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# 'My Flesh Be Hacked': Corporeal Conflation in Alan Cumming's one-man Macbeth

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- 1 A man stands onstage, bathed in sickly green light and clad in hospital garments. His eyes dart across the theatre as he shifts from foot to foot, his hands clenched. Frantically, he mutters to an unseen listener: "we have scorched the snake, not killed it" (*Macbeth*, 3.2.15). The man in question is an unnamed character, whose scorpion-filled mind conjures up the narrative of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* within the confines of a psychiatric ward. The occasion is a 2013 Lincoln Center Production of the Scottish play, directed by John Tiffany and Andrew Goldberg and performed by Alan Cumming. Contemporary one-person productions, like this one at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, are a far cry from how Shakespearean tragedy was performed by an ensemble of players in early modern England. Nevertheless, I contend that this can be used as a constructive tool to consider Shakespeare's tragedy and its thematic contemplation of embodiment.
- 2 Although billed as a one-person production, *Macbeth* also features two additional actors, who play primarily silent medical personnel. They monitor Cumming from a glass observation window above the stage; Cumming felt it "was important to have people watching him".<sup>1</sup> The result is an uncanny one. As an audience member, I became wholly immersed in the *Macbeth* narrative Cumming enacts. Suddenly, a nurse would appear in the observation window, shattering the play-with-the-play illusion and calling attention to the protagonist's own tragic fate. One critic called this production a "schizophrenic nightmare [...] a vision of one man's helpless descent into madness and suicidal despair" (Fisher).<sup>2</sup> Max Richter's soundscape lends the production an eerie, melancholy quality, as does Merle Hensel's high-walled, clinical set. Yet Cumming's sole figure is the crux of this performance, alternating characters at a rapid-fire pace. I draw upon secondary criticism, theatre reviews, and a personal interview with Mr. Cumming to analyze the production's focus on embodiment.

- 3 Shakespearean tragedy reflects an early modern preoccupation with the body. Tiffany Stern writes that the theory of the four humors “registers the early modern relationship between the body and the self as indivisible”.<sup>3</sup> In Shakespeare’s era, psychology and physiology were inextricably intertwined: “early modern ideas of subjectivity were [...] thoroughly material: bodily matters”.<sup>4</sup> Hence, vivid descriptions of illness and physical disintegration accompany those of psychological turmoil in *Macbeth*, a play that deals directly with questions of madness. Stern asserts, “the destruction of the tragic body is the ultimate end, both as conclusion and as purpose, of Shakespearean tragedy”.<sup>5</sup> By focusing on a single material body in one actor, *Macbeth* emphasizes the “destruction of the tragic body” that Stern describes. This play addresses bodies both absent and present – fathers, sons, supernatural ghosts and witches, female bodies, and children. Their figures are fused together by blood; a common Shakespearean device that binds characters both by lineage (bloodlines) and by tragic circumstance (murder).
- 4 I contend that through one-person performance, the paradoxical non-unity of the concepts of sovereignty, gender, and madness are given material expression, revealing something about the deconstructive work accomplished by Shakespearean tragedy. Each of these concepts underscores a pervasive fascination with the body and its capacity to destabilize established structures of power. To watch one body encompass numerous characters allows audiences to recognize how Shakespeare’s tragic figures cleave to one another, as they both fuse and fracture.

