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Macbeth's Language

Abstract

This essay approaches the question of language in *Macbeth* from the perspective of the recent proliferation of interest in computational analysis. Using the programmes Docuscope, LATtice, and Wordhoard, it examines the LATtice indication that, based on Language Action Types (LATs), *Macbeth* is, after *Troilus and Cressida*, linguistically closest to *Hamlet* and the Wordhoard finding that in *Macbeth* the pronoun *she* is used less often than in Shakespeare's canon. It argues that, despite the apparent similarity of language in the two tragedies, there is a profound difference between the two when one takes into account the poetic qualities of metaphor, rhythm, and the variation of single and multiple-syllabic words. Finally, examining the relative occurrence of the noun "woman" in the play, it argues that, in linguistic terms, the preponderance of uses in the final act in the phrase "of woman born" creates a rhythmical mantra that suggests that the root of evil in the Scottish play lies in the denial of the female.

KEYWORDS: Shakespeare; *Macbeth*; *Hamlet*; computational stylistic analysis; wordhoard; docuscope; LATtice; rhythm; poetry; pronouns; *she*; woman

In early 2017 the new Oxford Shakespeare appeared with much press fanfare, chiefly because of its radical expansion of co-authored plays from eight out of thirty-nine in the 1986 edition to seventeen out of forty-four in 2017. The major winner in this process is not Marlowe or Middleton or Fletcher, but rather computational analysis: the tool that allows scholars to pinpoint, in accordance with the relative frequency of particular words, passages written by specific authors that are now assumed to bear their characters as indelibly as their personal signatures or thumbprints. At a recent conference on Shakespeare and Marlowe held by the Kingston Shakespeare Seminar under the direction of Richard Wilson, most of the discussion (and contention) concerned the way in which computational analysis should be used: the questions it should be asked to address, the data it should be fed, the units of analysis it should depend upon. None of the protagonists, notably Brian Vickers and Marina Tarlonskaja on one side, and the representatives of the new Oxford

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Shakespeare, Gary Taylor and Gabriel Egan (with Hugh Craig in the background) on the other, attacked digital analysis as such. But they did disagree violently about how it should be used. Very simply – or simplistically – the ‘Oxford’ school put their faith in the purely computational analysis of ‘function words’ (articles, prepositions, auxiliaries), while Vickers claimed not only that it was far better to use ‘word strings’ as the unit of comparative analysis, but also that attention to ‘traditional’ literary concerns like differences of genre and fine shades of meaning in context is critical: “Attribution studies based on reading, on the constantly changing flux of meaning and intention, can register the full spectrum of dramatic language from the minutiae of verbal contractions to the larger significance of repeated words and concepts” (Vickers 2011: 114).

I must say at once that I have no interest in the attribution of authorship in this essay (especially not regarding *Macbeth*). But I am interested in the use of computer analysis to help us ask questions of and read Shakespeare’s texts with close attention. Most scholars engaged in author attribution analysis use their own sophisticated programmes. But there are others readily available to non-specialists that reveal patterns in the language of Shakespeare’s plays (indeed, any texts) that would be very difficult to see without the computer’s vast capacity for statistical analysis. The three programmes I will discuss here include Docuscope, which analyses Language Action Types (LATs), a range of different uses of language or speech acts; Lattice, which works with Docuscope data to represent graphically the distance of Shakespeare’s plays from each other in their rhetorical actions; and Wordhoard, which offers an analysis of the relative frequency of words used in particular plays in comparison with other Shakespeare plays, either in a single comparison (*Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, for example), or across the whole canon.

Wordhoard, like all concordance-based programmes, can reveal some counterintuitive things – for example, that the character who uses the word “love” most across the canon is Iago (followed by Othello) and that the word is hardly used at all in *The Tempest*. Docuscope’s speech-oriented analysis is more sophisticated. For example, it not only tags all first-person pronouns, but also indicates specific uses of the first person – “Self-disclosure”, as in ‘I think’, ‘I am’, ‘I feel’, ‘I believe’; but also “Self-reluctance”, as in ‘I regret’, ‘I was forced’, ‘I refuse’; and “Autobiography”, when characters reveal things about their past thoughts and actions.

