

December 1979

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Recommended Citation

Fox, Alice (1979) "How Many Pregnancies Had Lady Macbeth?," *University of Dayton Review*. Vol. 14: No. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/udr/vol14/iss1/7>

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How Many Pregnancies Had Lady Macbeth?

Alice Fox

A question not to be asked, say the literary critics. L.C. Knights' witty denunciation of Bradleian analysis became a part of our critical language when Knights thirty years ago entitled his influential essay "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" Knights contended that "the only profitable approach to Shakespeare is a consideration of his plays as dramatic poems, of his use of language to obtain a total complex emotional response. Yet the bulk of Shakespeare criticism is concerned with his characters, his heroines, his love of Nature or his 'philosophy' — with everything, in short, except with the words on the page. . ."¹

The very existence of such conferences as this one, however, stressing the performance of Shakespeare's plays, suggests that we are recovering from insistence that the plays are "dramatic poems." Of course they are; but they are clearly much more than that. I should therefore like to reopen the question of the children of Lady Macbeth, and to explore it in two ways: first, deriving what I can from the close textual analysis recommended by those who view the plays as drama; and then using my results to evaluate the positions on this question of those who view the plays as theatre.

I need not rehearse in any detail the occasion for critical concern with progeny in *Macbeth*. Macbeth worries about the lack of an heir to his throne, even though Lady Macbeth refers to having nursed an infant. Of course Shakespeare's source has a previously-married Lady Macbeth; yet since Shakespeare does not remind us of that prior marriage, he no more uses it than he does, say, Lear's restoration to rule in Britain. As far as the play is concerned, Macbeth is his Lady's only husband, and he is without an heir although she has given suck. A reasonable resolution of the anomaly might be the hypothesis that whatever child or children the Macbeths produced died in infancy. Shakespeare's contemporaries were of course familiar with infant mortality. Indeed, the rate was so high that over and over again parents did not name their children, noting in surviving manuscripts only that "a son" or "a daughter" was born — and recording laconically within a day or two the death of the child.

Pregnancy and childbirth were perilous, and to cope with their hazards books of instructions to midwives began to be published just a generation before Shakespeare's own birth. Prior to that time such books were written in Latin, for the exclusive use of the medical profession. Although doctors feared that midwiferies would discredit their mystery, such books were printed in ever-increasing numbers. It is through these vernacular handbooks that one can retrieve information about Renaissance obstetrics and gynecology which would have been familiar to the *Macbeth* audience. I will give a few examples.

In Lady Macbeth's apostrophe to the "Spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts" (I.v.40ff.), a feared upsurge of conscience following the murder of Duncan elicits two dizzying metaphors for its blockage: in the first, Lady Macbeth says:

make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and Passage to remorse.

The vehicle here derives from a popular theory advanced to explain the failure of some women to menstruate, that the blood was "to grosse and thicke" to allow "anye sutche purgation. . . ."² Lady Macbeth continues with a second metaphor:

That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose. . . .

Once again the tenor is a desired blockage of conscience, and once again the vehicle centers on the phenomenon of menstruation, for a common phrase at the time (as common as "period" today) was "womens natural visits."³ The fact that Lady Macbeth draws on such metaphors as her means of voicing her own rejection of the milk of human kindness is indicative of a preoccupation with menstruation.

Since G. Wilson Knight's excellent summary of the "life-themes" in *Macbeth*,⁴ we have recognized the frequency of references to children in this play. What we have not noticed, though, is the play's insistence on pregnancy, miscarriage, and abortive births. For Lady Macbeth and her husband share a preoccupation with such subjects. In the fine scene preceding the news of his wife's death, Macbeth speaks with the doctor about curing her and then, abruptly, about curing Scotland. It is the latter speech which is of special interest:

If thou couldst, Doctor, cast
The water of my land, find her disease,
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,
I would applaud thee to the very echo,
That should applaud again. . . .
What rhubarb, senna or what purgative drug,
Would scour these English hence? (V.iii.50-56)