### ***'Golden blood': Sovereign Embodiment***

- 5 The dangerous conflation of bodies within *Macbeth* reflects the endangered state of the body politic in Scotland. In early modern England, the King was understood to have two bodies: natural and sovereign. In addition to his physical body, the king also possessed a ‘superbody’ that exceeded his mortal frame. At the king’s “demise” (not a death), his soul ‘migrates’ into the body of his successor”.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a monarch complicates the notion of a single body: his “political and public function” is separate from his “physical and private person”.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, regicide is a complex crime that attacks both a physical person and the exalted office of a sovereign. Killing a king is therefore a sacrilegious act that destroys more than a mere body. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare employs vivid language to remind his audiences of the sovereign body’s sacred nature. When Duncan is murdered, Macduff cries: “Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord’s anointed temple and stole thence / The life o’ th’ building” (*Macbeth*, 2.3.76-79). The Scottish king’s body is portrayed as a holy “temple” encasing the precious office of kingship. Shakespeare extends this image of Duncan’s body as a type of treasure chest: “His silver skin laced with his golden blood, / And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature / For ruin’s wasteful entrance” (*Macbeth*, 2.3.130-133). In the early modern era, kingship was a form of one-person performance, in which a single body occupied the roles of bodies both natural and politic, with a corporeal surface and a holy inner sanctum.
- 6 In *Macbeth*, Scotland displays an ailing body politic because the body of its sovereign has been brutally dispatched. Franco Moretti notes that a monarch’s death “epitomizes the collapse of an entire civilization”.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, the body politic of Scotland adopts, “precariously and unconsciously, the decaying condition of the bod(y) natural of [...]”

King Duncan".<sup>9</sup> In this play, Shakespeare creates a permeable boundary between various bodies when the central act of regicide impacts the *murderers'* bodies as well as the royal victims. Macbeth observes that his own "bloody instructions" return "to plague th' inventor," as he imagines raising a "poisoned chalice / To our own lips" (*Macbeth*, 1.7.9-12). The mere thought of murdering Duncan impacts Macbeth's body: a mental image that "doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs" (*Macbeth*, 1.3.148-149). Throughout the play, Macbeth embodies Donalbain's supposition that "the near in blood, / The nearer bloody" (*Macbeth*, 3.1.165-166). After murdering Duncan, Macbeth's prayers are "stuck in my throat" (*Macbeth*, 2.2.44), and he visualizes invisible "hands" that "pluck out mine eyes" (*Macbeth*, 2.2.77). Shakespeare portrays Macbeth's madness as an inevitable physiological response to the assault on Duncan's body. At the end of the play, Macbeth's "pestered senses [...] recoil and start," and "all that is within him does condemn / itself for being there" (*Macbeth*, 5.2.26-29). Macbeth's physical reactions mirror an ailing Scotland: "it weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash / is added to her wounds" (*Macbeth*, 4.3.50-51). One-person contemporary productions further advance this theme by literalizing the physical conflation of murderer and victim. Cumming's *Macbeth* accentuates this link, by leaving his protagonist's backstory ambiguous. As the show opens, Cumming appears in the hospital, dripping wet with bloody scratches on his chest, clutching a brown paper bag labeled "evidence." Throughout the production, it is unclear whether Cumming is the perpetrator or the victim of a violent crime. Cumming muses that this ambiguity is crucial, because the character himself "also isn't sure" of what has transpired.<sup>10</sup>

- 7 Cumming illustrates the porous boundary between the slayer and the slain, as his practical need to shift between characters also bears a thematic significance. In order to differentiate between characters, Cumming creates a distinct set of corresponding gestures for each. In *Macbeth*, Cumming's title character is distinguished by frequently running a hand through his hair, which references a crown as well as his distracted thoughts. When Cumming symbolically kills Macduff's children by drowning a child's sweater in a hospital bathtub, he utters a series of anguished cries, collapsing assassin and victim into one body as the act of murder appears to cause them both physical pain. Within a one-person performance, the impact that a single protagonist has on an entire set of characters is made visible, as they are all visually bound up in one body.
- 8 A hallmark of Shakespearean tragedy is the idea that an individual's fatal decision causes seismic effects for an entire society. Helene Foley and Jean Howard observe, "Shakespearean plays like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* frequently end with the naming of a new king or other leader to fill a political vacuum, but many of these conclusions are fragile and hint at continuing cycles of violence and structural instability".<sup>11</sup> The destruction of the protagonist and the protagonist's body accentuates and symbolizes the fragile state of the country going forward. This production of *Macbeth* carries fatalistic undertones that underscore Shakespeare's bleak narrative ending. The play ends exactly as it begins, with Cumming pleading hopelessly to the two medical aides, "when shall we three meet again" (*Macbeth*, 1.1.1). Cumming's protagonist is trapped in a form of purgatory, in which all of Shakespeare's characters are forced to circulate and express themselves in his single body. Here, a sole performer encompasses the tragic Shakespearean link between individual and collective strife.