I have been playing around with these programmes for some years now, and have not quite come to a decision about how useful they are for the kind of analysis that Vickers describes as “dramatic language from the minutiae of verbal contractions to the larger significance of repeated words

and concepts". So I thought, especially after Michael Witmore, Jonathan Hope and Michael Gleicher's chapter on the use of these programmes to reveal the features of Shakespeare's language in his tragedies as a whole in the recent *Oxford Handbook of Shakespearean Tragedy*, that it might be interesting to see if they can tell us anything about the language of *Macbeth* (Witmore, Hope, and Gleicher 2016). In their early attempts to isolate the distinctive characteristics of Shakespeare's languages of tragedy and comedy, Witmore and Hope found that Shakespeare's tragedies and comedies clustered separately in different parts of a graph representing LATs (Hope and Witmore 2010). But in the latest study they suggest that, compared to the whole corpus of early modern plays, there is in fact little difference between Shakespeare's language of tragedy and that of his comedies. To anyone who has read Susan Snyder's decades-old study on the comic matrix of Shakespeare's tragedies, this should perhaps not be very surprising (Snyder 1979).

One striking difference that Witmore and Hope do isolate in their comparison is that Shakespeare uses more personal address, and especially first-person address – language addressed by the speaking 'I' concerning its own states, intentions, and actions – in his comedies than he does in his tragedies. This is counter-intuitive, especially in the light of the general assumption that it is in Shakespeare's tragedies, especially *Hamlet*, that a self-consciously interior subjectivity is invented.¹ But matters are more complicated than can be revealed by mere statistical analysis. Hope and Witmore know this, of course, and have always insisted that computational analysis is no more than a research aid – the researcher still has to ask, and try to answer, the hard questions. So what I am going to say should in no way be regarded as a criticism of their work, or indeed of those scholars who have discovered multiple other hands in Shakespeare's texts, or indeed his hand in others.

Looking at the OpensourceShakespeare concordance and the Wordhoard loglikelihood analysis of the relative frequency of words in *Macbeth* compared to the whole of Shakespeare's corpus, but stripped of proper names (which would otherwise skew the comparison considerably) it is striking for being unsurprising. We should expect "thane", "knock", "cauldron", "weird", "dagger", "tyrant", "fear", and "horror" to appear more frequently in the Scottish play than in the others. More interesting, though, are the personal pronouns. "She" is strikingly infrequent in *Macbeth*. It appears only seventeen times – twenty-one uses for every 10,000 words – in

¹ This has long been argued by cultural materialist and new historicist critics. The *locus classicus* of the argument is Barker 1995. For a critical response, see Eisaman Maus 1995.

comparison with the rest of the corpus, which has fifty-three per 10,000.² This is something I would certainly not have noticed without the help of the computer. The question is, what to make of it.

Does this absence of the female pronoun mean that women are unimportant in this play? It is not as if *Macbeth* is devoid of female characters. Indeed, Lady Macbeth is an extremely prominent figure in the play. For that matter, Lady Macduff is also pretty central to Macduff's life and actions, even if she appears in one brief, horrific scene. The point is that women may play an active role in the play, but they are not talked about much. They play very little part in the thoughts or reflections of the other (male) characters. There is no such discrepancy with the male pronoun, "he". Shakespeare uses it about as frequently in *Macbeth* as he does in his other plays. "Her" is also used significantly less frequently in *Macbeth*, on twenty-six occasions, many of which refer not to any specific woman but to entities like the scotched snake, a sow, figures invoked by the witches, and Scotland herself.

Matters get more interesting when we move from statistical analysis to reading the text itself. Act 5, scene 1 is very brief – no more than sixty-seven lines. But it contains fourteen instances of "she" and seventeen of "her". There is thus a "she" or "her" for every line of the scene, although they might not appear in every line. This is not surprising, because the scene is the famous, harrowing occasion on which the distraught Lady Macbeth walks and talks in her troubled sleep, lacerated by her conscience, and observed by the doctor and the Waiting-Gentlewoman. This is no dumb-show. Shakespeare provides a running commentary from the two minor characters that forces us to attend in full at the woman who now finds it almost impossible to speak or think, impossible to adopt the first person 'I' with any security or confidence. Her heart is "sorely charged"; we witness her inner torment in broken fragments that nevertheless sound with a terrifying clarity: "Out, out damned spot . . . Hell is murky . . . Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? . . . The Thane of Fife had a wife . . . Here's the smell of blood, still . . . What's done cannot be undone" (*Macbeth*, 5.1.37, passim).

