In the last moments of any production of Macbeth, as Macbeth feels himself increasingly hemmed in by enemies, the stage will resonate hauntingly with variants of his repeated question, “What’s he / That was not born of woman?” (5.7.2–3; for variants, see 5.3.4, 6; 5.7.11, 13; 5.8.13, 31). Repeated seven times, Macbeth’s allusion to the witches’ prophecy—“none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.80–81)—becomes virtually a talisman to ward off danger; even after he has begun to doubt the equivocation of the fiend (5.5.43), mere repetition of the phrase seems to Macbeth to guarantee his invulnerability. I want in this essay to explore the power of these resonances, particularly to explore how Macbeth’s assurance seems to turn itself inside out, becoming dependent not on the fact that all men are, after all, born of woman but on the fantasy of escape from this universal condition. The duplicity of Macbeth’s repeated question—its capacity to mean both itself and its opposite—carries such weight at the end of the play, I think, because the whole of the play represents in very powerful form both the fantasy of a virtually absolute and destructive maternal power and the fantasy of absolute escape from this power; I shall argue in fact that the peculiar texture of the end of the play is generated partly by the tension between these two fantasies.

Maternal power in Macbeth is not embodied in the figure of a particular mother (as it is, for example, in Coriolanus); it is instead diffused throughout the play, evoked primarily by the figures of the witches and Lady Macbeth. Largely through Macbeth’s relationship to them, the play becomes (like Coriolanus) a representation of primitive fears about male identity and autonomy itself, about those looming female presences who threaten to control one’s actions and one’s mind, to constitute one’s very self, even at a distance. When
Macbeth’s first words echo those we have already heard the witches speak—“So fair and foul a day I have not seen” (1.3.38); “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1.11)—we are in a realm that questions the very possibility of autonomous identity. The play will finally reimagine autonomous male identity, but only through the ruthless excision of all female presence, its own peculiar satisfaction of the witches’ prophecy.

In 1600, after the Earl of Gowrie’s failed attempt to kill James VI, one James Weimis of Bog, testifying about the earl’s recourse to necromancy, reported that the earl thought it “possible that the seed of man and woman might be brought to perfection otherwise then by the matrix of the woman” ("Gowries Conspiracie" 196). Whether or not Shakespeare deliberately recalled Gowrie in his portrayal of the murderer of James’s ancestor, the connection is haunting: the account of the conspiracy hints that, for Gowrie at least, recourse to necromancy seemed to promise at once invulnerability and escape from the maternal matrix. The fantasy of such escape in fact haunts Shakespeare’s plays. A few years after Macbeth, Posthumus will make the fantasy explicit: attributing all ills in man to the “woman’s part,” he will ask, “Is there no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers?” (Cymbeline 2.5.1–2). The strikingly motherless world of The Tempest and its potent image of absolute male control answer Posthumus’s questions affirmatively: there, at least, on that bare island, mothers and witches are banished and creation belongs to the male alone.

Even in one of Shakespeare’s earliest plays, male autonomy is ambivalently portrayed as the capacity to escape the maternal matrix that has misshaped the infant man. The man who will become Richard III emerges strikingly as a character for the first time as he watches his brother Edward’s sexual success with the Lady Grey. After wishing syphilis on him so that he will have no issue (a concern that anticipates Macbeth’s), Richard constructs his own desire for the crown specifically as compensation for his failure at the sexual game. Unable to “make [his] heaven in a lady’s lap,” he will “make [his] heaven to dream upon the crown” (3 Henry VI 3.2.148, 169). But his failure to make his heaven in a lady’s lap is itself understood as the consequence of his subjection to another lady’s lap, to the misshaping power of his mother’s womb:

Why, love forswore me in my Mother’s womb;
And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,
She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe
To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;
To make an envious mountain on my back.

(3.2.153–57)

Richard blames his deformity on a triad of female powers: Mother, Love, and Nature all fuse, conspiring to deform him as he is being formed in his mother’s womb. Given this image of female power, it is no wonder that he turns to the compensatory heaven of the crown. But the crown turns out to be an unstable compensation. Even as he shifts from the image of the misshaping womb to the image of the crown, the terrifying enclosure of the womb recurs, shaping his attempt to imagine the very political project that should free him from dependence on ladies’ laps:

I’ll make my heaven to dream upon the crown
And, whiles I live, t’account this world but hell
Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head
Be round impaled with a glorious crown.
And yet I know not how to get the crown,
For many lives stand between me and home;
And I—like one lost in a thorny wood,
That rents the thorns and is rent with the thorns,
Seeking a way and straying from the way,
Not knowing how to find the open air
But toiling desperately to find it out—
Torment myself to catch the English crown;
And from that torment I will free myself
Or hew my way out with a bloody axe.

(3.2.168–81)

The crown for him is “home,” the safe haven. But through the shifting meaning of “impaled,” the crown as safe haven is itself transformed into the dangerous enclosure: the stakes that enclose him protectively turn into the thorns that threaten to impale him. Strikingly, it is not his head but the trunk that bears his head that is so impaled by crown and thorns: the crown compensatory for ladies’ laps fuses with the image of the dangerous womb in an imagistic nightmare in which the lap/womb/home/crown become the thorny wood from which he desperately seeks escape into the open air. Through this imagistic transformation, these lines take on the configuration of a birth fantasy, or more precisely a fantasy of impeded birth, a birth that the man-child himself must manage by hewing his way out with a bloody axe. Escape from the dangerous female is here achieved by recourse to the exaggeratedly masculine bloody axe.
This, I will argue, is precisely the psychological configuration of Macbeth, where dangerous female presences like Love, Nature, Mother are given embodiment in Lady Macbeth and the witches, and where Macbeth wields the bloody axe in an attempt to escape their dominion over him.

At first glance, Macbeth seems to wield the bloody axe to comply with, not to escape, the dominion of women. The play constructs Macbeth as terrifyingly pawn to female figures. Whether or not he is rapt by the witches’ prophecies because the horrid image of Duncan’s murder has already occurred to him, their role as gleeful prophets constructs Macbeth’s actions in part as the enactments of their will. And he is impelled toward murder by Lady Macbeth’s equation of masculinity and murder: in his case, the bloody axe seems not an escape route but the tool of a man driven to enact the ferociously masculine strivings of his wife. Nonetheless, the weight given the image of the man not born of woman at the end suggests that the underlying fantasy is the same as in Richard’s defensive construction of his masculinity: even while enacting the wills of women, Macbeth’s bloody masculinity enables an escape from them in fantasy—an escape that the play itself embodies in dramatic form at the end. I will discuss first the unleashing of female power and Macbeth’s compliance with that power, and then the fantasy of escape.

In the figures of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the witches, the play gives us images of a masculinity and a femininity that are terribly disturbed; this disturbance seems to me both the cause and the consequence of the murder of Duncan. In Hamlet, Shakespeare had reconstructed the Fall as the death of the ideal father; here, he constructs a revised version in which the Fall is the death of the ideally androgynous parent. For Duncan combines in himself the attributes of both father and mother: he is the center of authority, the source of lineage and honor, the giver of name and gift; but he is also the source of all nurturance, planting the children to his throne and making them grow. He is the father as androgynous parent from whom, singly, all good can be imagined to flow, the source of a benign and empowering nurturance the opposite of that imaged in the witches’ poisonous cauldron and Lady Macbeth’s gall-filled breasts. Such a father does away with any need for a mother: he is the image of both parents in one, threatening aspects of each controlled by the presence of the other. When he is gone, “The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees / Is left this vault to brag of” (2.3.93–94): nurturance itself is spoiled, as all the play’s imagery of poisoned chalices and interrupted feasts implies. In his absence male and female break apart, the female becoming merely helpless or
merely poisonous and the male merely bloodthirsty; the harmonious relation of the genders imaged in Duncan fails.