## 'Unsex me here': Gendered Embodiment

- 9 Just as sovereignty undercuts the notion of a single body, gender confronts traditional concepts of embodiment in *Macbeth*. King James, who ruled England when Shakespeare penned *Macbeth*, imbued the body politic with gendered connotations when he declared: "I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is my lawfull Wife; I am the Head and it is my Body".<sup>12</sup> In the same way that kingship can be usurped, inhabited, and discarded in Shakespearean tragedy, gender is also a multifaceted and often illusory state of being. Macbeth remarks that fear might render him temporarily female: "If trembling I inhabit then, protest me / The baby of a girl" (*Macbeth*, 3.4.127-128). Macduff, too, illustrates how he might become both man and woman at once: "O, I could play the woman with mine eyes / And braggart with my tongue" (*Macbeth*, 4.3.270-271). These characters' musings align with Shakespeare's troubling of gender identity, in a play that opens with three androgynous witches: "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (*Macbeth*, 1.3.47-49). In *Macbeth*, the Weird Sisters confound gender stereotypes. They are an elusive bodily force: both material and immaterial, male and female. These witches are the "instruments of darkness" that first plant the seed of murder in Macbeth's mind, thus performing a symbolically masculine, penetrative act on the feminine vessel of Macbeth's consciousness (*Macbeth*, 1.3.126). By launching the regicide plot with their prophecy, these androgynous bodies demonstrate their power to upend the sovereign body.
- 10 Lady Macbeth is a second androgynous force that destabilizes the sovereign body in *Macbeth*. She convinces Macbeth to murder Duncan by conflating homicide with sexual "desire", asserting that only when he commits murder, "then you were a man" (*Macbeth*, 1.7.45-56). Her famed "unsex me here" monologue expresses a wish for metaphorical androgyny, full of corporeal language that replaces mother's milk with thick blood and murderous thoughts (*Macbeth*, 1.5.48-55). Shakespeare's exploration of gendered embodiment finds its fullest expression in Cumming's performance. A journalist writes of his production: "While madness is the obvious keynote, more subtle insights emerge concerning the play's exploration of gender and masculinity".<sup>13</sup> Cumming himself regards *Macbeth* as "so much about the women challenging men about their masculinity".<sup>14</sup> Cumming's production represents gender as visibly *fluid* – Cumming sinks into a bathtub as a battle-worn Macbeth, then emerges from the water seconds later embodying Lady Macbeth. As one reviewer observes: "nothing quite conveys the extent of Lady Macbeth's manipulative power over her husband like having them played by the same person".<sup>15</sup> Cumming differentiates between husband and wife by having Macbeth wrap a towel around his waist, and Lady Macbeth cover her chest with the towel. At one critical moment, Lady Macbeth drops the towel in order to seduce her husband. Cumming recalls, laughing: "People were like, 'oh my god, you showed your tits'".<sup>16</sup> In this moment, Cumming's body is mapped onto a female form. Later, Cumming's representation of a passionate consummation scene between the Macbeths literally merges two bodies into one. Here again, a feminine figure disrupts notions of gendered embodiment by performing a symbolically penetrative act; Lady Macbeth vows to "pour my spirits in thine ear" and thereby persuade Macbeth (*Macbeth*, 1.4.29). Cumming emblemizes the conflation of male and female bodies in this persuasion scene, writhing on a hospital bed and dexterously switching

between characters at a pace so rapid that the two seem to blur together. In this one-person production, the boundary between gendered bodies, mediated by the bathtub, appears porous.