And in their continuous commentary on the character we see before us on the stage, the Doctor and the Waiting-Gentlewoman present a fragile, damaged human being: throwing on a night-gown, opening a closet, taking out a paper, writing, reading, rubbing her hands, echoing her earlier reading of a letter actions in which she possessed such certainty of thought and

² These figures are obtained from the sites www.opensourceshakespeare.org (last access 28 November 2017) and [Wordhoard \(wordhoard.northwestern.edu\)](http://wordhoard.northwestern.edu) (last access 28 November 2017).

self that she was the one who spoke and acted, not the one spoken of. In the dialogues between them, Lady Macbeth by and large matches her husband's use of the first-person pronoun. He outstrips her only in his soliloquies, of which he has many more than his wife.

This brings us to *Hamlet*, and its relation to the later tragedy. LATtice reveals that comparatively speaking these two tragedies are linguistically very similar. The closest play to *Macbeth* (according to the Docuscope rhetorical analysis upon which LATtice bases its findings) is in fact *Troilus and Cressida*. *Hamlet* is next in line, followed by *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* and, perhaps surprisingly, *Cymbeline*. The play furthest from *Macbeth* is *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. What LATtice, working on Docuscope data, shows is that especially with regard to personal disclosure, there is not a great deal of difference between *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* has slightly more uses of the first person, *Hamlet* slightly more self-disclosure, but also a lot more that falls under Docuscope's "Autobiography" category (*Macbeth* has virtually none). Perhaps surprisingly, they are virtually on a par on "Self-disclosure", universally regarded as *Hamlet*'s unique province.

But again, we come up against the limitations of even a rhetorically oriented programme that focuses not on word frequency but rather on language as action. Intuitively, we sense that, despite what Docuscope and LATtice tell us, the languages of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* belong to entirely different worlds. In their modes of self-address the eponymous heroes are utterly different: the one, as James Calderwood (1985) argued, is embroiled in action – in *Macbeth*'s constant projection of "the deed" – the other, infamously and incessantly "los[es] the name of action". That intuition tends to ignore the degree to which *Macbeth*, at least initially, in his own early soliloquies struggles to bring himself to act. But it should prompt us to ask about differences of syntax and rhythm (this is verse, after all, and Docuscope has no means of measuring the linguistic force of the poetic) and the way in which, especially in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare alternates passages of multisyllabic language often clogged with recalcitrant metaphors and similes with much more simple, monosyllabic lines.

There are differences within the play, and sometimes differences in the language used by a single character.

Here is an early *Macbeth* soliloquy:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
 It were done quickly. If th'assassination
 Could trammel up the consequence and catch
 With his surcease success, that but this blow
 Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
 We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases

We still have judgment here, that we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
 To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
 Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned chalice
 To our own lips.
 (*Macbeth*, 1.7.1-10)

The opening sentence appears to be simple and clear enough. All the words bar “quickly” are monosyllabic. Almost all the words are repeated – “it”, “done”, “were/’twere”, “well” (“done” appears three times). But it is precisely this repletion, and the way in which words like “where” and “were” merge as the same sound that makes the syntax difficult to follow. That is complicated further by the conditional, “if”, while the indeterminate “it” coupled in the subjunctive mood and the passive voice means that while Shakespeare is using simple, common English words, he is throwing up grammatical obstacles to our easy grasp of the sense of Macbeth’s thinking. The rhythm offers a further hazard, breaking from the familiar voice of the iamb with three initial, unstressed beats and a strongly stressed accent on “done”, repeated twice more, over the enjambment, after two further unstressed beats.

Macbeth then follows this deceptively simple sentence with a further, elaborative conditional that runs across six lines and contains five multisyllabic words in what is effectively two lines, before returning to single syllables for the next four lines. And then he repeats the pattern: a string of monosyllables followed by a conglomeration of words up to four syllables in length. Rhythmically, this makes the speech difficult both to say and to follow, especially in the running together of sense and sound in “surcease success” and in the abrupt syncopated repetitions of “that but this blow . . . here / But here . . . But in these cases”.

