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Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England

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Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires (William Blake)¹

Lady Macbeth's reference to motherhood and infanticide near the end of act one of *Macbeth* remains one of the more enigmatic moments in all of Shakespeare's drama. Fearing Macbeth's wavering commitment to their succession scheme, Lady Macbeth declares that she would have "dashed the brains out" (1.7.58)² of an infant to realize an otherwise unachievable goal. Scholars have traditionally read this as well as her earlier "unsex me here" (1.5.39) invocation as evidence of Lady Macbeth's attempt to seize a masculine power to further Macbeth's political goals. To overcome her husband's feminized reticence, Lady Macbeth assumes a masculinity she will prove unable to support. While she clearly seeks power, such power is,

I would argue, conditioned on maternity, an ambiguous, conflicted status in early modern England. Indeed, the images of nursing and infanticide that frame Lady Macbeth's act one fantasy invoke a maternal agency, momentarily empowering the achievement of an illegitimate political goal.

That mothers could undermine patrilineal outcomes, in fact, contributed to a generalized cultural anxiety about women's roles in the transmission of patrilineage. That patrilineage could be irreparably altered through marital infidelity, nursing, and infanticide rendered maternal agency a social and political concern. Lady Macbeth's act one fantasy reveals much, in fact, about the early modern anxiety surrounding mothers' roles in the perpetuation of patrilineage. In the case of this woman who would be queen, Lady Macbeth's engineered murder of Duncan engenders the unlawful succession of a bastardized Macbeth, altering, in turn, the patrilineal as well as political order within the world of the play.

That motherhood was viewed as problematic in early modern England may be evinced in conduct literature of the period addressing the subject of good mothering.³ As Frances Dolan notes, "the fear of, fascination with, and hostility toward maternal power in early modern English culture motivated attempts to understand and control, even repudiate it [. . .]" (2000, 283). While on the one hand mothers were praised for a selfless devotion to their children, they were likewise condemned for harming the innocents entrusted to their care. As Dymrna Callaghan notes, "women were persecuted as mothers: as bad old mothers for witchcraft, and as bad young mothers for infanticide" (1992, 367). Naomi Miller observes that "mothers and other female caregivers appear as both objects and agents of sacrifice in early modern texts and images, sometimes represented as madonna and monster at once" (2000, 7). Susan Frye concludes that the maternal role has historically been an "unstable" one, that the struggle to "imagine a 'self'" rendered motherhood a confused, anxiety-producing state in early modern England (2000, 229). Christopher Newstead's *An apology for women: or women's defence* (1620) illustrates well the conflicting attitudes toward motherhood. On the one hand, he argues that "there is no ingratitude comparable to that which is committed against the mother" (Aughterson 1995, 116). For as he notes, "we have of them principally our essence; secondly our nourishment; thirdly our education" (116). Yet Newstead likewise registers a highly discernable anxiety about the dangers of maternal agency. For while, as he notes, "educing, education and affection are the threefold cords that should tie each child to the love of its mother" (116), a mother's love was conditioned on the undeniable assurance of her child's matrilineal identity. Indeed, as Newstead further observes, "two reasons may be given why they [mothers] do most affect their children. First because they are certain they are theirs. Wherefore

Telemachus being asked, if it were true that Ulysses was his father? Answered, *my mother saith he was*" (116).⁴ While Newstead's treatise openly praises the virtues of mothers as well as the social and familial debt owed them, it likewise points to early modern concerns about maternal agency. That early modern fathers lacked the same assurances regarding their children's paternity added to already existing anxieties. Because mothers were responsible for the identification of their children's fathers, they necessarily impacted patrilineage in early modern England.⁵

Maternal agency could undermine the patrilineal process even as it appeared to support it. This is especially evident in the practice of nursing. While much of the conduct literature from the early modern period praises the mother who opts to nurse rather than farm her infant out to a potentially detrimental wet-nurse, there existed a parallel thread that represented mother's milk as a potential source of corruption. Juan Luis Vives's *Education of a Christian Woman* (1524) expresses conflicting views toward breastfeeding. While he praises "the wise and generous parent of all things that supplied [. . .] abundant and wholesome nourishment for the sustenance of the child" (2000, 269), it is less the milk than the nurse that proves nurturing to the child. Fears that breast milk could be tainted through bodily disease or ethnic impurity as well as economic privation are well documented. As Robert Cleaver and John Dod note,

Now if the nurse be of an euill complexion, as she is affected in her body, or in her mind, or hath some hidden disease, the child sucking of her breast must needs take part with her. And if that be true which the learned do say, that the temperature of the mind follows the constitution of the body, needs must it be, that if the nurse be of a naughty nature, the child must take thereafter. (Cleaver and Dod 1630)

According to the OED, "complexion" in the early modern period pertained not only to the bodily disposition, i.e., the balance of the four humors, but also to the temperament or "habit of mind." Rachel Trubowitz concludes that "the affective ties between nurse and child thus had the potential to generate strangeness and strangers, to interrupt the genealogical transmission of identity, and so to tarnish a family's good name and disrupt the hereditary transmission of properties and titles [. . .]" (2000, 85). Indeed, as Vives observes, because "it is not uncommon that the wet nurse suckles the child reluctantly and with some feeling of annoyance" (2000, 269-70), the child suffers at the hands of a figure meant to nurture it. Even a mother's reluctance to nurse could be construed as patrilineal interference, for in consigning the child to a wet-nurse, she conceivably diminished its chances of survival—a practice Keith Wrightson has termed "infanticidal nursing" (1975, 16).

