shows, no individual is greater than the body politic. Macbeth may have a fruitless crown and a barren sceptre, but Scotland itself does not.

Notes

1. *Macbeth* is generally believed to have been first performed in 1606; James VI of Scotland was crowned James I of England in 1603. For more context, see Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson, "*Macbeth*, the Jacobean Scot, and the Politics of the Union," *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 47.2 (2007): 380.

2. Susan Doran, and Paulina Kewes, "Introduction: A Historiographical Perspective," in *Doubtful and Dangerous: The Question of Succession in Late Elizabethan England*, ed. Susan Doran and Paulina Kewes (Manchester:

Manchester University Press, 2014), 4. Though these rival claims were problematic, due to religion, foreignness, gender, or experience, they nonetheless had some stake of legitimacy that threatened James VI's claim. See the rest of *Doubtful and Dangerous: The Question of Succession in Late Elizabethan England* for more context.

3. James VI needed Elizabeth's explicit endorsement and the confirmation of parliament "to be sure of the crown." Doran and Kewes, "Introduction: A Historiographical Perspective," 5.

4. Elizabeth I distrusted James VI. Withholding official recognition of James VI as her heir was a tactic Elizabeth I employed to keep James VI in line if his Scottish policies appeared to be against English interests. Moreover, the uncertainty regarding her succession would keep her subjects loyal to her as opposed to the heir. Doran and Kewes, "Introduction: A Historiographical Perspective," 5.

5. Arthur Bradley, "Untimely Ripped: Macbeth's Children," in *Unbearable Life: A Genealogy of Political Erasure* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 74.

6. The Act of Recognition reaffirmed James I's lawful and, importantly, undoubtful, succession to the English throne, which James I himself emphasized in his first speech to parliament in March 1604. Doran and Kewes, "Introduction: A Historiographical Perspective," 12.

7. James I's Stuart legacy was "a constructed mythology of an ancient and noble lineage, similar to the Arthurian lineage embraced by the Tudors." Alker and Nelson, "Macbeth, the Jacobean Scot, and the Politics of the Union," 392.

8. All quotations from *Macbeth* are from William Shakespeare, *Macbeth, The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2016), 2709-2774.

9. Donald W. Foster, "Macbeth's War on Time," *English Literary Renaissance* 16.2 (1986): 328.

10. Foster, "Macbeth's War on Time," 328.

11. Malcolm Smuts, "Banquo's Progeny: Hereditary Monarchy, the Stuart Lineage, and Macbeth," in *Renaissance Historicism: Essays in Honor of Arthur F. Kinney*, ed. James M. Dutcher and Anne Lake Prescott (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2008), 227.

12. In addition to not being named heir, Macbeth may here already be showing concern with his lack of issue: "Though it does appear logical that if he is to be the new king, Duncan's heir is an obvious obstacle, there is something more sinister in his cry 'The Prince of Cumberland!' (I, iv, 350). Macbeth is likewise a nobleman of Scotland, and yet he does not have an heir." Milena Kaličanin, and Nina Miladinović, "Moral Corruption in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," *Belgrade English Language and Literature Studies* 11 (2019): 218.

13. Michael Hawkins, "History, Politics, and Macbeth," in F*ocus on Macbeth*, ed. John Russell Brown (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 175.

14. Rebecca Lemon, "Scaffolds of Treason in *Macbeth*," *Theatre Journal* 54.1 (2002): 39.

15. Macbeth does not usurp Duncan (or Malcolm) because he is officially elected to the throne, thus his title of king is legitimate. But Macbeth's disruption

of Duncan's lineage is a usurpation because it is Macbeth's attempt to be greater than the political institution.

16. Though the child in question may be Lady Macbeth's son (who is referenced in Holinshed's Chronicles) from a previous marriage, Malcolm Smuts points to the significance of Shakespeare's decision not to refer to this son elsewhere: "by suppressing any other reference to this son, Shakespeare leaves open the possibility that the Macbeths have lost a child, causing maternal feelings to become twisted into a fierce ambition tinged with rage." Smuts, "Banquo's Progeny: Hereditary Monarchy, the Stuart Lineage, and Macbeth," 240. Though Smuts only analyzes Lady Macbeth's lines, Macbeth's response, "bring forth men-children only," is equally reflective of ambition tinged with, if not rage, then obsession. Macbeth's desire for only male children is reflective of his obsessive desire to establish a political legacy through a hereditary monarchical system.