The speech is Hamlet-like in the degree to which it interrupts the train of thought, as in his “To be or not to be” reflection, with its many hesitations and interruptions. Indeed, the two soliloquies share affinities in both their subject matter and their rhythmically insecure struggles to follow a train of thought through qualification. Both are entangled in the struggle to hold a desired moment apart from its feared consequences. Both men are struggling to come to terms with themselves, with what they know but also wish to deny. And despite that fact that each reflection is deeply personal, neither grounds it in the first person – there is no “I”, at least grammatically, at the centre of either contemplation.

Here is Macbeth again, after his musing on the dagger, in a speech filled with the first-person pronoun, in some parts a pronoun in every line. The “here” that Macbeth has such difficulty locating and fixing in the earlier speech is now embodied in the concrete language of immediate sense-per-

ception (rendered extremely ironic by its character as an hallucination). I want to look at the second part of the speech, as Macbeth moves from the immediacy of the dagger to the anticipation of his "deed":

There's no such thing.
 It is the bloody business which informs
 Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one-half world
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
 The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
 Pale Hecate's off'rings, and withered murder,
 Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
 Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
 Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
 Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts
 And take the present horror from the time,
 Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives.
 Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

A bell rings.

I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
 Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
 That summons thee to heaven or to hell.
 (2.1.59-74)

It is not so much the words of the speech actions that carry emotion and sense here, but the rhythm, which is utterly different from that of the earlier speech. The absolute clarity of "There's no such thing. / It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes" derives from the secureness of the rhythm as much as the directness of the words, each stamped with equal emphasis. It marks a point of resolution and decision that morphs into Macbeth's immersion, as one of night's agents, into the world of Witchcraft, Hecate, and the wolf. His agency remains displaced, now onto "Tarquin's ravishing strides", whose design is the foreboding shadow or ghost of Macbeth's own determination. His sense of horror remains; he is still filled with fear; but it is banished with his determination to replace words with deeds: "Whiles I threat, he lives. / Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives".

The sentence at the centre of the speech spans six lines, comprising thirty-four words, and contains a complex image yoking together "witchcraft", "murder", "Hecate", a "wolf" as both "sentinel" and ravisher, "Tarquin" and "ghost" in two allusions, two forms of personification, two metaphors and a simile. It concludes in the direct simplicity of "I go, and it is done". The monosyllables; the straightforward syntax; the decisive rhythm, all bring

the uncertainties of the earlier contortions of thought and feeling to an abrupt end: the clear intrusion of the bell turns thought into deed, hesitation into grim resolution. Despite LATice's indication that only one other play in the canon is linguistically closer to *Macbeth* than *Hamlet*, such structural and rhythmical contrasts or progressions (this speech moves from relative simplicity through contorted, clotted syntax and imagery to a resolution in the direct finality of the final lines), suggests not action impeded by thought but rather reflection resolving itself in the directness of the deed, which completes itself almost without the intervention of intention: note the passive, "it is done".

If Hamlet is by and large left to himself to find a path to action – or at least a space of "readiness" and ultimately, "silence" – Macbeth negotiates his way in open, active dialogue with others, especially, in the early stages of the play, with his wife, of whom he may speak little, but to and with whom he converses much, and who drives him towards the "deed" that he both eagerly projects and from which he withdraws in horror (one of the words that appears most frequently in this play than any other). Shakespeare carries not only Macbeth's thoughts but also his immersion in and our imagination of the dark world of absolute evil, by skilfully varying but not interrupting the march of iambic pentameter: in the iamb followed by the equal stress of the spondee in "Nature seems dead" and the repeated, initial, trochaic stresses of "Moves like a ghost" and "Hear not my steps", which carry forward the newly secure imperative in their equal stresses. That is repeated in the horrific simplicity of "I go, and it is done". The earlier hesitation at the impossibility of securing the deed without consequence is obliterated in this contraction of the future into the present, precisely what he could not do in his earlier reflection. Shakespeare contracts even the economy of his usual monosyllables into the briefest breath. "I go, and it is done". Six words. Four of them containing no more than two letters. A deed of immense moral and political import is crushed into the economy of the greatest alphabetical compression. The irony of this is that it occurs at the very point when Macbeth decides to eschew speech for action. But speech, even in the tiniest words, may contain everything – therein lies Shakespeare's astonishing combination of language, thought, and feeling. Besides that compression, the ominous rhyming couplet with which the scene ends seems bathetic.