While Vives speaks against the practice of wet-nursing, as did many early modern behaviorists, he likewise comments on the potential danger any nursing figure could theoretically represent to the child. The overriding assumption here is that only a mother, and a virtuous one at that, could adequately care for her child. As Vives notes, “the very sight of her child dispels any clouds of sadness, and with gladness and cheerfulness she smiles happily to see her child sucking eagerly at her breast” (2000, 270). Elizabeth Clinton’s *The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery* (1622), however, addresses several “annoiances” which dissuaded many an early modern mother from nursing. As she notes, “it is objected, that it [nursing] is troublesome; that it is noysome to ones clothes; that it makes one looke old, &c.” While wet-nurses were, for the most part, at a distinct economic disadvantage and thus admittedly not the best caregivers, one must likewise question the degree of nurturance conceivably available through a resentful nursing mother. If she like the hypothetical wet-nurse “suckles the child reluctantly,” as appeared to be the case with a good many early modern nursing mothers, her milk, like that of Lady Macbeth, could well turn to “gall” (1.5.46), harming the innocent entrusted to her care.

Perhaps no other early modern crime better exemplifies cultural fears about maternal agency than does infanticide, a crime against both person and lineage. Treated as sin in medieval England, one punishable through ecclesiastical penance, infanticide, by the early modern period, had been deemed a criminal offense, one punishable by hanging (Sokol and Sokol 2000, 233). Lawrence Stone has suggested that “deliberate infanticide—to become ‘the deliberate butcher of her own bowels’—was a solution adopted by only the most desperate of pregnant mothers” (1979, 297). More recently, Susan Staub argues that most infanticidal mothers committed “their crimes out of their sense of duty as mothers” (2000, 335). Out of utter desperation, whether economic or emotional, infanticidal mothers purportedly killed their babies rather than face the wrath, disdain, even indifference of a society less concerned about infant murder than the problems such mothers had always posed to the economic well-being.

Just how prevalent infanticide was in the early modern period remains open to discussion. Although Elizabethan and Jacobean assize rolls record numerous cases of suspected infant murder, social and legal historians (while admitting the difficulty of determining the infanticidal rate in early modern England) suggest it had decreased by the beginning of the seventeenth century.⁶ That it continued as a problem within early modern English society, however, appears evident given legal reforms enacted to punish it. The 1624 Infanticide Act made it a criminal offense to “secretly bury or conceal the death of their [lewd women’s] children” (cited in Fletcher 1995, 277). While

the rationale behind such a law seems evident—to prevent the murder of newly-born infants—such an enactment remains curious if, as B. J. Sokol and Mary Sokol suggest, the rate of infanticide had shrunk to a “vanishingly small level of about 3 per 100,000” by 1610 (2000, 236).⁷ Indeed, if infanticide were such an uncommon event in the early seventeenth century, the 1624 Act would seem superfluous. While there is no way of accurately determining the rate of infanticide in early modern England, it appears likely that it could well have been higher. Unreported cases as well as those left unprosecuted would have significantly increased these rates.⁸

My purpose here is less to correct statistics than to examine the cultural fears and anxieties infanticide produced within an early modern England protective of patrilineal rights. As Dolan suggests, “the infanticide statutes articulated fears about women’s capacity for violence rather than accurately describing their behavior” (1994, 131). Indeed, the language of the act provides, I would argue, some insight into cultural motivations governing the development of the law. For while ostensibly designed to punish “lewd,” unmarried women, the law likewise speaks, I would argue, to early modern cultural fears of concealment, of an obtrusive, if secretive interference in the process of patrilineal transmission.⁹ While most recorded cases of infanticide involved illegitimate babies, such actions likewise interfered at least philosophically with the perceived authority of patriarchal society as a whole. As such, the 1624 act points less, it would seem, to an infanticide epidemic, but rather to an attempt to control the potential threat of maternal agency itself. As Dolan concludes, “maternal subjectivity is threatening when its boundaries expand to include—even consume—the offspring” (1994, 148).