- 11 Cumming's performance also suggests that the construction of a gendered body impacts the office of a sovereign. Cumming plays Macbeth as a powerful military man, with Duncan as an effeminized foil character. Repeatedly, Cumming establishes Duncan's body as insufficiently regal. Given the production's hospital *mise-en-scène*, Duncan's throne is appropriately translated to a wheelchair, which underscores the idea of his corporeal frailty. As Duncan, Cumming cranes his head to address a towering Banquo, suggesting the former's diminutive stature. Even Duncan's voice, as intoned by Cumming, is a high, throaty, English contrast to Macbeth's deep, Scottish accent. Duncan's effeminized body is harnessed as a motive for regicide – Cumming's Macbeth sees Duncan's body as physically inadequate to the frame befitting a powerful male king. Cumming's performance highlights a misogyny-fueled murder, in which Macbeth views Duncan – an effeminate king – as deserving the male violence and displacement that Macbeth inflicts.
- 12 In this production, masculinity is fractured between the hypermasculine and the effeminate man, while both are opposed to a demonized femininity that is nonetheless a potential within each protagonist. Meanwhile, woman's capacity to create a second body inside her own is another source of disquiet in *Macbeth*. In Scotland's patriarchal nation, the woman is overtly granted power as a necessary vessel to carry and regenerate the sovereign body. However, no such reproductive promise exists within this play. In *Macbeth*, Fleance's mother never appears, Lady Macbeth's child is no more, and Lady Macduff and her offspring are "savagely slaughtered" (*Macbeth*, 4.3.208). Macbeth laments his "fruitless crown" and "barren scepter": signifiers of a sterile reign (*Macbeth*, 3.1.66-67). Both sexes are necessary to create a political whole and to birth a successor – a fact that goes awry in this tragedy. The female bodies in *Macbeth* do not fulfill their duty to the sovereign body by producing heirs. Macbeth is unable to correctly read the witches' prophecy, which, like their gender, is positioned as capricious and slippery. "None of woman born" will harm Macbeth, yet Macduff evades that aspect of the prophecy, being from his mother's womb "untimely ripped" (*Macbeth*, 5.8.13-17). Like the androgynous witches and the unsexed Lady Macbeth, Macduff's mother is presented as another unreliable female body that seals Macbeth's tragic fate. Here, she herself is unsexed – denied the identity of "woman" because her body delivers a child in an unconventional way.
- 13 Cumming's one-person production of *Macbeth* repeatedly signals the absence or suffocation of reproductive bodies. In Cumming's performance, none of the characters "are of woman born," as they all spring from the mind of a troubled male protagonist. This fact, coupled with Cumming's own body and its inability to become pregnant even as he embodies these female roles, underscores the themes of sterility and gender unreliability that Shakespeare suffuses throughout *Macbeth*. Cumming's Banquo carelessly tosses an apple as he speaks, a taunting reminder of his progeny through the apple's allusion to ripe fertility and seeds. After Banquo's death, Cumming's Macbeth takes up the discarded apple and bites into it savagely – a visual example of the male body consuming the reproductive fruits of labor. When Cumming's Macbeth visits the witches to hear their second prophecy, Banquo's line is represented as a long series of entrails, pulled from the stomach of a crow. Here again, the possibility of a future

lineage is eclipsed within a bodily omen of death. In this production, the murder of Macduff's children is rendered still more acute when Cumming's protagonist unveils a child's sweater from his "evidence" bag. The child's body is conspicuously absent, as the ghosts of Macduff's children merge with this new missing figure. Just as Cumming envelops a collection of bodies, this sweater hints at a number of possible bodies: the missing children of Macbeth, Macduff, and the protagonist. Instead of producing bodies of flesh and blood, the failed mingling of male and female bodies in *Macbeth* generates a notable lack of bodies – they create ghosts.