Finally, I turn to the last of the two occasions on which Macbeth speaks of his wife, in which he speaks of her as "she", his famous reflection on her death.

There is a bit of context that will be useful to keep in mind as we look at this speech. It is Macbeth's early, public declaration, after he has killed Duncan, of the way in which a single death may rob the world of significance:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
 I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant
 There's nothing serious in mortality.
 All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead.
 The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
 Is left this vault to brag of.
 (2.3.106-11)

What makes this speech ring hollowly? The language is plain enough. The rhythm fairly supple and flexible. Compare it with this:

She should have died hereafter.
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.
 (5.5.16-27)

The latter is an astonishing speech – the culmination, perhaps, of everything Shakespeare achieved in this great play. Once again, I want to talk about the power of Shakespeare's language as the supple alternation between muscular and yielding rhythms. Yes, the words and the syntax are important: the plain simplicity of "she should have died hereafter / There would have been a time for such a word", as Macbeth is thrown back into the agony of the here and now and the loss of a future he has so desperately sought to trammel up. The exhausted repetition of "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow", the multiple syllables of which are contracted into the compressed assonance and alliteration of "Creeps in this pretty pace from day to day", as if the words have turned in upon themselves in exhausted iteration. Again, the natural tiredness of the unstressed/stressed iamb is wonderfully varied as the verse (and the thought and feeling) are stopped on a stressed/unstressed rhythm: "Creeps in", "To the last", varied to a sudden, insistent, despairing spondee: "Out, out". In a final breath of despair all meaning itself, after the contemptible "strutting and fretting", is drained from the pretensions of language as the word "signifying" dissolves into emptiness.

But that is not the whole story, for we are watching a player strutting and fretting upon a stage; we are listening to his words, to what he signi-

fies, and the words in performance move us to tears, even for this tyrant, as we feel and breathe with Shakespeare his grief and emptiness. It is impossible to convey anything of the power of this language through the abstractions of mere signification. These words, these rhythms, this syntax demand the living breath and body of the actor. We have to share in the actor's bringing these words of death to life in a community that unites body, intellect, and soul. And that, perhaps above all, is why computer analysis, if not exactly a way to dusty death, cannot touch the living force of Shakespeare's universe of language, although it can do much besides.

In conclusion, let us return to the distribution of words in *Macbeth*, in particular the substantive counterpart of the pronoun "she": "woman". I have noted both the relative absence of the feminine pronoun in *Macbeth* compared to the Shakespeare canon and also its significantly unbalanced distribution across the scenes in the play. Almost all the uses of "she" in the entire play occur in a brief scene in which Lady Macbeth is the object of commentary rather than the subject of action. "Woman" occurs relatively frequently in *Macbeth*. Not as frequently as in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, which, at sixty-six occurrences, has both the greatest number and the highest relative frequency of uses, but measured by relative frequency it comes sixth in the corpus, pipped only by *Merry Wives*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *As You Like It*, and *Henry VIII* (in itself an interesting list). Like "she", almost half of those occurrences are concentrated in one part of the play. That concentration is not as intense as it is with "she", but it remains significant that seven of the fourteen uses of "woman" in *Macbeth* occur in the final act. Even more telling, they are confined in this act to two syntactic strings: "of woman born" or "born of woman". These utterances thus offer a different kind of rhythm, as repeated mantra in the final scenes of the play: a variation of Duncan's earlier "knell / That summons [him] to heaven or to hell" (2.1.76-7).