A sampling of the assize records from the reign of Elizabeth I provides valuable insight into the cultural anxiety surrounding infanticide. What is perhaps most striking about these recorded indictments against early modern mothers are their graphic, arguably gratuitous depictions of maternal violence. The case of Anne Lynsted of Lynsted is illustrative. On May 4, 1593, Anne allegedly “killed her newly-born female child by throwing it into a seething furnace.”¹⁰ What is striking in this otherwise formulaic account is the word “seething,” which seems designed to inflame the jury rendering justice. According to the OED, “seething” in the early modern period referred not only to intense heat, but to “intense and ceaseless inner agitation” as well. In the case of Anne Lynsted, the emotional state which would enable the murder of a newborn infant is made to mirror a “seething” furnace. The case of Elizabeth Brown of Lenham is equally graphic. On the 20 of March 1593, she is reported to have “ripped open the stomach of her newly-born male child with a knife and tore out its entrails.”¹¹ Of the records I have examined, perhaps none is represented as more cruelly calcu-

lating than the case of Margaret Chaundler of Richmond. On the 20 of November 1591, Margaret purportedly murdered her newborn son by stuffing “the child’s mouth with earth and a bone from a goose’s leg and left it grovelling in a ditch, where it died on the follow[ing] day.”¹² While detailed descriptions were undoubtedly deemed necessary to describe the horrific nature of these crimes, many likewise appear to go well beyond mere factual accounts. Moreover, while the assize records make no specific mention of the mothers’ mental states at the time of the crimes, they nonetheless attach emotional value to those who would murder their children. Many early modern infanticidal accounts, in fact, represent these women as monstrous beings, who take sadistic delight in butchering babies. Indeed, the infanticidal mothers represented in the assize records are all Lady Macbeths, who would lightly dash out the brains of the babes entrusted to their care. Importantly, the dire social and economic circumstances which appear to have motivated many purported cases of infanticide fail to enter into the public record. Aside from the mother’s legal status, usually identified as “spinster,” the records provide virtually no extenuating circumstances which may have led these women to commit the crime of infanticide. In so doing, these accounts communicate, I would argue, existing early modern anxieties about the inherent dangers of maternal agency both to helpless children as well as to a patrilineal system dependent upon women for its perpetuation. As Susan Staub concludes, “the murdering mother embodies both her society’s expectations and its anxieties about motherhood by showing motherhood to be at once empowering and destructive” (2000, 345).

While assize records from the reign of Elizabeth I represent infanticide as a crime of unmarried (and conceivably poor) women, they fail to account for the more generalized cultural misgivings this crime against person and line produced within early modern England. That anxiety about maternal agency crossed class, economic, and marital lines can be seen in the case of Anne Boleyn, whose infamous rise and fall earlier in the sixteenth century continued to incite political discussion throughout the Elizabethan period. Elizabeth’s right to rule was, of course, called into question when Henry bastardized her following Anne’s conviction on charges of adultery and witchcraft. While there is little doubt that the charges against her were politically-motivated, it is likewise evident that Anne’s failure to produce a living, male heir led to her conviction and execution. What interests me is not whether this second wife of Henry VIII was, in fact, guilty of the crime of high treason but what the charges reveal about early modern fears of maternal agency.

Perhaps the most damning incident in Anne’s short, contentious reign was the stillborn, premature birth of a male child in January of 1536. The stillbirth, which reportedly occurred after fifteen weeks of pregnancy, was

widely interpreted as a sign of demonic possession, the result being that Anne was declared responsible for the premature death of this heir to the king.¹³ Miscarriages during the first trimester often occur from conception abnormalities, frequently resulting in undefined tissue mass or otherwise severely malformed fetuses. Given that this miscarriage occurred fairly early in the pregnancy, it is likely that Anne gave birth to what would have been considered a monstrous being in early modern Europe.¹⁴ That the official reports of this stillbirth made no mention of deformity is not surprising given that the aborted fetus was Henry's son. As Retha Warnicke notes, "early modern folk were ignorant about many facets of childbirth, most especially about deformed fetuses, whose existence they interpreted as God's way of punishing sinful parents. If Anne's fetus were deformed, Henry's reaction to her made sense by the standards of his society" (1999, 20). Moreover, as David Cressy has observed, "monstrous births might mean many things, but they could not be allowed to mean nothing. Contemporaries were accustomed to considering a range of possible meanings, a hierarchy of plots and sub-plots, in which natural law, divinity, and human corruption intertwined" (2000, 36). Indeed, while miscarriages and stillbirths were a fact of life given the state of early modern gynecology, they were often interpreted as signs of divine disapproval for wickedness committed by one or both parents. Catherine of Aragon's many miscarriages and stillbirths, for example, were attributed by Henry to the couple's violation of divine law (Warnicke 1999, 18). In the case of Anne, however, the stillbirth of a male child would be interpreted as maternal malfeasance. Warnicke has noted that

as the head of a schismatic church, Henry could never have admitted even to himself that he had sired this fetus. He would also have wanted to defend himself against his enemies' belief that the aborted fetus, if its existence were discovered, was divine punishment for his activities. The blame for its birth was transferred to Anne, who was subsequently convicted and executed for having had sexual relations with five men after enticing them with witch-like activities. (Warnicke 1999, 20–21)

What ultimately emerges from Anne's miscarriage provides evidence, I would argue, of cultural anxiety about the dangers of women's roles in patrilineal transmission. While Henry was dependent upon Anne to bear the male heir he so desperately desired, he likewise remained vulnerable, as the stillbirth demonstrates, to maternal involvement in the patrilineal project.¹⁵ As Henry Eucharius Roselin (1545) concludes, "although the man be as principal mover and cause of the generation, yet (no displeasure to men) the woman doth confer and contribute much more, what to the increasement of the child in her womb and what to the nourishment thereof after the birth, than doth

the man” (Klein 1992, 183). Anne’s maternal agency, in the end, superceded any generative authority this king might have possessed.