The metaphor of urinalysis is commonplace, although it is just possible that Macbeth through free association arrives at the image via his prior mention of Lady Macbeth: it was popularly believed that one could "foretell casualties, and the ordinarie euent of life, conceptions of women with child, and definite distinctions of the male and female in the wombe" by means of "a colourable deriuation of supposed cunning from the vrine."⁵ Be that as it may, Macbeth's asking the doctor "What rhubarb, senna or what purgative drug,/Would scour these English hence?" is conclusive proof of the absorption of his own mind with matters gynecological. Let me explain. Rhubarb and senna are peculiar choices for purgatives to cleanse Scotland, being as they are the mildest of the mild remedies for costiveness known in Shakespeare's time. Rhubarb was called "an harmless medicine, and good . . . for women with childe." Senna was "slow in operation," and "purgeth not so speedily as stronger medicines do." In fact, the midwiferies recommended rhubarb and senna specifically because those herbs were known to "deduce and purge from euery part of the body mildly and gently all humors alike, nothing noysome . . . to . . . women with child. . . ."⁶ The sense of Macbeth's speech is thus at variance with the images he chooses: needing a speedy, and even violent, remedy, to put down a foreign invasion which must cost Macbeth his throne, he thinks of the two mildest purgatives known. Since Shakespeare nowhere else in the canon mentions these particular purgative drugs, although "purge" and its derivatives occur some forty-five times, the presumption is strong that he carefully assigned the images to

Macbeth, probably to stress Macbeth's continued concern with his childlessness.

Our awareness of the metaphors of obstetrics and gynecology in the play (and I have merely sketched a few of the many examples which I have discovered), provides a useful criterion for evaluating the suggestions and practices of theatre people. The theatre historian Marvin Rosenberg has recently argued for the presence of a baby in a cradle in all the scenes at Macbeth's castles.⁷ "The crown is barren," he says, "not Macbeth. His talk of dynasty would be absurd . . . if the Macbeths had no issue of their begetting" (p. 17). Without such evidence as I have adduced, this would be a moot point, for one could assert on the other side of the question that Macbeth's fears of Fleance would be absurd if the Macbeths *did* have issue of their begetting. But it is not a moot point: the careful crafting of language and imagery throughout the play points to that preoccupation with reproduction characteristic of the childless. Rosenberg quite unnecessarily accounts for the absence in the text of a child by making him into a property—and then assigning the property a bit of quasi dialogue following the death of Lady Macbeth: "the unmothered, futureless manchild will exist as one of the sounds of hopeless life in the castle. . . . A little cry, a final little cry, may herald Macbeth's death knell" (p. 19). It is as if not Birnam Wood but the Cherry Orchard were come to Dunsinane.

More to the point is the strategy of Glen Byam Shaw, who directed what was arguably the most successful modern production of *Macbeth*: "Apart from his burning ambition I feel he has a deep sorrow that gnaws at his heart and I think it is due to the fact that his only son died after it was born. He never speaks of it, & we only know about it through what his wife says in the terrible scene they have together before the murder." For this reason Shaw had Olivier take Vivien Leigh's hand when she spoke of her tenderness toward a nursing babe.⁸ The juxtaposition of their shared sorrow with her brutality of the next moment must have made good theatre. It certainly makes good dramatic sense.

Another man of the theatre has gone further. In *Throne of Blood* Kurosawa gave us a pregnant Lady Macbeth. Asafi tells Washizu that she is with child. Subsequently she gives birth to a dead son, and it is this horror which precipitates her madness and suicide. Are these details of Kurosawa's scenario at variance with the original play? I think not, for there is evidence within Shakespeare's *Macbeth* not only of a prior history of pregnancy, but also of concern for the present condition of Lady Macbeth. I am not referring to Macbeth's statement "Bring forth men-children only" (which could obviously refer to the rather more distant future), although it might be noted that males were thought to have a better chance of being carried to term.⁹ The play's concern for the condition of Lady Macbeth centers on the avoidance of miscarriage, for her circumstances are those most likely to cause spontaneous abortion. Melancholia and problems with sleeping were both thought to bring on monstrous births, stillbirths, and miscarriage. Furthermore, candles were considered especially dangerous for pregnant women. One midwifery warns: "Pliny noteth, and experience shews it to be true that the ill sent only of a Candle new put foorth, is enough to destroy a child in the mothers wombe, so that shee may be forced to fall in trauaile, and be deliuered before her time. . . ." ¹⁰ The insistence of the midwiferies on this point perhaps explains the reactions of the doctor in the sleep-walking scene. Lady Macbeth enters with a taper, and the doctor asks the waiting-gentlewoman, "How came shee by that light?" Since candles would not

be hard to come by at the castle, the doctor's question implies that they had specifically been forbidden Lady Macbeth. She should not in fact have been able to have acquired this item of such potential danger.