The invocation of "woman" in the early parts of the play call up the conventional sense of woman as weak, prone to emotion and pity, lacking courage and resolution, unfit for manly action. The most infamous occurrence is Lady Macbeth's own desire not only to be "unsexed" but also to be made both more and less than human, certainly inhumane:

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 murd'ring ministers,
 Wherever in your sightless substances
 You wait on nature's mischief. Come, thick night,
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
 To cry "Hold, hold!"
 (1.5.47-61)

This process of dehumanization is cumulative, as the relatively neutral "spirits that tend on mortal thoughts" are transformed into "murd'ring ministers", "thick night" and "the dunnest smoke of hell". To possess the milk of human kindness is to be open to the "visitings of nature", vulnerable to the body's natural "passages of remorse", properly fearful of "nature's mischief" and the "wound it makes". These are bodily as well as spiritual conditions, and when Lady Macbeth attempts to deny the reality of her body she sets herself up for the unbearable insanity to come, already signalled by her (dare we say it?) womanly incapacity to murder Duncan herself: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12-13).

So: "woman" as weak, but also as the incarnation of humanity itself. In the subsequent uses of the word before Act 5, characters, male and female, invoke woman as a site of potential weakness (or humanity). Macduff (with supreme dramatic irony) withholds the description of the murdered Duncan to Lady Macbeth, declaring, "O gentle lady, / 'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak. / The repetition in a woman's ear / Would murder as it fell" (2.3.96-9). Lady Macbeth herself decries the stupid superstitions of "A woman's story at a winter's fire, / Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!" (3.4.78-9) in her response to Macbeth's shameful terror at the vision of Banquo's ghost. Even Lady Macduff denigrates the protestation of innocence as a "womanly defence": "Why then, alas, / Do I put up that womanly defense / To say I have done no harm?" (4.2.85-7); and Macduff himself controls his grief at his family's murder by refusing to "play the woman with mine eyes" (4.3.270).

By the time the ambiguous prophesy, "Be bloody, bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.90-2), is pronounced by the ambiguously gendered "weyward sisters", the very notion of what it is to be a woman has taken on complex and contradictory resonances. The apparition offers an instruction as well as a prophecy, the qualities of bloodiness, boldness, and resolution aligned against the notion of what it is to be "of woman born". To have been given life by a woman is to retain, by nature, some of the channels of remorse and pity, kindness and proper fear; but that would also mean an incapaci-

ty to defeat Macbeth. Not to have been born of woman is to be quintessentially unhuman and inhumane, a being beyond nature and therefore imbued with all the qualities of fearlessness, boldness, cruelty, and resolution that Lady Macbeth, seeking to be “unsexed”, calls upon in the early part of the play.

No person is “not of woman born”. But with characteristic blindness Macbeth assumes the straightforwardness of the apparitions’ language, its transparency and clarity. He may harbour dark depths, but language seems to exist open to the view. He therefore clings to the apparitions’ mantra with a combination of growing desperation and hubris. This after his reflection just before his wife’s death draws him, briefly, to her return to being a “woman”, and therefore human and humane:

I am sick at heart
 When I behold – Seyton, I say! – This push
 Will cheer me ever or disseat me now.
 I have lived long enough. My way of life
 Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
 And that which should accompany old age,
 As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
 I must not look to have, but in their stead
 Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
 Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.
 (5.3.23-32)

What connects Macbeth here to his wife is his honest recognition of inward disease: “I am sick at heart”, which echoes the doctor’s observation in the earlier scene: “What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged” (5.2.52), and the Gentlewoman’s reply: “I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body” (56). In contrast to the bold and bloody bluster of his final scenes, Macbeth recognizes for a brief moment what he has lost forever, what he will never regain.

From now on he will turn from the brief recognition that there is nothing gendered about being human, about pity, love, troops of friends: that these belong exclusively neither to man nor to woman. Instead he will cling to a warped conception of what it is not to be touched by woman, reiterating over and over his empty mantra that he is invincible unless confronted by a miracle. The miracle that greets him is ordinary enough – a man “from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripped” (5.8.18-19). But the violence of these lines is startling, given the degree of violence that has been heaped on us already in the play. Macduff’s entry into the world is initiated by a form of violence that proclaims a world the initial condition of which is uncanniness, a wrenching into a life that cannot be a home, and the sac-

rifice of the mother. It contributes to the uneasy sense of many (exemplified by Polanski's film) that there is no return to "order" with Macbeth's death. But what we do know, from the resonance of "of woman born" in the last act, is not only the omnipresence of woman as a condition of human life, but also that the desire to expunge "woman" from that life is where evil lies.

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