Perhaps no other Shakespearean character better represents the threat of maternal agency than does Lady Macbeth, one whose studied cruelty nurtures social and political chaos. As Janet Adelman has noted, “in *Macbeth*, maternal power is given its most virulent sway [. . .]” (1992, 123). Lady Macbeth’s invocation to evil in act one illustrates well the inherent dangers of motherhood to the patrilineal order. Upon hearing of the witches’ prophecy, she declares: “[. . .] Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / and fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty” (1.5.38-40). Critics have traditionally read this scene as an attempt by Lady Macbeth to seize a masculine authority perceived necessary to the achievement of her political goals. Mark Thornton Burnett, for instance, argues that *Macbeth* explores “the attempts of a woman to realize herself by using the dominant discourses of patriarchy as she lacks an effectively powerful counter-language” (1993, 2). Joan Larsen Klein likewise suggests that Lady Macbeth seeks an unattainable masculine authority, observing that “as long as she lives, Lady Macbeth is never unsexed in the only way she wanted to be unsexed—able to act with the cruelty she ignorantly and perversely identified with male strength” (1980, 250). Even Adelman, who argues for a competing female authority, tends to structure Lady Macbeth’s invocation in terms of defined gender boundaries which maintain a culturally constructed masculine/feminine dichotomy. As she argues, “dangerous female presences like Love, Nature, Mother are given embodiment in Lady Macbeth and the witches” and it therefore becomes the responsibility of men like Macbeth “to escape their dominion over [them]” (1987, 93). This sentiment is echoed by Dymphna Callaghan, who suggests that “in *Macbeth*, the kingdom of darkness is unequivocally female, unequivocally matriarchal, and the fantasy of incipient rebellion of demonic forces is crucial to the maintenance of the godly rule it is supposed to overthrow” (1992, 358-59). I would argue, however, that Lady Macbeth’s “unsex me here” speech tends to deconstruct gender categories, unfixing the rigid cultural distinctions as well as attributes which define male and female. In the world of *Macbeth*, for example, masculine power is expressed through the use of physical force. Indeed, Macbeth’s strength as well as his valor is directly linked to the battlefield, is, in fact, based upon his ability to carve his enemy “from the nave to th’ chops” (1.2.22). Although she may well fantasize killing an infant, Lady Macbeth expressly rejects the masculine power which would allow her to wield a dagger. While she makes a case for killing Duncan, even declaring that “had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t” (2.2.12-13), Lady Macbeth ultimately refuses masculine authority. What she craves instead is an

alternative gender identity, one which will allow her to slip free of the emotional as well as cultural constraints governing women. That she immediately invokes a maternal image, “come to my woman’s breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers” (1.5.45–46), speaks, I would argue, to the desire for an authority at once both powerful and ambiguous in early modern England.

Gender ambiguity is, in fact, present from virtually the opening lines of the play as the witches collapse established boundaries. As does the maternal, witchcraft represents an ambiguous gender status. This is evident during Banquo’s initial encounter with the witches where he observes: “You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (1.3.42–44). Physically, the witches challenge gender expectations; beards belong to men. Yet, the witches’ ambiguity goes well beyond facial hair. Indeed, it is their self-assured authority more than their bizarre physical appearance which destabilizes the patriarchal world of the play. Not only do they foresee the future, but the trio are effortlessly adept at predicting, if not manipulating Macbeth’s behavior.

Critics have long debated the role of the witches in *Macbeth*. While some have viewed them as representatives of fate, others see them as demonic instruments. Terry Eagleton has suggested that “they are poets, prophetesses and devotees of female cult, radical separatists who scorn male power and lay bare the hollow sound and fury at its heart. Their words and bodies mock rigorous boundaries and make sport of fixed positions, unhinging received meanings as they dance, dissolve and re-materialize” (1986, 3). Whether one chooses to identify them as representatives of fate or of the demonic, they are clearly the governing force within the play. At once both nurturing and harmful, the three force the proud Scottish warrior to confront the demonic within himself. They are mothers pushing a reluctant son toward his destiny as well as fearful opponents who bide their time before bringing Macbeth down. While their supernatural connection no doubt enables such authority, as characters their gender is rendered ambiguous; they are at once both masculine and feminine, deconstructing, like Lady Macbeth, fixed categories.