In *Hamlet*, the absence of the ideal protecting father brings the son face to face with maternal power. The absence of Duncan similarly unleashes the power of the play’s malevolent mothers. But this father-king seems strikingly absent even before his murder. Heavily idealized, he is nonetheless largely ineffectual: even while he is alive, he is unable to hold his kingdom together, reliant on a series of bloody men to suppress an increasingly successful series of rebellions. The witches are already abroad in his realm; they in fact constitute our introduction to that realm. Duncan, not Macbeth, is the first person to echo them (“When the battle’s lost and won” [1.1.4]; “What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won” [1.2.69]). The witches’ sexual ambiguity terrifies: Banquo says of them, “You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (1.3.45–47). Is their androgyny the shadow side of the king’s, enabled perhaps by his failure to maintain a protective masculine authority? Is their strength a consequence of his weakness? (This is the configuration of *Cymbeline*, where the power of the witch-queen-stepmother is so dependent on the failure of Cymbeline’s masculine authority that she obligingly dies when that authority returns to him.) Banquo’s question to the witches may ask us to hear a counterquestion about Duncan, who should be man. For Duncan’s androgynty is the object of enormous ambivalence: idealized for his nurturing paternity, he is nonetheless killed for his womanish softness, his childish trust, his inability to read men’s minds in their faces, his reliance on the fighting of sons who can rebel against him. Macbeth’s description of the dead Duncan—“his silver skin lac’d with his golden blood” (2.3.110)—makes him into a virtual icon of kingly worth; but other images surrounding his death make him into an emblem not of masculine authority but of female vulnerability. As he moves toward the murder, Macbeth first imagines himself the allegorical figure of murder, as though to absolve himself of the responsibility of choice. But the figure of murder then fuses with that of Tarquin:

wither’d Murther,
... thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin’s ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost.

(2.1.52–56)

These lines figure the murder as a display of male sexual aggression against a passive female victim; murder here becomes rape; Macbeth’s victim becomes
not the powerful male figure of the king but the helpless Lucrece.\(^\text{12}\) Hardened by Lady Macbeth to regard maleness and violence as equivalent, that is, Macbeth responds to Duncan’s idealized milky gentleness as though it were evidence of his femaleness. The horror of this gender transformation, as well as the horror of the murder, is implicit in Macduff’s identification of the king’s body as a new Gorgon (“Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight / With a new Gorgon” [2.3.70–71]). The power of this image lies partly in its suggestion that Duncan’s bloodied body, with its multiple wounds, has been revealed as female and hence blinding to his sons: as if the threat all along were that Duncan would be revealed as female and that this revelation would rob his sons of his masculine protection and hence of their own masculinity.\(^\text{13}\)

In *King Lear*, the abdication of protective paternal power seems to release the destructive power of a female chaos imaged not only in Goneril and Regan, but also in the storm on the heath. Macbeth virtually alludes to Lear’s storm as he approaches the witches in act 4, conjuring them to answer though they “untie the winds, and let them fight / Against the Churches,” though the “waves / Confound and swallow navigation up,” though “the treasure / Of Nature’s germens tumble all together / Even till destruction sicken” (4.1.52–60; see *King Lear* 3.2.1–9). The witches merely implicit on Lear’s heath have become in *Macbeth* embodied agents of storm and disorder,\(^\text{14}\) and they are there from the start. Their presence suggests that the absence of the father that unleashes female chaos (as in *Lear*) has already happened at the beginning of *Macbeth*; that absence is merely made literal in Macbeth’s murder of Duncan at the instigation of female forces. For this father-king cannot protect his sons from powerful mothers, and it is the son’s—and the play’s—revenge to kill him, or, more precisely, to kill him first and love him after, paying him back for his excessively “womanish” trust and then memorializing him as the ideal androgynous parent.\(^\text{15}\) The reconstitution of manhood becomes a central problem of the play in part, I think, because the vision of manhood embodied in Duncan has already failed at the play’s beginning.

The witches constitute our introduction to the realm of maternal malevolence unleashed by the loss of paternal protection; as soon as Macbeth meets them, he becomes (in Hecate’s probably non-Shakespearean words) their “wayward son” (3.5.11). This maternal malevolence is given its most horrifying expression in Shakespeare in the image through which Lady Macbeth secures her control over Macbeth:

\[
\text{I have given suck, and know,}
\text{How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:}
\]
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn  
As you have done to this.

(1.7.54–59)

This image of murderously disrupted nurturance is the psychic equivalence of the witches’ poisonous cauldron; both function to subject Macbeth’s will to female forces.¹⁶ For the play strikingly constructs the fantasy of subjection to maternal malevolence in two parts, in the witches and in Lady Macbeth, and then persistently identifies the two parts as one. Through this identification, Shakespeare in effect locates the source of his culture’s fear of witchcraft in individual human history, in the infant’s long dependence on female figures felt as all-powerful: what the witches suggest about the vulnerability of men to female power on the cosmic plane, Lady Macbeth doubles on the psychological plane.

Lady Macbeth’s power as a female temptress allies her in a general way with the witches as soon as we see her. The specifics of that implied alliance begin to emerge as she attempts to harden herself in preparation for hardening her husband: the disturbance of gender that Banquo registers when he first meets the witches is played out in psychological terms in Lady Macbeth’s attempt to unsex herself. Calling on spirits ambiguously allied with the witches themselves, she phrases this unsexing as the undoing of her own bodily maternal function:

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! make thick my blood,  
Stop up th’access and passage to remorse;  
That no compunctious visitings of Nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
Th’effect and it! Come to my woman’s breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, you murth’ring ministers.

(1.5.40–48)

In the play’s context of unnatural births, the thickening of the blood and the stopping up of access and passage to remorse begin to sound like attempts to undo reproductive functioning and perhaps to stop the menstrual blood that is the sign of its potential.¹⁷ The metaphors in which Lady Macbeth frames the stopping up of remorse, that is, suggest that she imagines an attack on the reproductive passages of her own body, on what makes her specifically female.
And as she invites the spirits to her breasts, she reiterates the centrality of the attack specifically on maternal function: needing to undo the “milk of human kindness” (1.5.18) in Macbeth, she imagines an attack on her own literal milk, its transformation into gall. This imagery locates the horror of the scene in Lady Macbeth’s unnatural abrogation of her maternal function. But latent within this image of unsexing is the horror of the maternal function itself. Most modern editors follow Johnson in glossing “take my milk for gall” as “take my milk in exchange for gall,” imagining in effect that the spirits empty out the natural maternal fluid and replace it with the unnatural and poisonous one.18 But perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk as gall, to nurse from her breast and find in her milk their sustaining poison. Here the milk itself is the gall; no transformation is necessary. In these lines Lady Macbeth focuses the culture’s fear of maternal nursery—a fear reflected, for example, in the common worries about the various ills (including female blood itself) that could be transmitted through nursing and in the sometime identification of colostrum as witch’s milk.19 Insofar as her milk itself nurtures the evil spirits, Lady Macbeth localizes the image of maternal danger, inviting the identification of her maternal function itself with that of the witch. For she here invites precisely that nursing of devil-imps so central to the current understanding of witchcraft that the presence of supernumerary teats alone was often taken as sufficient evidence that one was a witch.20 Lady Macbeth and the witches fuse at this moment, and they fuse through the image of perverse nursery.

