

City University of New York (CUNY)

## CUNY Academic Works

---

All Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone  
Projects

Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects

---

9-2019

### Furious: Myth, Gender, and the Origins of Lady Macbeth

Emma King

*The Graduate Center, City University of New York*

[How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!](#)

More information about this work at: [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/3431](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3431)

Discover additional works at: <https://academicworks.cuny.edu>

---

This work is made publicly available by the City University of New York (CUNY).

Contact: [AcademicWorks@cuny.edu](mailto:AcademicWorks@cuny.edu)

FURIOUS:  
MYTH, GENDER, AND THE ORIGINS OF LADY MACBETH

by

EMMA KING

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

2019

© 2019

EMMA KING

All Rights Reserved

Furious: Myth, Gender, and the Origins of Lady Macbeth

by

Emma King

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

---

Date

---

Tanya Pollard

Thesis Advisor

---

Date

---

Elizabeth Macaulay-Lewis

## ABSTRACT

Furious: Myth, Gender, and the Origins of Lady Macbeth

by

Emma King

This thesis attempts to understand the fabulously complex and poisonously unsettling Lady Macbeth as a product of classical reception and intertextuality in early modern England. Whence comes her “undaunted mettle” (1.7.73)? Why is she, like the regicide she helps commit, such a “bloody piece of work” (2.3.108)? How does her ability to be “bloody, bold, and resolute” (4.1.81), as Macbeth is commanded to be, reflect canonical literary ideas, early modern or otherwise, regarding women, gender, and violence? Approaching texts in the literary canon as the result of transformation and reception, this research analyzes the ways in which Lady Macbeth’s gender, motivations, and words can be understood as inherently intertextual. By tracing the provenance of Lady Macbeth’s character to figures from Greek and Roman mythology—particularly Clytemnestra, the Furies, Medusa, Medea, and Orestes—this work reckons with how Lady Macbeth’s catalyzing of violence receives mythological ideas regarding women and wrath.

When we see rage or violence in Lady Macbeth, it is in some way coded for figures of wrath in classical mythology and their afterlives. By appropriating and translating these figures (as Bottom is ‘translated’), Shakespeare’s depiction of Lady Macbeth renegotiates the extant gender binary, opening up new possibilities for gendered behavior that neither embrace nor fully disown binary concepts of womanhood and femaleness. Examining sources from early modern

literature—including medical texts, poetry, and translations of Greek and Roman mythological works—this work dives into the ideological framework that both establishes and complicates Lady Macbeth’s identity. This thesis suggests that, by identifying pervasive background of classical mythology in *Macbeth*, we can perform a more nuanced analysis of Lady Macbeth’s poisonous maternity and destabilizing impact upon the patriarchal settings of the play. Her drive towards violence can, as a result, be seen as a concurrent and traumatic intensification and repudiation of emotions or characteristics typically perceived as feminine or maternal. By evoking and sometimes explicitly quoting rageful or violent mythological women, Shakespeare simultaneously renders Lady Macbeth dangerously feminine, disruptively masculine, and stubbornly ambiguous.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I would like to thank my advisor Tanya Pollard, who understands and shares my passions, for guiding me through this challenging process with care, rigor, and (much needed) squares of dark chocolate. Her clarity of vision and intellectual joy were indispensable to this project and pushed me to think and write more meticulously, effectively, and passionately.

Secondly, thank you to my wonderful friends, who watched me pace and rant. Who unreservedly celebrated every minor victory. Who read for grammar and typos and basic readability. Who made me stop working and take a break. Who helped me start and finish this and supported me along the way.

Thank you to Ana, who never allowed me to minimize myself. To Ari, who let me use him as a soundboard. To Laura, who sat next to me as I typed the final words.

Thank you also to Cole, who, despite having heard me describe this work about a thousand times since 2016, read it over and over - with appreciation and pride. Thank you for lovingly held me accountable for every extra adverb and adjective, giving me an outlet to vent all my frustrations, and providing a steady stream of support and levity.