Lady Macbeth’s connection to the witches has, of course, long been noted by Shakespearean scholars.¹⁶ Frances Dolan, for example, groups Lady Macbeth with the witches as catalytic agents who incite Macbeth’s ambition (1994, 227). As she observes, “*Macbeth* uses female characters—the witches and Lady Macbeth—to instill ambition, translate that ambition into violent action, and thus cast doubt on ambition and agency as associated with violence” (227). Leah Marcus suggests that “Lady Macbeth is a ‘woman on top’ whose sexual ambivalence and dominance are allied with the demonic and

mirror the obscure gender identifications of the bearded witches” (1988, 104). Yet, perhaps the most compelling connection between the witches and Lady Macbeth can be seen in the early modern association of witchcraft with motherhood. Callaghan has observed that early modern witches “though often old, celibate, and devoid of kin, were imaged as the mother in an idea which has strong associations with the ancient fertility goddess under whose auspices all procreative power was placed” (1992, 358). This image may be traced in Macbeth’s reference to the witches as “secret, black, and midnight hags” (4.1.63). While, according to the OED, the term hag came to refer to a woman who is frequently ugly, repulsive and old and who is aligned with Satan and Hell, the term’s earliest usage may be found in the etymologically related *hegge* or *heg*, which refers to “an evil spirit, demon, or infernal being, in female form; applied in early use to the Furies, Harpies, etc. of Greco-Latin mythology.” Shakespeare uses the term hag again in relation to Sycorax in *The Tempest*. Speaking of the island’s long-deceased witch, Prospero notes: “Then was this island—/ Save for the son that she did litter here, / A freckled whelp, hag-born—not honoured with / A human shape” (1.2.283–286). Its usage here is interesting, for it directly links the concept of witch with mother: a linkage which proves significant in terms of *Macbeth*’s women. That early modern witches were purportedly identified by the presence of an extra nipple or teat, which was used to nurse Satan’s familiars, provides additional linkage between witchcraft and motherhood. As Gail Kern Paster notes, “not only do witches resemble lactating mothers, but thanks to the witchhunters’ [of the seventeenth century] fetishistic attention to the witch’s teat, lactating mothers come to resemble witches” (1993, 249). While the witches do not explicitly function as mother figures within the play, Lady Macbeth clearly does, invoking the image of a lactating mother.

The issue of Lady Macbeth’s maternal identity has, of course, long been fodder for critical discussion. Beginning with L. C. Knight’s, “How Many Children Hath Lady Macbeth” (1947),¹⁷ scholars have attempted to account for Lady Macbeth’s enigmatic reference to motherhood in act one. Whether she ever nursed children, however, is perhaps less important than how such a role would accommodate one intent on securing a husband’s royal succession. When Macbeth registers hesitation about murdering Duncan, “we will proceed no further in this business” (1.7.31), Lady Macbeth immediately appeals to the maternal, calling up a chilling image of infanticide. As she declares:

[. . .] I have given suck, and I know
 How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me.
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums

And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this. (1.7.54-59)

The juxtaposition of images here is quite striking. On the one hand, we have the loving image of a nurturing mother, one praised by Vives for her selfless devotion to the child entrusted in her care. Indeed, the bond here is faintly reminiscent of Renaissance images of Madonna and child, lending a spiritualized quality to the state of motherhood. This loving image, however, immediately gives way to one of absolute horror, as a demonic mother butchers her yet-smiling infant. Here we are reminded of stylized representations of the murdering mother in the assize records. That this savagery surfaces at a moment of greatest intimacy between mother and child only adds to its incomprehensible brutality. What is perhaps most revealing about Lady Macbeth's proudly defiant disclosure is how absolutely empowering such a fantasized moment proves to one struggling to break free from the gendered constraints that bind her. This is not to suggest that Lady Macbeth despises the child she murders in fantasy. On the contrary, her empowerment is crucially dependent upon a loving relationship with the one she will shortly slaughter; it must be a blood sacrifice. That a mother could lovingly nurture her infant one moment and spill his brains the next underscores the uncertainties if not the dangers of unchecked maternal agency.

Indeed, Lady Macbeth appeals to the maternal to deny the patrilineal. She would readily kill Macbeth's progeny to secure her husband's succession, but in killing the progeny she must likewise destroy his patrilineage, rendering his short-lived reign a barren one. I think it important to ask not only what Lady Macbeth's actions signify, but what the child represents. That Macbeth seems undisturbed by her bold, horrifying declaration, instead merely inquiring, "if we should fail?" (1.7.59), argues a symbolic as well as a literal reading of the child and of Lady Macbeth's fantasy. For while it is clear that her actions are meant to signify a fierce resolve, I think it likewise clear that the child as well as Lady Macbeth's brutal sacrifice represent far more. If the hypothetical child she butchers in fantasy represents legitimacy—and by legitimacy I mean lawful succession—then Lady Macbeth must destroy it to further her usurpation project. As such, the child comes to represent Macbeth's patrilineal future. While she does not, of course, literally kill Macbeth's heir, Lady Macbeth's infanticidal fantasy does directly manipulate the murder of Duncan, altering in turn the body politic. The hypothetical murder of this would-be child thus comes to represent the demise not only of Macbeth's moral and political legitimacy within the tyrannized world of the play, but that of his line itself. As Macbeth bitterly notes,