It is characteristic of the play’s division of labor between Lady Macbeth and the witches that she, rather than they, is given the imagery of perverse nursery traditionally attributed to the witches. The often noted alliance between Lady Macbeth and the witches constructs malignant female power both in the cosmos and in the family: it in effect adds the whole weight of the spiritual order to the condemnation of Lady Macbeth’s insurrection.21 But despite the superior cosmic status of the witches, Lady Macbeth seems to me finally the more frightening figure. For Shakespeare’s witches are an odd mixture of the terrifying and the near-comic. Even without consideration of the Hecate scene (3.5), with its distinct lightening of tone and its incipient comedy of discord among the witches, we may begin to feel a shift toward the comic in the presentation of the witches: the specificity and predictability of the ingredients in their dire recipe pass over toward grotesque comedy even while they create a (partly pleasurable) shiver of horror.22 There is a distinct weakening of their power after their first appearances: only halfway through the play, in 4.1, do we hear that they themselves have masters (4.1.61). The more Macbeth claims for them,
the less their actual power seems: by the time Macbeth evokes the cosmic damage they can wreak (4.1.50–60), we have already felt the presence of such damage, and felt it moreover not as issuing from the witches but as a divinely sanctioned nature’s expressions of outrage at the disruption of patriarchal order. The witches’ displays of thunder and lightning, like their apparitions, are mere theatrics compared to what we have already heard; and the serious disruptions of natural order—the storm that toppled the chimneys and made the earth shake (2.3.53–60), the unnatural darkness in day (2.4.5–10), the cannibalism of Duncan’s horses (2.4.14–18)—seem the horrifying but reassuringly familiar signs of God’s displeasure, firmly under His—not their—control. Partly because their power is thus circumscribed, nothing the witches say or do conveys the presence of awesome and unexplained malevolence in the way that Lear’s storm does. Even the process of dramatic representation itself may diminish their power: embodied, perhaps, they lack full power to terrify: “Present fears”—even of witches—“are less than horrible imaginings” (1.3.137–38). They tend thus to become as much containers for as expressions of nightmare; to a certain extent, they help to exorcise the terror of female malevolence by localizing it.

The witches may of course have lost some of their power to terrify through the general decline in witchcraft belief. Nonetheless, even when that belief was in full force, these witches would have been less frightening than their Continental sisters, their crimes less sensational. For despite their numinous and infinitely suggestive indefinability, insofar as they are witches, they are distinctly English witches; and most commentators on English witchcraft note how tame an affair it was in comparison with witchcraft belief on the Continent. The most sensational staples of Continental belief from the *Mal leus Maleficarum* (1486) on—the ritual murder and eating of infants, the attacks specifically on the male genitals, the perverse sexual relationship with demons—are missing or greatly muted in English witchcraft belief, replaced largely by a simpler concern with retaliatory wrongdoing of exactly the order Shakespeare points to when one of his witches announces her retaliation for the sailor’s wife’s refusal to share her chestnuts. We may hear an echo of some of the Continental beliefs in the hint of their quasi-sexual attack on the sailor with the uncooperative wife (the witches promise to “do and do and do,” leaving him drained “dry as hay”) and in the infanticidal contents of the cauldron, especially the “finger of birth-strangled babe” and the blood of the sow “that hath eaten / Her nine farrow.” The cannibalism that is a staple of Continental belief may be implicit in the contents of that grim cauldron; and the various
eyes, toes, tongues, legs, teeth, livers, and noses (indiscriminately human and animal) may evoke primitive fears of dismemberment close to the center of witchcraft belief. But these terrors remain largely implicit. For Shakespeare's witches are both smaller and greater than their Continental sisters: on the one hand, more the representation of English homebodies with relatively small concerns; on the other, more the incarnation of literary or mythic fates or sibyls, given the power not only to predict but to enforce the future. But the staples of Continental witchcraft belief are not altogether missing from the play: for the most part, they are transferred away from the witches and recur as the psychological issues evoked by Lady Macbeth in her relation to Macbeth. She becomes the inheritor of the realm of primitive relational and bodily disturbance: of infantile vulnerability to maternal power, of dismemberment and its developmentally later equivalent, castration. Lady Macbeth brings the witches' power home: they get the cosmic apparatus, she gets the psychic force. That Lady Macbeth is the more frightening figure—and was so, I suspect, even before belief in witchcraft had declined—suggests the firmly domestic and psychological basis of Shakespeare's imagination.  

The fears of female coercion, female definition of the male, that are initially located cosically in the witches thus find their ultimate locus in the figure of Lady Macbeth, whose attack on Macbeth's virility is the source of her strength over him and who acquires that strength, I shall argue, partly because she can make him imagine himself as an infant vulnerable to her. In the figure of Lady Macbeth, that is, Shakespeare rephrases the power of the witches as the wife/mother's power to poison human relatedness at its source; in her, their power of cosmic coercion is rewritten as the power of the mother to misshape or destroy the child. The attack on infants and on the genitals characteristic of Continental witchcraft belief is thus in her returned to its psychological source: in the play these beliefs are localized not in the witches but in the great central scene in which Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. In this scene, Lady Macbeth notoriously makes the murder of Duncan the test of Macbeth's virility; if he cannot perform the murder, he is in effect reduced to the helplessness of an infant subject to her rage. She begins by attacking his manhood, making her love for him contingent on the murder that she identifies as equivalent to his male potency: "From this time / Such I account thy love" (1.7.38-39); "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (1.7.49). Insofar as his drunk hope is now "green and pale" (1.7.37), he is identified as emasculated, exhibiting the symptoms not only of hangover but also of the green-sickness, the typical disease of timid young virgin women. Lady Macbeth's argument is, in effect, that any signs of the "milk of human kindness" (1.5.17)
mark him as more womanly than she; she proceeds to enforce his masculinity
by demonstrating her willingness to dry up that milk in herself, specifically by
destroying her nursing infant in fantasy: "I would, while it was smiling in my
face, / Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash'd the brains
out" (1.7.56-58). That this image has no place in the plot, where the Macbeths
are strikingly childless, gives some indication of the inner necessity through
which it appears. For Lady Macbeth expresses here not only the hardness she
imagines to be male, not only her willingness to unmake the most essential
maternal relationship; she expresses also a deep fantasy of Macbeth's utter vul-
nerability to her. As she progresses from questioning Macbeth's masculinity to
imagining herself dashing out the brains of her infant son,27 she articulates a
fantasy in which to be less than a man is to become interchangeably a woman
or a baby,28 terribly subject to the wife/mother's destructive rage.