Finally, I want to express my continual gratitude to my family for their unerring, unconditional support and love. Thank you to my aunt, Martha Zaslou, who helped me understand what was missing and how to fix it. Thank you to everyone who talked to me at Thanksgiving and Passover, and who engaged with me through every step of the process. Lastly, thank you to my mother, Sara, father, Mark, and brother, Isaac for listening, for appreciating, for cheering me on, and for pushing forward. I love you guys so much.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iv
Acknowledgements .....	vi
Introduction & Overview: The Lady in Context .....	1
Chapter One: The Lady's Wrath: Milk, Bile, and Dash'd Infants .....	7
"Unsex Me Here": Imagining Rage and Maternity .....	9
"Rarer Monsters": Bewitching the Gorgon .....	28
Chapter Two: The Lady's Death: Sleep, Blood, and Madness .....	37
"Sleep No More": Unsexing Masculinity, Infirmary, and Sleep .....	37
"I Am in Blood": Embodying Guilt as Pollution, Putrefaction, and Insomnia .....	47
"Minister to a Mind Diseased: Transgressive Purity, Orestes, and Lady Macbeth .....	57
Conclusion: The Lady in Memoriam .....	68
Bibliography .....	70

## INTRODUCTION & OVERVIEW: The Lady in Context

Lady Macbeth eludes us all. Varyingly posed in scholarship as too much or too little a woman, too much or too little a man, a victim, and a perpetrator, she remains an inherently chimeric figure. While foundational, such readings limit our understanding of her characterization, confining her within a cage of binaries and socio-political hegemonies, and should be complicated by examining the impact of intertextuality upon Shakespeare's depiction of the Lady as a woman of immense destructive potential. Indeed, despite her slippery complexity, Lady Macbeth springs from a clearly established well of literary characterizations. She is a searingly vivid example of a literary tradition that stretches across and through millennia: the archetype and myth of the rageful, vengeful woman. As Catherine Bradshaw Boyd argues, comparing her to Antigone, Lady Macbeth evolved from resonant and extant templates.<sup>1</sup> While Shakespeare drafted her words, Lady Macbeth, like other examples of rageful woman, was "not developed by the dramatist. Rather, the dramatist gave the impetus, and of themselves and of the circumstances in which they were involved the great figure of . . . Lady Macbeth swirled into being."<sup>2</sup> Shakespeare breathed life into Lady Macbeth, but she herself is the result of intertextual classical reception; a pastiche of ideas, traits, and ideologies—explosively crammed into a powerful, wonderfully manipulative, and effective queen.

Lady Macbeth's virulence and elicitation of violence receive mythological ideas regarding women and wrath. Greek plays such as *Medea* and the *Oresteia* impact Shakespeare's complicated gendered depiction of Lady Macbeth, such that *Macbeth* itself is an iteration of an entrenched archetype depicting women and rage. In the early modern era, classical ideas and myths were passed by word of mouth, intertextual reappropriation, and authorial intervention

---

<sup>1</sup> Catherine Boyd, "The Isolation of Antigone and Lady Macbeth," *The Classical Journal* 47, no. 5 (1952): 174.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

through canons, subtly transformed and appropriated for a given era. As a multitude of scholars have noted, Shakespeare interpolated and often directly integrated Greek and Roman myth, deliberately or subconsciously.<sup>3</sup> Scholarship has typically held that Shakespeare had access to Greek tragedy by way of Seneca, Vergil, and Ovid in Latin, or through Plutarch's widely circulated *Lives*.<sup>4</sup> Classical reception undoubtedly affected Shakespeare's plays, both in content and in structure; yet, as noted by scholars like Inga-Stina Ewbanks, Tanya Pollard, and many others, the challenge of untangling layers of influence, source material, and intertextuality in Shakespeare's work is enormous. The typical position is that there is a mysterious "affinity" between Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, but that no real reception is being performed.<sup>5</sup> The only truly incontrovertible claim is that Shakespeare was — through mythical transmission via cultural diffusion, Latin or English translations, or direct contact with Greek texts — in some way exposed to Greek mythology.