Upon my head they [the witches] placed a fruitless crown,

And put a barren sceptre in my grip,
 Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand
 No son of mine succeeding [. . .]. (3.1.62-65)

Ironically, to succeed to the throne is not to further a failed patrilineal project. Macbeth is destined to look on as another man's progeny secures the future which is denied him. Adelman has observed that "[. . .]the play becomes [. . .] a representation of primitive fears about male identity and autonomy itself, about those looming female presences who threaten to control one's mind, to constitute one's very self, even at a distance" (1987, 105). Although it is Macbeth who wields the fatal dagger which ends Duncan's life, we cannot forget that it is Lady Macbeth's infanticidal fantasy prompted by the witches' prophecy which makes possible a succession rendered barren through crass cruelty and emotional depravity. Burnett has suggested that in the end Macbeth "is left with the empty symbols of royalty [. . .], brooding upon the imminent disappearance of his name" (1993, 5). And it is that loss of name, of a protected patrilineal identity that proves so destructive to this man who would be the father of kings. For what Lady Macbeth's frightening maternal agency renders is not a coveted line, but rather a barren reign, one which quickly disintegrates when confronted by legitimate political authority.

That Macbeth's succession is dependent upon the perpetuation of his patrilineage becomes evident, in fact, from the opening moments of the play. Even before Duncan names Malcolm his successor, usurping Macbeth's newly-made plans and setting in motion a king's murder, the witches prophesy that it is Banquo's progeny who will be kings. That heirs are important to political as well as social outcomes is thus only too apparent. As Marjorie Garber has argued, "the play is as urgently concerned with dynasty, offspring and succession as any in Shakespeare" (1997, 154). Given this urgency, it is interesting to note, however, how little textual attention is paid to the subject of Macbeth's heir. Certainly Macbeth registers anxiety over a "barren sceptre." Yet this anxiety surfaces only after he is confronted with the chilling realization that his line will not succeed, that the horrendous crime he has committed must prove for naught given his failure to perpetuate a line. Moreover, while the power and authority of kingship initially fuel his ambitions, Macbeth is forced to face the totality of the witches' prophecy, that Banquo's heirs, not Macbeth's, will be kings. As Coppélia Kahn has argued, it is "fatherhood that makes him [Macbeth] Banquo's rival" (1981, 182). Indeed, it is the possession of an heir which elevates Banquo above Macbeth, ensuring that the patrilineal future of this bloody and barren usurper is denied.

Patriarchal identity in the early modern period was conditioned upon the perpetuation of the patrilineal line. Without an heir to continue the family name, lineal identity would be lost. Shakespeare's "young man" sonnets argue again and again the importance of heirs to the preservation of this identity. As the speaker in Sonnet 1 observes,

From fairest creatures we desire increase,
 That thereby beauty's rose might never die,
 But as the ripener should by time decease,
 His tender heir might bear his memory;
 But thou, contracted to thine own bright eyes,
 Feed'st thy light's flame with self-substantial fuel,
 Making a famine where abundance lies,
 Thyself thy foe, to thy sweet self too cruel. (1.1-8)

The speaker could well be speaking of Macbeth here, who sacrifices patrilineal "memory" for a power which proves both unstable and fleeting. As Joan Larsen Klein has argued, "he exchanges his hopes for men-children born to his wife for the grisly finger of a birth-strangled babe and tormenting visions of the crowned children of other men" (1980, 243). The importance of an heir to Macbeth's increasingly elusive political aspirations becomes apparent only when he is confronted with fathers such as Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff who have satisfied their patrilineal obligations. His life as well as his ambitions ultimately prove barren, indeed.

Whereas Macbeth registers tardy concern over the fate of his ill-informed patrilineage, Lady Macbeth appears supremely indifferent. When she is not fantasizing the brutal murder of the child nursing at her breast, Lady Macbeth is busy plotting the future of her husband as king. What she fails to acknowledge is what will become of Macbeth's line given the failure to produce a living heir. Even after the bloody deed is done, even after her husband seizes an unlawful throne, Lady Macbeth expresses no concern for Macbeth's extinguished patrilineage. As Macbeth agonizes over his "barren sceptre," his wife merely cautions "what's done is done" (3.2.14); she has, in essence, sold Macbeth's heir for a little, fleeting power. Her indifference proves crucial, I believe, to an understanding of a mother's potentially negative impact upon the patrilineal process in early modern England. For what Lady Macbeth's indifference constitutes is itself another form of infanticide, rendering Macbeth's patrilineal future nonexistent. By erasing the possibility of an heir, i.e., lawful succession, Lady Macbeth likewise blots from the cultural memory future traces of Macbeth's lineage. With his death at the end of act five, so too dies the tyranny her bloody infanticidal fantasy fatally engen-