By evoking this vulnerability, Lady Macbeth acquires a power over Macbeth
more absolute than any the witches can achieve. The play's central fantasy of
escape from woman seems to me to unfold from this moment; we can see its
beginnings in Macbeth's response to Lady Macbeth's evocation of absolute
maternal power. Macbeth first responds by questioning the possibility of fail-
ure ("If we should fail?" [1.7.59]). Lady Macbeth counters this fear by inviting
Macbeth to share in her fantasy of omnipotent malevolence: "What cannot you
and I perform upon / Th'unguarded Duncan?" (1.7.70-71). The satiated and
sleeping Duncan takes on the vulnerability that Lady Macbeth has just invoked
in the image of the feeding, trusting infant,29 Macbeth releases himself from
the image of this vulnerability by sharing in the murder of this innocent. In
his elation at this transfer of vulnerability from himself to Duncan, Macbeth
imagines Lady Macbeth the mother to infants sharing her hardness, born in
effect without vulnerability; in effect, he imagines her as male and then reconsti-
tutes himself as the invulnerable male child of such a mother:

Bring forth men-children only!
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

(1.7.73-75)

Through the double pun on "mettle/metal" and "male/mail," Lady Macbeth
herself becomes virtually male, composed of the hard metal of which the
armored male is made.30 Her children would necessarily be men, composed of
her male mettle, armored by her mettle, lacking the female inheritance from
the mother that would make them vulnerable. The man-child thus brought
forth would be no trusting infant; the very phrase "men-children" suggests the
presence of the adult man even at birth, hence the undoing of childish vulnerability.\(^3\) The mobility of the imagery—from male infant with his brains dashed out, to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth triumphing over the sleeping, trusting Duncan, to the all-male invulnerable man-child—suggests the logic of the fantasy: only the child of an all-male mother is safe. We see here the creation of a defensive fantasy of exemption from the woman’s part: as infantile vulnerability is shifted to Duncan, Macbeth creates in himself the image of Lady Macbeth’s hardened all-male man-child; in committing the murder, he thus becomes like Richard III, using the bloody axe to free himself in fantasy from the dominion of women, even while apparently carrying out their will.

Macbeth’s temporary solution to the infantile vulnerability and maternal malevolence revealed by Lady Macbeth is to imagine Lady Macbeth the all-male mother of invulnerable infants. The final solution, both for Macbeth and for the play itself, though in differing ways, is an even more radical excision of the female: it is to imagine a birth entirely exempt from women, to imagine in effect an all-male family, composed of nothing but males, in which the father is fully restored to power. Overtly, of course, the play denies the possibility of this fantasy: Macduff carries the power of the man not born of woman only through the equivocation of the fiends, their obstetrical joke that quibbles with the meaning of “born” and thus confirms circuitously that all men come from women after all. Even Macbeth, in whom, I think, the fantasy is centrally invested, knows its impossibility: his false security depends exactly on his commonsense assumption that everyone is born of woman. Nonetheless, I shall argue, the play curiously enacts the fantasy that it seems to deny: punishing Macbeth for his participation in a fantasy of escape from the maternal matrix, it nonetheless allows the audience the partial satisfaction of a dramatic equivalent to it. The dual process of repudiation and enactment of the fantasy seems to me to shape the ending of Macbeth decisively; I will attempt to trace this process in the rest of this essay.

The witches’ prophecy has the immediate force of psychic relevance for Macbeth partly because of the fantasy constructions central to 1.7:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

\(^{4.1.79-81}\)

The witches here invite Macbeth to make himself into the bloody and invulnerable man-child he has created as a defense against maternal malevolence in
1.7: the man-child ambivalently recalled by the accompanying apparition of the Bloody Child. For the apparition alludes at once to the bloody vulnerability of the infant destroyed by Lady Macbeth and to the bloodthirsty masculinity that seems to promise escape from this vulnerability, the bloodiness the witches urge Macbeth to take on. The doubleness of the image epitomizes exactly the doubleness of the prophecy itself: the prophecy constructs Macbeth's invulnerability in effect from the vulnerability of all other men, a vulnerability dependent on their having been born of woman. Macbeth does not question this prophecy, even after the experience of Birnam Wood should have taught him better, partly because it so perfectly meets his needs: in encouraging him to “laugh to scorn / The power of men,” the prophecy seems to grant him exemption from the condition of all men, who bring with them the liabilities inherent in their birth. As Macbeth carries the prophecy as a shield onto the battlefield, his confidence in his own invulnerability increasingly reveals his sense of his own exemption from the universal human condition. Repeated seven times, the phrase “born to woman” with its variants begins to carry for Macbeth the meaning “vulnerable,” as though vulnerability itself is the taint deriving from woman; his own invulnerability comes therefore to stand as evidence for his exemption from that taint. This is the subterranean logic of Macbeth’s words to Young Siward immediately after Macbeth has killed him:

Thou wast born of woman:—
But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born.

(5.7.11–13)

Young Siward’s death becomes in effect proof that he was born of woman; in the logic of Macbeth’s psyche, Macbeth’s invulnerability is the proof that he was not. The “but” records this fantasied distinction: it constructs the sentence “You, born of woman, are vulnerable; but I, not born of woman, am not.”

Insofar as this is the fantasy embodied in Macbeth at the play’s end, it is punished by the equivocation of the fiends: the revelation that Macduff derives from woman, though by unusual means, musters against Macbeth all the values of ordinary family and community that Macduff carries with him. Macbeth, “cow’d” by the revelation (5.8.18), is forced to take on the taint of vulnerability; the fantasy of escape from the maternal matrix seems to die with him. But although this fantasy is punished in Macbeth, it does not quite die with him; it continues to have a curious life of its own in the play, apart from its embodiment in him. Even from the beginning of the play, the fantasy has not been
Macbeth's alone: as the play's most striking bloody man, he is in the beginning
the bearer of this fantasy for the all-male community that depends on his
bloody prowess. The opening scenes strikingly construct male and female as
realms apart; and the initial descriptions of Macbeth's battles construe his
prowess as a consequence of his exemption from the taint of woman.

In the description of his battle with Macdonwald, what looks initially like
a battle between loyal and disloyal sons to establish primacy in the father's eyes
is oddly transposed into a battle of male against female:

Doubtful it stood;
As two spent swimmers, that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald
(Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him) from the western isles
Of Kernes and Gallowglasses is supplied;
And Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,
Show'd like a rebel's whore: but all's too weak;
For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smok'd with bloody execution,
Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
Till he fac'd the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the navel to th' chops,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(1.2.7-23)

The two initially indistinguishable figures metaphorized as the swimmers
eventually sort themselves out into victor and victim, but only by first sorting
themselves out into male and female, as though Macbeth can be distinguished
from Macdonwald only by making Macdonwald functionally female. The
"merciless Macdonwald" is initially firmly identified; but by the time Macbeth
appears, Macdonwald has temporarily disappeared, replaced by the female
figure of Fortune, against whom Macbeth seems to fight ("brave Macbeth, ... Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel"). The metaphorical substitution
of Fortune for Macdonwald transforms the battle into a contest between male
and female; it makes Macbeth's deserving of his name contingent on his vic-
tory over the female. We are prepared for this transformation by Macdonwald's
sexual alliance with the tainting female, the whore Fortune;34 Macbeth's
identification as valor's minion redefines the battle as a contest between the
half-female couple Fortune/Macdonwald and the all-male couple Valor/Macbeth. Metaphorically, Macdonwald and Macbeth take on the qualities of the unreliable female and the heroic male; Macbeth’s battle against Fortune turns out to be his battle against Macdonwald because the two are functionally the same. Macdonwald, tainted by the female, becomes an easy mark for Macbeth, who demonstrates his own untainted manhood by unseaming Macdonwald from the navel to the chops. Through its allusions both to castration and to Caesarian section, this unseaming furthermore remakes Macdonwald’s body as female, revealing what his alliance with Fortune has suggested all along.