## 'Infected minds': Lunatic Embodiment

- 14 *Macbeth* employs the tragic Shakespearean trope of madness to highlight the ways in which numerous selves can occupy a single body. Moretti describes "the Shakespearean tragic hero" as comprised of "opposed and irreconcilable forces" that make him "an irreparably split character", like "the conflict that lays unremitting hold of the regicide Macbeth".<sup>17</sup> This modern one-person production actualizes notions of divided selfhood by creating aesthetic tension between a unified, single body onstage and the fractured stage elements surrounding it. In Cumming's *Macbeth*, "concerned faces on the medical personnel implied that the patient might at any time explode, implode, or scatter his bloody fragments about the stage".<sup>18</sup> One reporter notes: "The lighting sources from various angles on the floor also created a visual representation of his split personality: sometimes we could see the actor's multiple shadows projected on the back wall".<sup>19</sup> *Macbeth*'s production design emphasizes the idea that a single player can contain numerous selves. This concept is most evident in the production's realization of the three witches, who are represented via three CCTV cameras. Cumming found the witches to be the most difficult characters to inhabit, describing their presence "like something taking over my body".<sup>20</sup> As mediated through the screens, the witches are both embodied and bodiless. This design creates a provocative experience for audiences: "Confused and startled, we looked back and forth between the screens and Cumming's material body, wondering if we were seeing things. Instead of comfortably watching Macbeth's madness unfold, we momentarily experienced his psychosis".<sup>21</sup> By observing Cumming's single body figuratively splinter into three, spectators undergo their own form of double consciousness, linking audience and actor.
- 15 When describing his production, Cumming identifies a triangulation that occurs between performer, spectator, and character. While preparing for *Macbeth*, Cumming and his directors consulted psychiatrists about mental fugue states, which are defined as "altered state(s) of consciousness in which a person may move about purposely and even speak but is not fully aware".<sup>22</sup> Cumming characterizes his protagonist as "having absolutely no recollection of an episode," then, as he drowns the child's sweater in Act 4 Scene 3, he experiences "a slow dawning of the enormity of this awful thing he's done".<sup>23</sup> The act of embodying this character was a visceral one – "I was in a constant state of worry for this person." This empathetic response ripples through the audience as well – "I could feel people wanting to get out of their seats and grab me – they feared for me as well as the character." In certain moments, Cumming and the character that he portrays collapse into one being. In fact, Cumming experienced his own version of a fugue state while performing the role. He recalls "coming offstage and seeing all the bruises on my body and thinking, 'when did this happen?' It was almost supernatural".



- <sup>24</sup> The acute conflation of actor and character created a form of double consciousness throughout this production.
- 16 In *Macbeth*, Cumming locates Lady Macbeth's lunacy in a fracturing of former male and female fusion – “the passion and togetherness” she shared with Macbeth “splintered”, thus creating an irreparable cleft. Nevertheless, this production linked various bodies through madness in what Cumming calls a “theme of cleansing”.<sup>25</sup> In one scene, the protagonist experiences a manic fit and retreats to the bathtub to literally and figuratively purify himself, only to have Lady Macbeth emerge. This phenomenon links to scientific evidence, in what is known as “the Lady Macbeth” effect – psychologists demonstrate that “a threat to one's moral purity induces the need to cleanse oneself”.<sup>26</sup> In this production, new bodies materialize in moments of psychological upheaval.
- 17 As the “definitive sign of the sovereign's degeneration,” madness allows Shakespeare's characters to replicate the king's two bodies on a baser level by generating multiple selves.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, when characters in *Macbeth* go mad, they imagine themselves as being conjoined to the dead sovereign's body. Benjamin Parris writes, “the guilt of Duncan's murder takes on the substantial character of a bodily humor that fuses to Macbeth”.<sup>28</sup> Macbeth has a visceral experience of guilt; he feels the “his secret murders sticking on his hands” (*Macbeth*, 5.2.19-20). Lady Macbeth is no different. In her famous “out damned spot” monologue, she acknowledges the slippage between various bodies when she imagines sovereign blood clinging to her hands and stinging her nostrils (*Macbeth*, 5.1.37). In Shakespeare's tragedy, madness – like sovereignty and gender – shows how bodies cleave to one another. Cumming's *Macbeth* accentuates this element of Shakespearean tragedy by swirling a collection of characters into one body.