dered. Indeed, the smiling babe she indifferently plucks from her gall-filled breast comes to represent nothing less than Macbeth's aborted patrilineal line.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the one who will subdue Macbeth is "none of woman born" (4.1.80). Rather, "Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" (5.8.15-16). Such a revelation decisively undercuts the power of the maternal, arming Macduff against Macbeth's ultimately powerless assault. Macduff's unusual, violent birth warrants some discussion in light of the play's representation of maternal agency as well as its containment. Caesarean sections in early modern England were considered a last resort, performed, as Jacques Guillemeau (1635) notes, "that thereby the child may be saved, and receive baptism." As Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski observes, "the child could indeed be considered as 'not of woman born,' or even 'unborn' . . . [for] the newborn was the child not of a living woman but of a corpse" (1990, 1). Given early modern surgical methods, the lack of anesthesia, as well as post-surgical infection, Caesareans were normally performed only on women who had already died during labor.¹⁸ Eucharius Roselin's description of the Caesarean emphasizes the post-mortem violence committed on the mother:

If it chance that the woman in her labor die and the child having life in it, then shall it be meet to keep open the woman's mouth and also the nether places, so that the child may be by that means both receive and also expel air and breath which otherwise might be stopped, to the destruction of the child. And then to turn her on her left side and there to cut her open and so to take out the child. (Klein 1992, 197)

Striking here is the obvious effort taken to preserve the life of the yet unborn child. The mother's mouth and "nether places" are opened wide to ensure that the child has an adequate air supply while the surgeon begins carving up the maternal body.¹⁹ That the mother is deemed already dead does little to alleviate the inherent brutality of the scene. What Roselin's description conjures up are images of blood sacrifice as the mother is cut apart to free the potentially viable life trapped within her body. Whether we choose to call the early modern Caesarean matricide or rescue depends crucially on the degree to which patrilineal preservation is a factor. That such a procedure would most likely have not been performed in the case of bastard birth reveals much about the governing motivation for early modern Caesarean sections. Indeed, the Caesarean birth represents, I would argue, a conquest over the maternal body which otherwise threatens to consume the precious offspring. In so doing, it likewise comes to represent the preservation of the patrilineage itself.

The issue of matricide has special significance in *Macbeth*, a play which resolves patrilineal crisis through the at times violent deaths of mothers.

Indeed, the fate of mothers in general seems problematic within a play struggling with the issue of patrilineal survival. Duncan's wife is long dead, consigning the care of her sons to a father and king who, as Janet Adelman has noted, becomes "the source of all nurturance, planting the children to his throne and making them grow" (1992, 132). Macduff, of course, owes his life to the surgeon who literally rips him from his mother's "suffocating" grasp, to borrow again from Adelman. It is he, not Macbeth, who leads "a charmed life" (5.10.12) as a result of escaping a maternal control which must otherwise strangle him. Macduff's mother is not, of course, the only maternal figure killed off to protect a threatened line. Lady Macduff, Macduff's sad, abandoned wife, is also killed within the play to motivate Macduff into taking the kind of action necessary to defeat the murderous Macbeth: to breathe new life, if you will, into a dying Scotland. Upon learning of his wife and children's violent murders, Macduff initially registers a stunned, immobilized disbelief:

... All my pretty ones?

Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?

What, all my pretty chickens and their dam

At one fell swoop? (4.3.217-220)

While it is true that Macduff abandons his wife and children to seek support for Scotland, their deaths constitute a necessary incitement to action. Only when Malcolm reminds this grieving husband and father that he must "dispute it [their deaths] as a man" (4.3.221) does Macduff find the strength to confront Macbeth and save, if not his own line, that of the royal patrilineage.

Then there is, of course, Lady Macbeth. In many respects her violent death at the conclusion of an equally violent reign of terror constitutes justice. That she who is the author of such social and political strife should perish at her own blood-stained, now suicidal hands seems appropriate given her involvement in Duncan's death as well as in Macbeth's cataclysmic fall from grace. That these sullied hands render Lady Macbeth incapable of redemption appears appropriate given her own calculated brutality against family and state. In many respects the death of this infanticidal mother helps bring about the re-unification of Duncan's scattered progeny, enabling, in turn, the fulfillment of the witches' prophecy that heirs of the ill-fated Banquo will be kings. As such, Lady Macbeth's death preserves life even as her own slips away.