As Ewbanks writes, it is "a long-held axiom of English Renaissance scholarship that, when the playwrights wielded their antique sword, it struck too short at Greeks and lay where it fell, that is on Roman Seneca."<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite general philological and academic avoidance of Shakespeare's "lesse Greek," in the last three decades or so a small group of scholars—including

---

<sup>3</sup> See, for example: T.W. Baldwin, *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944); Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (New York: Columbia University Press: 1963); Gordon Braden, Classical Greek Tragedy and Shakespeare, *Classical Receptions Journal*, 9: 1 (2017): 103–199; Tania Demetriou, Tanya Pollard, "Homer and Greek tragedy in early modern England's theatres: an introduction," *Classical Receptions Journal*, 9: 1 (2017): 1–35; Stuart Gillespie, *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Sources* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2001); Charles and Michelle Martindale, *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>4</sup> See Jann Kott, "Hamlet and Orestes," *PMLA* 82, no. 5 (1967): 303–13.; Pollard, *Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); above.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Silk, "Shakespeare and Greek Tragedy: Strange Relationship," in *Shakespeare and the Classics*, ed. Charles Martindale and A.B. Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241.

<sup>6</sup> Inga Stina Ewbank, "'Striking too short at Greeks': The Transmission of Agamemnon to the English Renaissance Stage," in *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004: 458 BC to AD 2004*, ed. Fiona Macintosh and Pantelis Michelakis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37.

Louise Schleiner, Pollard, Jan Kott, and others—have addressed this lacuna, challenging this axiom and arguing for Greek theatrical influence upon Shakespeare. Much has been written correlating *Hamlet* with Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, while others have uncovered significant theatrical, thematic, verbal, and character features in common between *Macbeth* and Greek tragedy, including the *Oresteia*.<sup>7</sup> Ewbanks expands on this sentiment, claiming that there is compelling evidence that Aeschylus left traces in Shakespeare's dramatic imagination.

Of course, claiming that Shakespeare certainly had firsthand encounters with Aeschylus is precarious; there were no translations of Aeschylus (from any manuscript tradition) into English until long after his death.<sup>8</sup> However, scholars like Schleiner, Emrys Jones and G.K. Hunter emphasize Shakespeare's "remembered Latin school learning and skilled integration of materials from diverse sources."<sup>9</sup> This, compounded with mounting evidence that Greek tragedy (including Latin translations of both Aeschylus and the more popular Euripides) was available in England suggests an alternate understanding of Shakespeare's relationship with the ancients.<sup>10</sup> In particular, both Ewbanks and Schleiner point to Jean de Saint-Ravy's truncated 1556 Latin translation of the *Oresteia* (which circulated in England's theatrical circles in the 1590s and was owned by Ben Jonson) as a significant and credible contender as a primary source for Shakespeare.<sup>11</sup>

Lady Macbeth's character, more specifically, draws extensively from several mythological figures and archetypes, especially Clytemnestra, Medea, Medusa, the Furies, and Orestes. These characters figure prominently in the early modern era; Clytemnestra and Orestes

---

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed analysis of *Hamlet* in the light of Greek influence, see Kott, "Hamlet and Orestes."

<sup>8</sup> For more on early modern awareness of Greek as a method of direct reception, see Micha Lazarus, "Greek Literacy in Sixteenth Century England," *Renaissance Studies* 20:3 (2015): 433–458.

<sup>9</sup> Louise Schleiner, "Latinized Greek Drama in Shakespeare's Writing of "Hamlet"," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1990): 31.

<sup>10</sup> Pollard lists 68 translations of Euripides in the 16th century; Pollard, *Greek Tragic Women*, 242–59.

<sup>11</sup> Schleiner, "Latinized Greek Drama," 31.

were especially utilized and reconfigured in numerous adaptations. Among these were popular translations of Seneca's *Orestes* and other Latin and (rarely) Greek versions of the *Oresteia*, a multitude of epigrams, and several original plays, including John Pickering's 1657 *Horestes*, the first English language revenge play.<sup>12</sup> The Furies, who notably appear in Arthur Golding's 1567 translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, were often used as a way to enable or call to revenge—often through masochistic pathways; the beseechers asked for pain, viewing it as a direct path to rage and determination. Early modern audiences were unquestionably aware of these myths and archetype, whether through direct exposure to Greek mythology, mediation through the interpretive lenses of Ovid, Seneca, Plutarch, other Roman writers, or canonical archetypes.