In effect, then, the battle that supports the father’s kingdom plays out the creation of a conquering all-male erotics that marks its conquest by its triumph over a feminized body, simultaneously that of Fortune and Macdonwald. Hence, in the double action of the passage, the victorious unseaming happens twice: first on the body of Fortune and then on the body of Macdonwald. The lines descriptive of Macbeth’s approach to Macdonwald—“brave Macbeth . . . Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel . . . carved out his passage”—make that approach contingent on Macbeth’s first carving his passage through a female body, hewing his way out. The language here perfectly anticipates Macduff’s birth by Caesarian section, revealed at the end of the play: if Macduff is ripped untimely from his mother’s womb, Macbeth here manages in fantasy his own Caesarian section,35 carving his passage out from the unreliable female to achieve heroic male action, in effect carving up the female to arrive at the male. Only after this rite of passage can Macbeth meet Macdonwald: the act of aggression toward the female body, the fantasy of self-birth, marks his passage to the contest that will be definitive of his maleness partly insofar as it is definitive of Macdonwald’s tainted femaleness. For the all-male community surrounding Duncan, then, Macbeth’s victory is allied with his triumph over femaleness; for them, he becomes invulnerable, “lapp’d in proof” (1.2.55) like one of Lady Macbeth’s armored men-children.36 Even before his entry into the play, that is, Macbeth is the bearer of the shared fantasy that secure male community depends on the prowess of the man in effect not born of woman, the man who can carve his own passage out, the man whose very maleness is the mark of his exemption from female power.37

Ostensibly, the play rejects the version of manhood implicit in the shared fantasy of the beginning. Macbeth himself is well aware that his capitulation to Lady Macbeth’s definition of manhood entails his abandonment of his own more inclusive definition of what becomes a man (1.7.46); and Macduff’s response to the news of his family’s destruction insists that humane feeling is
central to the definition of manhood (4.3.221). Moreover, the revelation that even Macduff had a mother sets a limiting condition on the fantasy of a bloody masculine escape from the female and hence on the kind of manhood defined by that escape. Nonetheless, even at the end, the play enables one version of the fantasy that heroic manhood is exemption from the female even while it punishes that fantasy in Macbeth. The key figure in whom this double movement is vested in the end of the play is Macduff; the unresolved contradictions that surround him are, I think, marks of ambivalence toward the fantasy itself. In insisting that mourning for his family is his right as a man, he presents family feeling as central to the definition of manhood; and yet he conspicuously leaves his family vulnerable to destruction when he goes off to offer his services to Malcolm. The play moreover insists on reminding us that he has inexplicably abandoned his family: both Lady Macduff and Malcolm question the necessity of this abandonment (4.2.6–14; 4.3.26–28), and the play never allows Macduff to explain himself. This unexplained abandonment severely qualifies Macduff’s force as the play’s central exemplar of a healthy manhood that can include the possibility of relationship to women: the play seems to vest diseased familial relations in Macbeth and the possibility of healthy ones in Macduff; and yet we discover dramatically that Macduff has a family only when we hear that he has abandoned it. Dramatically and psychologically, he takes on full masculine power only as he loses his family and becomes energized by the loss, converting his grief into the more “manly” tune of vengeance (4.3.235); the loss of his family here enables his accession to full masculine action even while his response to that loss insists on a more humane definition of manhood. The play here pulls in two directions. It reiterates this doubleness by vesting in Macduff its final fantasy of exemption from woman. The ambivalence that shapes the portrayal of Macduff is evident even as he reveals to Macbeth that he “was from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripp’d” (5.8.15–16): the emphasis on untimeliness and the violence of the image suggest that he has been prematurely deprived of a nurturing maternal presence; but the prophecy construes just this deprivation as the source of Macduff’s strength. The prophecy itself both denies and affirms the fantasy of exemption from women: in affirming that Macduff has indeed had a mother, it denies the fantasy of male self-generation; but in attributing his power to his having been untimely ripped from that mother, it sustains the sense that violent separation from the mother is the mark of the successful male. The final battle between Macbeth and Macduff thus replays the initial battle between Macbeth and Macdonwald. But Macduff
has now taken the place of Macbeth: he carries with him the male power given him by the Caesarean solution, and Macbeth is retrospectively revealed as Macdonwald, the woman's man.

The doubleness of the prophecy is less the equivocation of the fiends than Shakespeare's own equivocation about the figure of Macduff and about the fantasy vested in him in the end. For Macduff carries with him simultaneously all the values of family and the claim that masculine power derives from the unnatural abrogation of family, including escape from the conditions of one's birth. Moreover, the ambivalence that shapes the figure of Macduff similarly shapes the dramatic structure of the play itself. Ostensibly concerned to restore natural order at the end,\(^{40}\) the play bases that order upon the radical exclusion of the female. Initially construed as all-powerful, the women virtually disappear at the end, Lady Macbeth becoming so diminished a character that we scarcely trouble to ask ourselves whether the report of her suicide is accurate or not, the witches literally gone from the stage and so diminished in psychic power that Macbeth never mentions them and blames his defeat only on the equivocation of their male masters, the fiends; even Lady Macduff exists only to disappear. The bogus fulfillment of the Birnam Wood prophecy suggests the extent to which the natural order of the end depends on the exclusion of the female. Critics sometimes see in the march of Malcolm's soldiers bearing their green branches an allusion to the Maying festivals in which participants returned from the woods bearing branches, or to the ritual scourging of a hibernal figure by the forces of the oncoming spring.\(^{41}\) The allusion seems to me clearly present; but it serves, I think, to mark precisely what the moving of Birnam Wood is not. Malcolm's use of Birnam Wood is a military maneuver. His drily worded command (5.4.4–7) leaves little room for suggestions of natural fertility or for the deep sense of the generative world rising up to expel its winter king; nor does the play later enable these associations except in a scattered and partly ironic way.\(^{42}\) These trees have little resemblance to those in the Forest of Arden; their branches, like those carried by the apparition of the "child crowned, with a tree in his hand" (4.1.86), are little more than the emblems of a strictly patriarchal family tree.\(^{43}\) This family tree, like the march of Birnam Wood itself, is relentlessly male: Duncan and sons, Banquo and son, Siward and son. There are no daughters and scarcely any mention of mothers in these family trees. We are brought as close as possible here to the fantasy of family without women.\(^{44}\) In that sense, Birnam Wood is the perfect emblem of the nature that triumphs at the end of the play: nature without generative pos-
sibility, nature without women. Malcolm tells his men to carry the branches to obscure themselves, and that is exactly their function: insofar as they seem to allude to the rising of the natural order against Macbeth, they obscure the operations of male power, disguising them as a natural force; and they simultaneously obscure the extent to which natural order itself is here reconceived as purely male. 45

If we can see the fantasy of escape from the female in the play’s fulfillment of the witches’ prophecies—in Macduff’s birth by Caesarean section and in Malcolm’s appropriation of Birnam Wood—we can see it also in the play’s psychological geography. The shift from Scotland to England is strikingly the shift from the mother’s to the father’s terrain. 46 Scotland “cannot / Be call’d our mother, but our grave” (4.3.165–66), in Rosse’s words to Macduff: it is the realm of Lady Macbeth and the witches, the realm in which the mother is the grave, the realm appropriately ruled by their bad son Macbeth. The escape to England is an escape from their power into the realm of the good father-king and his surrogate son Malcolm, “unknown to woman” (4.3.126). The magical power of this father to cure clearly balances the magical power of the witches to harm, as Malcolm (the father’s son) balances Macbeth (the mother’s son). That Macduff can cross from one realm into the other only by abandoning his family suggests the rigidity of the psychic geography separating England from Scotland. At the end of the play, Malcolm returns to Scotland mantled in the power England gives him, in effect bringing the power of the fathers with him: bearer of his father’s line, unknown to woman, supported by his agent Macduff (empowered by his own special immunity from birth), Malcolm embodies utter separation from women and as such triumphs easily over Macbeth, the mother’s son.