17. Luke Wilson, "*Macbeth* and the Contingency of Future Persons," Shakespeare Studies 40 (2012): 55.

18. Wilson, "*Macbeth* and the Contingency of Future Persons," 56.

19. Macbeth's principal murder targets are all fathers or sons: "The structure of the play shows Macbeth constantly coming up against one father/son combination after another." Margaret Omberg, "Macbeth's Barren Sceptre," *Studia Neophilologica: A Journal of Germanic and Romanic Philology* 68 (1996): 40.

20. Holinshed's Chronicles makes explicit in the Weird Sisters' prophecy that Macbeth will never "leave anie issue behind him to succeed in his place." Omberg, "Macbeth's Barren Sceptre," 40.

21. Prophecy itself is a different scale: "In *Macbeth*, prophetic discourse instead presumes the ability to access a third order of time, situated at some point between history and the all-seeing verities of the divine." Rhodri Lewis, "Polychronic *Macbeth*," *Modern Philology* 117.3 (2020): 336.

22. Sarah Wintle, and René Weis, "*Macbeth* and the Barren Sceptre," *Essays in Criticism* XLI.2 (1991): 133.

23. Joseph Campana, "The Child's Two Bodies: Shakespeare, Sovereignty, and The End of Succession," *ELH* 81.3 (2014): 830.

24. Douglas Burnham, "Language, Time, and Politics in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," in *Displaced Persons: Conditions of Exile in European Culture* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002), 32.

25. Wintle and Weis, "*Macbeth* and the Barren Sceptre," 133.

26. Omberg, "Macbeth's Barren Sceptre," 40.

27. Omberg, "Macbeth's Barren Sceptre," 40.

28. Stephen Greenblatt, "The Instigator," in *Tyrant: Shakespeare on Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2018), 106.

29. Foster reads Macbeth as expressing "no desire to have his story told, for it seems a tale told by an idiot. He would not have the moment of his greatness reduced to a flickering shadow-show for generations to come." Foster, "Macbeth's War on Time," 340. Foster's claim that Macbeth would dislike these imitations of immortality overlooks the fact that what those imitations would signify is tyranny. It is not that Macbeth would not have his "moment of greatness reduced to a flickering shadow-show"—it is that Macbeth does not have a moment of

greatness. Macbeth desires his story to be told through a dynastic, political legacy, but this escapes him. His political tale is that of a tyrant, and it is one he does not wish to be imitated for generations to come.

30. Smuts, "Banquo's Progeny: Hereditary Monarchy, the Stuart Lineage, and *Macbeth*," 243. Smuts also notes that Shakespeare "underline[s] the profoundly temporal nature of political processes, the idea that although sudden violence may achieve power, settled authority and peaceful kingdoms are always products of history." Smuts, "Banquo's Progeny: Hereditary Monarchy, the Stuart Lineage, and *Macbeth*," 243 (emphasis added). "Settled authority and peaceful kingdoms" are products of time because time is a framework for history.

31. Lewis, "Polychronic *Macbeth*," 344.

32. Alisa Manninen, "Tragedy of State: *Macbeth*," in *The Genres of Renaissance Tragedy*, eds. Daniel Cadman, Andrew Duxfield, and Lisa Hopkins (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 79.

33. David Scott Kastan, "*Macbeth* and the 'Name of King,'" in *Shakespeare After Theory*, 1st ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 169.

34. Philip Goldfarb Styrt, "*Macbeth*, Thanes and Medieval Scottish Feudalism," in *Shakespeare's Political Imagination: The Historicism of Setting* (Bloomsbury: The Arden Shakespeare, 2022), 50.

35. Styrt ,"*Macbeth*, Thanes and Medieval Scottish Feudalism," 59.

36. Styrt, "*Macbeth*, Thanes and Medieval Scottish Feudalism," 60.

37. Manninen, "Tragedy of State: *Macbeth*," 80.