Punishment for those convicted of infanticide in early modern England was most often accomplished through hanging. Yet whether a convicted mother faced this dire sentence depended upon her demeanor during the trial. Marilyn Francus notes that early modern "women who presented narratives of female weaknesses, ignorance, fallibility, and repentant virtue were acquitted [...]" (1997, 134). Conversely, "the rebellious infanticidal mother

renounced neither her agency nor her identity and because she could not be accommodated by the female narrative of ignorance and passivity, she was silenced by death” (Francus 1997, 134). Indeed, confessions of guilt tacit or otherwise yielded control to an early modern patriarchy anxious about mothers’ roles in the transmission of patrilineage. That Lady Macbeth dies unrepentant, unable either to wash clean the murderous hands that helped secure Macbeth’s unlawful succession nor to yield the agency which enabled her crime speaks to a guilt which cannot be absolved. Her solitary, anti-climactic death, unmourned either by Macbeth or his society, becomes apt punishment for the havoc Lady Macbeth’s infanticidal fantasy wreaks upon the social and political order. Janet Adelman has observed that “the play that begins by unleashing the terrible threat of destructive maternal power [. . .] ends by consolidating male power” (1992, 122). The demonized maternal agency which enables the murder of patrilineage is by play’s end supplanted by a revitalized, if altered political authority. Malcolm succeeds to his father’s usurped throne as the descendents of Banquo’s line eye their future patrilineal succession.

Notes

¹ William Blake, “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell.”

² All Shakespeare citations are from *The Norton Shakespeare*.

³ See, for example, Juan Luis Vives’s *The Education of a Christian Woman: A Sixteenth-Century Manual* (1524); Eucharius Roeslin, *The Birth of Mankind, otherwise named The Woman’s Book* (1545), in Joan Larsen Klein, *Daughters, Wives and Widows: Writings by Men about Women and Marriage in England, 1500-1640*; Thomas Tusser, *The Points of Housewifery* (1580), in Klein, *Daughters, Wives and Widows*; Thomas Becon, *The book of matrimony* (1564), in Kate Aughterson, *Renaissance Woman: Constructions of Femininity in England*; Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countess of Lincoln’s Nursery* (1622); Christopher Hooke, *The Childbirth* (1590); Robert Cleaver and John Dod, *A Godly Form of Household Government: For the Ordering of Private Families, according to the Direction of God’s Word* (1630); William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Duties. Eight Treatises* (1622); and Dorothy Leigh, *The Mother’s Blessing* (1616).

⁴ Even the commonplace fear of cuckolding can be traced to a concern about women’s roles in patrilineal transmission. Indeed, it’s not only the fear of being shamed before the community that led so many early modern men to steer clear of the cuckold’s horns, but that they must ultimately call as their own anything their wives brought forth.

⁵ This is readily apparent in the case of unwed mothers, who while in labor, were often bullied by midwives into revealing fathers’ identities. While such mandatory name identification was a means by which to reduce the poor roll, it also conceivably resulted in a form of empowerment for mothers. For a good discussion of early modern childbirth, see Cressy (1997).

⁶ See, for example, Sokol and Sokol (2000), Stone (1979), Erickson (1993), Cressy, (2000), Ingram (1987), and Wrightson, (1975).

⁷ See also Laslett (1983).

⁸ See Jankowski (1992). Married women, as Jankowski has noted, were less likely to be prosecuted for infanticide than were unmarried women, the rationale being that because there was no need to disguise pregnancy, there would be less reason to murder newborn infants (44).

⁹ Natasha Korda notes that while “women were more vulnerable to punishment for bastard-bearing [. . .] because paternity was always open to doubt in a way that maternity was not” (2002, 183), such punishment was likewise dependent upon social status. While unmarried mothers of the lower class constituted a threat to the economic well-being of the community, those of the middle and upper classes threatened patrilineage. In her discussion of Shakespeare’s Juliet from *Measure for Measure*, Korda notes that she violates the cultural trust in having “thrown away the ‘jewel’ of her patrimony” (2002, 181).

¹⁰ The queen’s justices met at Maidstone in July of 1593 to hear this case (1979, #2074).

¹¹ *Calendar of Assize Records*, #2082.

¹² *Calendar of Assize Records*, #2279.

¹³ For a full account of this stillbirth, see Fraser (1994).

¹⁴ Charles Wriothesley (1875–77) makes mention of the stillbirth.

¹⁵ See Warnicke (1989). Warnicke suggests that “Henry considered a miscarriage or stillbirth an ill omen for his kingdom as well as for his dynasty” (176).

¹⁶ See, for example Adelman (1987), Callaghan (1992), Marcus (1988), Newman (1991), and Stallybrass (1982).

¹⁷ While L. C. Knight’s provocatively titled essay does not deal with the issue of Lady Macbeth’s maternal history, it does raise intriguing questions about absences within the text. The specter of patrilineage and its impact on Macbeth’s succession scheme, I would argue, constitutes one of the more interesting absent presences within the text.

¹⁸ See Blumenfeld-Kosinski (1990). There are reports of early modern mothers surviving Caesarean sections.

¹⁹ Normally, male surgeons performed Caesarean sections. As Blumenfeld-Kosinski has noted, however, midwives were also expected to perform this procedure if they believed that the fetus could still be alive (1990, 2).

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