Interestingly, were Lady Macbeth pregnant, she would have been exposed to that Renaissance panacea for all ailments and disabilities of obstetrics and gynecology—perfume.¹¹ It would not be surprising, then, for her to be differentiated from her visually-oriented husband through an emphasis on olfactory imagery, and most particularly by her perfumes of Arabia, in contrast to, say, his multitudinous seas incarnadined. The direction of Macbeth's visual imagery, when he describes the newly-dead Duncan, also points to the dangers of pregnancy: Duncan's

gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance: there, the murderers,
Steep'd in the colours of their trade, their daggers
Unmannerly breech'd with gore. (II.iii.113-16)

The chiming "breach"—"breech'd" evokes the gory breech-births pictured and described in the midwiferies.¹² Such births were known to be "verie painefull and difficult, because the child fills all the Matrice" when he "puts out his thighs, and buttocks foremost. . . ." ¹³ Were Lady Macbeth to be pregnant at the time of the murder, she might be likely to faint at hearing the two "breeches" in Macbeth's statement.¹⁴ I would conclude, then, that Kurosawa's decision to have a pregnant Asaji is not inconsistent with Shakespeare's text.

Of course Shakespeare does not directly state that Lady Macbeth is in fact pregnant. Byam Shaw's stage business is therefore a more conservative handling of the problem. Yet pregnancy is a useful visual clue for modern audiences, who lack a Jacobean familiarity with Renaissance obstetrics and gynecology.

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NOTES

1. *Explorations* (New York: George W. Stewart, 1947), p. 20.
2. Thomas Phayre, *The Regiment of Lyfe* (London, [1579]), sig. Hviii^V.
3. Thomas Brugis, *The Marrovv of Physicke* (London, 1640), sigs. Bb2^r, Ff^r, and passim.
4. "The Milk of Concord: An Essay on Life-themes in *Macbeth*," in *The Imperial Theme* (London: Methuen, 1951), pp. 125-53.
5. *A Short Discoverie* (London, 1612), p. 104.
6. Philip Barrough, *The Method of Phisick* (London, 1601), pp. 395, 437; and John Gerarde, *The Herball or Generall Historie of Plantes*, enlarged and amended by Thomas Johnson (London, 1636), pp. 396, 1298.
7. "Lady Macbeth's Indispensable Child," *Educational Theater Journal*, 26 (1974), 14-19.
8. Quoted from Shaw's notebook on the play by Michael Mullin, ed., *Macbeth Onstage: An Annotated Facsimile of Glen Byam Shaw's 1955 Promptbook* (Columbia, Mo., and London: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1976), pp. 74-75.
9. Jacques Guillemeau, *Child-birth or, The happy deliverie of vvomen* (London, 1612), p. 10: the male was "faster tied and bound [within the womb] then the female, because the ligaments which hold and fasten him are stronger and dryer then they that bind and support a wench."

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10. Guillemeau, "The Avthors Epistle Introductory to the Reader"; and see also Helkiah Crooke, *Body of Man* (1615), p. 251.
11. Perfume was indicated for problems with menstruation, fertility, still-births, and for "diuers diseases of the wombe. . . ." See, among others, Konrad Gesner, *The Treasure of Evonymvs*, trans. Peter Morvvyng (London, 1559), pp. 365-66; Humfre Lloyde, *The treasury of healthe* (London, 1550?), sig. b.vi^r; Thomas Raynalde, *The Byrth of mankynde, otherwyse named the womans Booke* (1560), p. Cxxxiii^v.
12. Jacques Guillemeau, *The Frenche Chirurgerye*, trans. A. M. (Dort, 1597), pp. 35^v-36^v; and Jakob Rueff, *The Expert Midwife* (London, 1637), pp. 111, 125.
13. Guillemeau, *Child-birth*, pp. 164-65.
14. Although critics have debated the genuineness of the faint, most accept it. Ronald Watkins and Jeremy Lemmon, *Macbeth, In Shakespeare's Playhouse* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1974), p. 162, point out that "On the deep Stage of the Globe, it is possible, though not easy, for the player to suggest that the 'faint' is deliberate. . . ."