Bridging the gap between classical reception and Shakespearean scholarship, this work examines the mythical backdrop framing Lady Macbeth's character, gender, and behaviors. Seen through the lens of reception, Lady Macbeth's wrath and vitriol take on new complexities, particularly when considered in conjunction with her gender expression. Examining her from this perspective, scholars like A.C. Bradley, Inga-Stina Ewbank, and W. Moelwyn Merchant see her demise as a result of 'bad' womanhood, a conclusion contingent upon accepting a paradigm comprised of a static and binary pattern of gendered behavior.<sup>13</sup> However, as Robert Kimbrough compellingly notes, "Shakespeare sensed that so long as one remains exclusively female or exclusively male, that person will be restricted and confined, denied human growth. Each will be the prisoner of gender, not its keeper."<sup>14</sup> Indeed, written in response to a shift from matriarchy, in

---

<sup>12</sup> There were at least four of these plays: Thomas Pickering's 1567 *Horestes*; the authorless 1568 *Orestes* commissioned by the Revels Office; Thomas Dekker and Henry Chettle's lost 1599 play, *The Tragedy of Agamemnon or Orestes Furens*; and Thomas Goffe's 1633 *The Tragedy of Orestes*.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, New Penguin Shakespeare Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991), 321, 339; Inga-Stina Ewbank, "The Fiend-Like Queen: A Note on *Macbeth* and Seneca's *Medea*," *Shakespeare Survey*, 19 (1966): 82–94; Moelwyn Merchant, "His 'Fiend-Like Queen'," *Shakespeare Survey*, 19 (1966): 75–81.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Kimbrough, "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender," *Shakespeare Studies* 16 (1983): 175.

the form of Queen Elizabeth I, to patriarchy, in the form of King James I, Shakespeare plays with gender throughout *Macbeth*. Through the reception of classical mythology, Shakespeare uses Lady Macbeth as way to deconstruct this restrictive binary; her blended masculine and feminine mythological traits afford her the ability to navigate beyond and between the traditional binary.

While we might traditionally look to such culturally ubiquitous feminine archetypes as Clytemnestra or Medusa as models for Lady Macbeth's character, I argue that Shakespeare not only knew and directly responded to mythology regarding these archetypes, but also integrated components of Orestes' character. Some scholars do gesture towards the presence of these figures behind the Lady, but most stop short of seeking concrete evidence linking them to each other and none perceive her as an Orestes figure. Edith Williams, for example, acknowledges the presence of a Jungian archetype – the “terrible Mother” – derived from classical literature, but hesitates to attribute this archetype to the classical rageful feminine or to Furies at all.<sup>15</sup> I posit that, drawing upon Greek archetypes of rage and violence appearing in contemporary literature and translations, Shakespeare depicts Lady Macbeth as a woman attempting to negotiate a space for herself in a gender spectrum that demands binary behavior. She is first a Clytemnestra, a Medusa, a Fury, then transforms into an impossible Orestes, punished for her ambition, futilely trying to purify her shame and guilt. By taking on the maternal characteristics of Clytemnestra and Medea, the monstrous femininity of Medusa and the Furies, and the tragic masculinity of Orestes, Lady Macbeth reflects the full spectrum of complex mythological gendering, positioned in an early modern context that sentences her to die.

The first chapter of this work focuses on the early modern and ancient templates that dictate the Lady's actions and ambitions, up to and including her accessory to regicide. In the

---

<sup>15</sup> Edith Whitehurst Williams, “In Defense of Lady Macbeth,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1973): 221.

two sub-sections, I discuss her unsexing, poisonous maternity, and feminine monstrosity, as well as the early modern medical and ideological context that both curtail and explain her behavior. I also examine how early modern depictions of Greek myth, particularly the *Oresteia*, might have influenced Shakespeare.

The second chapter examines the consequences of Lady Macbeth's actions and ambitions: her reactions and her demise. Within three subsections, I discuss how motifs of sleep, blood, madness, and purification reach back through time, intertextually exposing facets of her character and arc while also guiding the way that we receive her. Through this lens, I examine her exclusion from purification as a function of her stunted transformation into Orestes. I suggest that the gender binary is aggressively simplistic and does not apply in the case of Lady Macbeth, who does not view womanhood and personhood as mutually exclusive. Rather, she opportunistically wields gendered characteristics from across the spectrum, holding her maternity as a weapon and her self-described masculine heart, which Kimbrough describes as her "un-cultivated" femininity, as an incentive.<sup>16</sup> The mythical roots that bind and locate her are multi-gendered in nature.