## Conclusion

- 18 Although this production is a non-traditional staging of *Macbeth*, it is a useful tool for highlighting Shakespeare's investment in tragic embodiment. One reporter calls Cumming's *Macbeth* “an uncommonly rich reading of the play” for its ability to produce a variety of nuanced characters in one body.<sup>29</sup> Ironically, Cumming cites the limitations of his own body as a primary motivation for mounting this production. Cumming recited Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking monologue as a young man in drama school, and identifies his “longstanding connection” to the character. He admits: “partly why I did (*Macbeth*) is because Lady Macbeth is such a good part” and he wanted an opportunity to play her, even as a male-identifying actor.<sup>30</sup> Cumming used the mode of one-person performance as a vehicle for taking on an uncustomary role for his body.
- 19 Furthermore, Cumming recounts the physical toll that arises from a one-person show. He broke a rib during rehearsals, and spoke of the “incredible stamina” and “physical danger of the production.” He describes it as “a feat” and “an ordeal,” recalling: “I was sort of a slave to it.” From Cumming's perspective, “a lot of it was kind of like dance [...] long sequences with just me and the music,” which meant there was no time to “breathe, fart, burp” or relax his body offstage. Each night required intensive physical recovery: “what do I have to do to my body to make sure I can do this again”.<sup>31</sup> Through the lens of a single performer, Shakespeare's tragic concepts of kingship, gender, and insanity are given complex embodiment, stressing the divisions at the heart of each, as well as the intertextual matrix from which they emerge. As embodied by a sole actor, all three of these tropes are reconfigured as transient performances rather than static



identities— elusive states of being that can be shifted and transformed within the murky confines of Shakespeare's tragedy.

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## NOTES

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## ABSTRACTS

Contemporary one-person productions are vastly different from how an ensemble of players performed Shakespearean tragedy in early modern England. However, I argue that a recent staging of *Macbeth*, produced by the Lincoln Center Festival and starring Alan Cumming (2013), is a constructive tool to consider Shakespeare's Scottish play and the questions it raises about embodiment. Specifically, I contend that through Cumming's performance, the paradoxical non-unity of the concepts of sovereignty, gender, and madness are given material expression, revealing something about the deconstructive work accomplished by Shakespearean tragedy. Having interviewed Alan Cumming, I use his first-hand account (along with performance reviews and scholarly criticism) to discuss the resonances of one-person productions and what this performance reveals about Shakespearean tragedy.

Les seuls en scène contemporains sont radicalement différents des représentations d'une tragédie shakespearienne par une troupe d'acteurs dans l'Angleterre de la première modernité. Toutefois, j'avance l'idée qu'une mise en scène récente de *Macbeth*, montée par le Center Festival de Lincoln avec Alan Cumming à l'affiche (2013), est un outil opératoire pour envisager la pièce écossaise de Shakespeare et les questions qu'elle pose quant à la notion d'incarnation. Plus précisément, je soutiens que le travail d'acteur de Cumming donne une expression concrète à l'absence d'unité paradoxale des concepts de souveraineté, de genre et de folie, en révélant quelque chose de la déconstruction réalisée par la tragédie de Shakespeare. L'entretien que j'ai eu avec Alan Cumming me fournit un matériau de première main (en plus des critiques et de la littérature scientifique sur la question) pour analyser les résonances créées par les seuls en scène et ce que ces représentations théâtrales révèlent de la tragédie shakespearienne.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Shakespeare, tragedy, performance, gender, embodiment, madness

**Mots-clés:** Shakespeare, tragédie, représentation théâtrale, genre, incarnation, folie