The play that begins by unleashing the terrible threat of destructive maternal power and demonstrates the helplessness of its central male figure before that power thus ends by consolidating male power, in effect solving the problem of masculinity by eliminating the female. In the psychological fantasies that I am tracing, the play portrays the failure of the androgynous parent to protect his son, that son’s consequent fall into the dominion of the bad mothers, and the final victory of a masculine order in which mothers no longer threaten because they no longer exist. In that sense, Macbeth is a recuperative consolidation of male power, a consolidation in the face of the threat unleashed in Hamlet and especially in King Lear and never fully contained in those plays. In Macbeth, maternal power is given its most virulent sway and
then abolished; at the end of the play we are in a purely male realm. We will
not be in so absolute a male realm again until we are in Prospero’s island king-
dom, similarly based firmly on the exiling of the witch Sycorax.

NOTES

This essay is reprinted from Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renais-
sance (Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1985, New Series, No. 11), ed. Marjorie
Garber (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 90–121. The essay is also
incorporated in Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origins in Shakespeare,

1. All references to Macbeth are to the new Arden edition, edited by Muir.

2. I have written elsewhere about Coriolanus’s doomed attempts to create a self
that is independent of his mother’s will; see my “Anger’s My Meat: Feeding, Depen-
dency, and Aggression in Coriolanus.” Others have noted the extent to which both Macbeth
and Coriolanus deal with the construction of a rigid male identity felt as a defense
against overwhelming maternal power; see particularly Kahn, Man’s Estate, whose
chapter title “The Milking Babe and the Bloody Man in Coriolanus and Macbeth”
indicates the similarity of our concerns (151–92). Bamber argues, however, that the
absence of a feminine Other in Macbeth and Coriolanus prevents the development of
manliness in the heroes, since true manliness “involves a detachment from the femi-
nine” (20, 91–107).

3. Kozikowski argues strenuously that Shakespeare knew either the pamphlet
“Gowries Conspiracie” (printed in Scotland and London in 1600) or the abortive play
on the conspiracy, apparently performed twice by the King’s Men and then canceled in
1604. Although I do not find his arguments entirely persuasive, it seems likely that
Shakespeare knew at least the central facts of the conspiracy, given both James’s annual
celebration of his escape from it and the apparent involvement of the King’s Men in a
play on the subject. See also Mullaney’s suggestive use of the Gowrie material as an
analogue for Macbeth in its link between treason and magical riddle (32, 38).

4. After the failure of the conspiracy, James searched the dead earl’s pockets,
finding nothing in them “but a little close parchment bag, full of magical characters,
and words of enchantment, wherin, it seemed, that he had put his confidence, thinking
him selfe never safe without them, and therfore ever carried them about with him; bee-
ing also observed, that, while they were uppon him, his wound whereof he died, bled
not, but, incontinent after the taking of them away, the blood gushed out in great
abundance, to the great admiration of al the beholders” (“Gowries Conspiracie” 196).
The magical stopping up of the blood and the sudden return of its natural flow seem
to me potent images for the progress of Macbeth as he is first seduced and then aban-
doned by the witches’ prophecies; that Gowrie’s necromancer, like the witches, seemed
to dabble in alternate modes of generation increases the suggestiveness of this association for Macbeth.

5. All references to Shakespeare's plays other than Macbeth are to the revised Pelican edition, William Shakespeare: The Complete Works, ed. Alfred Harbage.


7. "Impale" in the sense of "to enclose with pales, stakes or posts; to surround with a pallisade" (OED's first meaning) is of course the dominant usage contemporary with Macbeth. But the word was in the process of change. OED's meaning 4, "to thrust a pointed stake through the body of, as a form of torture or capital punishment," although cited first in 1613, clearly seems to stand behind the imagistic transformation here. The shift in meaning perfectly catches Richard's psychological process, in which any protective enclosure is ambivalently desired and threatens to turn into a torturing impalement.

8. Watson notes the imagery of Caesarean birth here and in Macbeth (see esp. 19-20, 99-105); the metaphors of Caesarean section and Oedipal rape are central to his understanding of ambitious self-creation insofar as both imagine a usurpation of the defining parental acts of generation (see, for example, 3-5). Though it is frequently very suggestive, Watson's account tends too easily to blur the distinction between matricide and patricide: in fantasies of rebirth, the hero may symbolically replace the father to re-create himself, but he does so by means of an attack specifically on the maternal body. In Shakespeare's images of Caesarean birth, the father tends to be conspicuously absent; indeed, I shall argue, precisely his absence—not his defining presence—creates the fear of the engulfing maternal body to which the fantasy of Caesarean section is a response. This body tends to be missing in Watson's account, as it is missing in his discussion of Richard's Caesarean fantasy here.

9. In an early essay that has become a classic, Waith established the centrality of definitions of manhood and Lady Macbeth's role in enforcing Macbeth's particularly bloodthirsty version, a theme that has since become a major topos of Macbeth criticism. Among the ensuing legions, see, for example, Proser; Taylor (unusual in its early emphasis on the extent to which the culture is complicit in defining masculinity as aggression); Harding (significant especially in its stress on women's responsibility for committing men to their false fantasy of manhood); Jorgensen, esp. 147ff.; Ramsey; Asp (significant especially for associating Macbeth's pursuit of masculinity with his pursuit of omnipotence); Berger, "Text against Performance," esp. 67-75; and Kimbrough. Virtually all these essays recount the centrality of 1.7 to this theme; most see Macbeth's willingness to murder as his response to Lady Macbeth's nearly explicit attack on his male potency. Biggins and Greene note particularly the extent to which the murder itself is imagined as a sexual act through which the union of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is consummated; see also Watson 90. My account differs from most of these
largely in stressing the infantile components of Macbeth’s susceptibility to Lady Macbeth. The classic account of these pre-Oedipal components in the play is Barron’s brilliant early essay “The Babe That Milks.” For similar readings, see Rosenberg 81–82, 270–72; and especially Kahn 151–55, 172–92, and Wheeler, Shakespeare’s Development 144–49; as always, I am deeply and minutely indebted to the two last named.

10. Berger associates both Duncan’s vulnerability and his role in legitimizing the bloody masculinity of his thanes with his status as the androgynous supplier of blood and milk (“The Early Scenes” 26–28). Schwartz (29) and Wheeler (Shakespeare’s Development 145) note specifically the extent to which the male claim to androgynous possession of nurturant power reflects a fear of maternal power outside male control. My discussion of Duncan’s androgyny is partly a consequence of my having heard at MLA in 1979 Erickson’s rich account of the Duke’s taking on a nurturant function in As You Like It; this account is now part of his Patriarchal Structures; see esp. 27–37.

11. Many commentators note that Shakespeare’s Duncan is less ineffectual than Holingshed’s; others note the continuing signs of his weakness. See especially Berger’s brilliant account of the structural effect of Duncan’s weakness in defining his (and Macbeth’s) society (“The Early Scenes”).

12. Many note the appropriateness of Macbeth’s conflation of himself with Tarquin, given the play’s alliance of sexuality and murder. See, for example, Robinson 104; Biggs 269; and Watson 100. Kirsch works extensively with the analogy, seeing the Tarquin of The Rape of Lucrece as a model for Macbeth’s ambitious desire. Commentators on the analogy do not in general note that it transforms Macbeth’s kingly victim into a woman; Rabkin is the exception (107).

13. Wheeler sees the simultaneously castrated and castrating Gorgon-like body of Duncan as the emblem of the world Macbeth brings into being (Shakespeare’s Development 145); I see it as the emblem of a potentially castrating femaleness that Macbeth’s act of violence reveals but does not create.

14. The witches’ power to raise storms was conventional; see, for example, Scot 31; James I 46; and the failure of the witches to raise a storm in Jonson’s Masque of Queens. Jonson’s learned note on their attempt to disturb nature gives his classical sources for their association with chaos: see Masque, ll. 134–37, 209–20, and Jonson’s note to l. 134, in Orgel, Ben Johnson 531–32.

15. Many commentators, following Freud, find the murder of Duncan “little else than parricide” (Strachey 14: 321; see, for example, Rabkin 106–109; Kirsch 276–80, 286; and Watson, esp. 85–88, 98–99 (the last two are particularly interesting in understanding parricide as an ambitious attempt to redefine the self as omnipotently free from limits). In standard Oedipal readings of the play, the mother is less the object of desire than the ‘demon-woman’ who creates the abyss between father and son” by inciting the son to parricide (Jekels 240). See also, for example, Veszy-Wagner 242–57; Holland 229; and Hogan’s very suggestive account of the Oedipal narrative structure (385–95). My reading differs from these Oedipal readings mainly in suggesting that the play’s mothers acquire their power because the father’s protective masculine authority is already

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significantly absent; in my reading, female power over Macbeth becomes the sign (rather than the cause) of that absence.

16. For those recent commentators who follow Barron in seeing pre-Oedipal rather than Oedipal issues as central to the play, the images of disrupted nurturance define the primary area of disturbance; see, for example, Barron 255; Schwartz 29; Berger, “The Early Scenes” 27–28; Byles; Wheeler, Shakespeare’s Development 147–48; and Kirsch 291–92. Although Madelon Gohlke (now Sprengnether) does not specifically discuss the rupture of maternal nurturance in Macbeth, my understanding of the play is very much indebted to her classic essay “‘I wooed thee with my sword’: Shakespeare’s Tragic Paradigms,” in which she establishes the extent to which masculinity in Shakespeare’s heroes entails a defensive denial of the female; in an unfortunately unpublished essay, she discusses the traumatic failure of maternal protection imaged by Lady Macbeth here. Willborn locates in Lady Macbeth’s image the psychological point of origin for the failure of potential space that Macbeth enacts. Erickson, noting that patriarchal bounty in Macbeth has gone awry, suggestively locates the dependence of that bounty on the maternal nurturance that is here disturbed (116–21). Several critics see in Macbeth’s susceptibility to female influence evidence of his failure to differentiate from a maternal figure, a failure psychologically the consequence of the abrupt and bloody weaning imaged by Lady Macbeth; see, for example, Bachmann, and particularly the full and very suggestive accounts of Barron 263–68 and Kahn 172–78. In the readings of all these critics, as in mine, Lady Macbeth and the witches variously embody the destructive maternal force that overwhelms Macbeth and in relation to whom he is imagined as an infant. Rosenberg notes intriguingly that Macbeth has twice been performed with a mother and son in the chief roles (196).

17. Despite some overliteral interpretation, Fox and particularly La Belle usefully demonstrate the specifically gynecological references of “passage” and “visitings of nature,” using contemporary gynecological treatises (see Fox 129; and La Belle 382, for the identification of “visitings of nature” as a term for menstruation; see La Belle 383 for the identification of “passage” as a term for the neck of the womb. See also Barron, who associates Lady Macbeth’s language here with contraception [267]).


19. Insofar as syphilis was known to be transmitted through the nursing process, there was some reason to worry; see, for example, Clowes’s frightening account (151). But Leontes’s words to Hermione as he removes Mamillius from her (“I am glad you did not nurse him. Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you / Have too much blood in him” [The Winter’s Tale 2.1.56–58]) suggest that the worry was not fundamentally about epidemiology. Worry that the nurse’s milk determined morals was, of course, common; see, for example, Phaire 18. The topic was of interest to King James, who claimed to have sucked his Protestantism from his nurse’s milk; his drunkenness
was also attributed to her (see Paul 387–88). For the identification of colostrum with witch’s milk, see Radbill 249. The fear of maternal functioning itself, not simply of its perversions, is central to most readings of the play in pre-Oedipal terms; see the critics cited in note 16 above.

20. Many commentators on English witchcraft note the unusual prominence given to the presence of the witch’s mark and the nursing of familiars; see, for example, Rosen’s introduction to the collection of witchcraft documents she edited (29–30). She cites contemporary documents on the nursing of familiars, for example 187–88, 315; the testimony of Joan Prentice, one of the convicted witches of Chelmsford in 1589, is particularly suggestive: “at what time soever she would have her ferret do anything for her, she used the words ‘Bid, Bid, Bid, come Bid, come Bid, come suck, come suck, come suck’ ” (188). Briggs quotes a contemporary (1613) story about the finding of a witch’s teat (250); see also Notestein 36; and Kittredge, Witchcraft 179. Though he does not refer to the suckling of familiars, King James believed in the significance of the witch’s mark, at least when he wrote the Daemonologie (see James I 33). Bradbrook notes that Lady Macbeth’s invitation to the spirits is “as much as any witch could do by way of self-dedication” (43).

21. In a brilliant essay, Stallybrass associates the move from the cosmic to the secular realm with the ideological shoring up of a patriarchal state founded on the model of the family (esp. 196–98).

22. Sanders notes the extent to which “terror is mediated through absurdity” in the witches (277); see also Berger’s fine account of the scapegoating reduction of the witches to a comic and grotesque triviality (“Text against Performance” 67–68). Goddard (512–13), Robinson (100–103), and Stallybrass (199) note the witches’ change from potent and mysterious to more diminished figures in act 4.

23. After years of trying fruitlessly to pin down a precise identity for the witches, critics are increasingly finding their dramatic power precisely in their indefinability. The most powerful statements of this relatively new critical topos are those by Sanders (277–79), West (78–79), and Booth (101–103).

24. For their “Englishness,” see Stallybrass 195. Macfarlane’s important study of English witchcraft, Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England, frequently notes the absence of the Continental staples: if the witches of Essex are typical, English witches do not fly, do not hold Sabbaths, do not commit sexual perversions or attack male potency, do not kill babies (see 6, 160, 180, for example).

25. Macfarlane finds the failure of neighborliness reflected in the retaliatory acts of the witch the key to the social function of witchcraft in England; see Macfarlane 168–76 for accounts of the failures of neighborliness—very similar to the refusal to share chestnuts—that provoked the witch to act. Sprenger and Kramer, Malleus Maleficarum, is the locus classicus for Continental witchcraft beliefs: for the murder and eating of infants, see 21, 66, 99, 100–101; for attacks on the genitals, see 47, 55–60, 117–19; for sexual relations with demons, see 21, 112–14. Or see Scot’s convenient summary of these beliefs (31).

26. The relationship between cosmology and domestic psychology is similar in
27. Although “his” was a common form for the as yet unfamiliar possessive “its,” Lady Macbeth’s move from “while it was smiling” to “his boneless gums” nonetheless seems to register the metamorphosis of an ungendered to a gendered infant exactly at the moment of vulnerability, making her attack specifically on a male child. That she uses the ungendered “the” a moment later (“the brains out”) suggests one alternative open to Shakespeare had he wished to avoid the implication that the fantasied infant was male; Antóny’s crocodile, who “moves with it own organs” (Antony and Cleopatra 2.7.42), suggests another. (OED notes that, although “its” occurs in the Folio, it does not occur in any work of Shakespeare published while he was alive; it also notes the various strategies by which authors attempted to avoid the inappropriate use of “his.”)

28. Lady Macbeth maintains her control over Macbeth through 3.4 by manipulating these categories: see 2.2.53–54 (“tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil”) and 3.4.57–65 (“Are you a man? . . . these flaws and starts . . . would well become / A woman’s story”). In his response to Banquo’s ghost, Macbeth invokes the same categories and suggests their interchangeability: he dares what man dares (3.4.98); if he feared Banquo alive, he could rightly be called “the baby of a girl” (l. 105).

29. Willbern notes the extent to which the regicide is reimagined as a “symbolic infanticide” so that the image of Duncan fuses with the image of Lady Macbeth’s child murdered in fantasy. Macbeth’s earlier association of Duncan’s power with the power of the “naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast” (1.7.21–22) prepares for this fusion. Despite their symbolic power, the literal babies of this play and those adults who sleep and trust like infants are hideously vulnerable.

30. See Kahn 173 for a very similar account of this passage.

31. Shakespeare’s only other use of “man-child” is in a strikingly similar context. Volumnia, reporting her pleasure in Coriolanus’s martial success, tells Virgilia, “I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man” (Coriolanus 1.3.15–17).

32. De Quincy seems to have understood this process: “The murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is ‘unsexed’; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman” (335). Critics who consider gender relations central to this play generally note the importance of the witches’ prophecy for the figure of Macduff; they do not usually note its application to Macbeth. But see Kahn’s suggestion that the prophecy sets Macbeth “apart from women as well as from men” (187) and Gohlke’s central perception that “to be born of woman, as [Macbeth] reads the witches’ prophecy, is to be mortal” (176).

33. See Kahn’s rich understanding of the function of the term “cow’d” (191).
34. Many comment on this contamination; see, for example, Berger, "The Early Scenes" 7-8; Hogan 387; Rosenberg 45; Biggs 265.

35. Watson notes the suggestion of Caesarean section here, though not its aggression toward the female. Barron does not comment specifically on this passage but notes breaking and cutting imagery throughout and relates it to Macbeth's attempt to "cut his way out of the female environment which chokes and smothers him" (269). I am indebted to Willbern specifically for the Caesarean implication of the unseaming from navel to chops.

36. The reference to Macbeth as "Bellona's bridegroom" anticipates his interaction with Lady Macbeth in 1.7: only the murderous man-child is fit mate for either of these unsexed, quasi-male figures.

37. To the extent that ferocious maleness is the creation of the male community, not of Lady Macbeth or the witches, the women are scapegoats who exist partly to obscure the failures of male community. For fuller accounts of this process, see Veszy-Wagner 244, Bamber 19-20, and especially Berger, "Text against Performance" 68-75. But whether or not the women are scapegoats insofar as they are (falsely) held responsible for Macbeth's murderous maleness, fear of the female power they represent remains primary (not secondary and obscurantist) insofar as the male community and, to some extent, the play itself define maleness as violent differentiation from the female.

38. A great many critics, following Waith (266-67), find the play's embodiment of healthy masculinity in Macduff. They often register some uneasiness about his leaving his family, but they rarely allow this uneasiness to complicate their view of him as exemplary. But critics interested in the play's construction of masculinity as a defense against the fear of femaleness tend to see in Macduff's removal from family a replication of the central fear of women that is more fully played out in Macbeth. See, for example, Wheeler, Shakespeare's Development 146, and Berger, "Text against Performance" 70. For these critics, Macduff's flight is of a piece with his status as the man not born of woman.

39. Critics interested in gender issues almost invariably comment on the centrality of Macduff's fulfillment of this prophecy, finding his strength here in his freedom from contamination by or regressive dependency on women: see, for example, Harding 250; Barron 272; Berger, "The Early Scenes" 28; Bachmann 101; Kirsch 293; Kahn 172-73; Wheeler, Shakespeare's Development 146; and Calef 537. For Barron and Harding, Macduff's status as the bearer of this fantasy positively enhances his manhood; but for many of these critics, it qualifies his status as the exemplar of healthy manhood. Perhaps because ambivalence toward Macduff is built so deeply into the play, several very astute critics see the fantasy embedded in Macduff here and nonetheless continue to find in him an ideal manhood that includes the possibility of relatedness to the feminine. See, for example, Kahn 191 and Kirsch 294.

40. The triumph of the natural order has of course been a commonplace of criticism since the classic essay by Knight, "The Milk of Concord," esp. 140-53. The topos
is so powerful that it can cause even critics interested in gender issues to praise the triumph of nature and natural sexuality at the end without noting the exclusion of the female; see, for example, Greene 172. But Rosenberg, for example, notes the qualifying effect of this exclusion (654).

41. See, for example, Goddard 520–23; Jekels 238; Holloway 66; Rosenberg 626; and Watson 89, 106–16. Even without sensing the covert presence of a vegetation myth, critics often associate the coming of Birnam Wood with the restoration of spring and fertility; see, for example, Knight 144–45 and Greene 169. Only Bamber demurs: in her account Birnam Wood rises up in aid of a male alliance, not the Saturnalian disorder of the Maying rituals (106). My view coincides with hers.

42. When Malcolm refers to planting (5.9.31) at the play’s end, for example, his comment serves partly to reinforce our sense of his distance from his father’s generative power.

43. Paul attributes Shakespeare’s use of the imagery of the family tree here to his familiarity with the cut of the Banquo tree in Leslie’s De Origine, Moribus, et Rebus Gesta Scotorum (Royal Play, 175). But the image is too familiar to call for such explanation; see, for example, the tree described in Richard II (1.2.12–21).

44. As Wheeler notes, the description of Malcolm’s saintly mother makes him “symbolically the child of something approximating virgin birth” (Shakespeare’s Development 146)—in effect another version of the man not quite born of woman. Berger comments on the aspiration to be “a nation of bachelor Adams, of no woman born and unknown to women” (“Text against Performance” 72), without noting the extent to which this fantasy is enacted in the play; Stallybrass calls attention to this configuration and describes the structure of antithesis through which “(virtuous) families of men” are distinguished from “antifamilies of women” (198). The fantasy of escape from maternal birth and the creation of all-male lineage would probably have been of interest to King James, whose problematic derivation from Mary, Queen of Scots must occasionally have made him wish himself not born of (that particular) woman, no matter how much he was concerned publicly to rehabilitate her image. See Goldberg’s account of James’s complex attitude toward Mary and especially his attempt to claim the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth, rather than Mary as his mother as he moved toward the English throne (11–17, 25–26, 119); see also Goldberg’s very suggestive discussions of James’s poetic attacks on women (24–25) and his imaging himself as a man taking control of a woman in becoming king of England (30–31, 46). Orgel speculates brilliantly about the ways in which James’s concerns about his own lineage and hence about the derivation of his royal authority are reflected in The Tempest: James “conceived himself as the head of a single-parent family,” as a paternal figure who has “incorporated the maternal,” in effect as a Prospero; the alternative model is Caliban, who derives his authority from his mother (“Prospero’s Wife” 8–9). Perhaps Macbeth indirectly serves a cultural need to free James from entanglement with the problematic memory of his witch-mother (portrayed thus, for example, by Spenser in book 5 of The Faerie Queene), tracing his lineage instead from a safely distanced and safely male forefather—Banquo.
45. Although neither Berger nor Stallybrass discusses the function of Birnam Wood specifically, I am indebted here to their discussions of the ideological function of the play’s appeal to cosmology in the service of patriarchy, Berger seeing it as “a collective project of mystification” (“Text against Performance” 64), Stallybrass as “a returning of the disputed ground of politics to the undisputed ground of Nature” (205–206). If, as Bradbrook suggests, witches were thought able to move trees (42), then we have in Malcolm’s gesture a literal appropriation of female power, an act of making the unnatural natural by making it serve patriarchal needs.

46. See Erickson’s fine discussion of this geographic distinction (121–22).

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