Thus, examining Shakespeare's catachrestic depiction of Lady Macbeth's nature, this work attempts to interrogate how the reception of classical depictions of rage and vengeance expand, metamorphose, and endanger her identity and gender. Simultaneously, this work identifies how archetypal personifications of wrath and retaliation are received and manipulated in the play. Lady Macbeth's mythic origins affect her identity, fate, characterization, and mind by making her symbolically multi-gendered; she is at once and neither dangerously and unacceptably masculine as well as intrinsically and excessively feminine. The deep power of

---

<sup>16</sup> Kimbrough, "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender," 181.

Lady Macbeth's uncanny, inaccessible, and nonbinary womanhood alters her presence within the play, rendering her both marvelously disruptive and doomed.

## CHAPTER ONE THE LADY'S WRATH: MILK, BILE, and DASH'D INFANTS

It is easy to dismiss Lady Macbeth as, in misogynistic terms, a bitch. She is a morally poisonous catalyst whose provocative elicitation of violence is the primary antidote to Macbeth's inertia. It is she who ultimately engenders, encourages, and precipitates wrath and retaliation within the action of the play. In response to her startlingly active role, scholarship tends to position her as an anti-woman, as Mark Burnett writes, a "woman who becomes less than a woman."<sup>17</sup> Monolithic orthodoxies regarding her have ossified, casting her as a destabilizing or supernatural woman who ultimately succumbs to feminine failings. As Caroline Asp claims, trapped in a "society in which femininity is divorced from strength and womanliness is equated with weakness," Lady Macbeth's actions, especially her martial and political agency, seem to come at the cost of "her own womanliness."<sup>18</sup> Insinuated in these doctrines is the underlying presumption that Lady Macbeth "can only be a 'woman' if she obeys the laws of convention, that she shocks because she deviates from norms of conduct, and that she is redeemed when she shows herself as 'feminine' in the final scenes."<sup>19</sup> This "critical neglect" can, Mark Burnett argues, be traced back to Freud's "influential but judgmental comments, which attempt to normalize and reify [that] the transformation of her callousness into penitence could be explained directly as a reaction to her childlessness," and therefore her own failed femininity.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Mark Burnett, "The 'fiend-like Queen': Rewriting Lady Macbeth," *Parergon* 11, no. 1 (1993): 1

<sup>18</sup> Carolyn Asp "'Be Bloody, Bold and Resolute': Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in *Macbeth*." *Studies in Philology* 78, no. 2 (1981): 159.

<sup>19</sup> Burnett, "The 'fiend-like Queen': Rewriting Lady Macbeth," 2

<sup>20</sup> Burnett, "The 'fiend-like Queen': Rewriting Lady Macbeth," 1; Sigmund Freud, "The Character of Lady Macbeth," in *New Casebooks: 'Macbeth'*, ed. Alan Sinfield (London: Palgrave, 1992), 39–45

Yet, even in ostensibly rejecting her femininity with that famous line – “unsex me here” (1.5.34) – Lady Macbeth’s power and rage are coded, by herself and others, in explicitly female terminology and structures, especially motherhood. This intensification of female characteristics is likewise a motif featured prominently in the mythic predecessors from which Shakespeare borrows. In particular, he establishes Lady Macbeth’s character and power by using both classical and early modern depictions of Clytemnestra’s poisonous motherhood and the Furies’ primal, vindictive rage. Lady Macbeth’s appropriation of threatening maternal prowess, like Clytemnestra’s, destabilizes the rigid power structures proposed by patriarchy in the play.

Trends in current scholarship examine Lady Macbeth within the context of early modern womanhood, positioning her as a surgical dissection of “anxieties about women and worries about the security of masculine identity.”<sup>21</sup> In particular, Lady Macbeth’s rageful and passionate pursuit of violence as well as her later susceptibility to guilt suggest what Coppelia Kahn identifies as a typical “identification of women with arbitrary, insatiable, and inscrutable desire [that] bespeaks a fear of engulfment or absorption by them.”<sup>22</sup> Lady Macbeth’s ability to provoke these fears comes from the classical archetypes of feminine rage employed in *Macbeth* — transmitted through myth, time, language, literature, and medicine — that help to depict its “fiend-like queen” as a woman striving to assert herself within the dominant structure of patriarchy (5.8.70).

Although orthodox Shakespearean study balks at including Greek plays among lists of direct sources, there are plausible and significant models of transmission, direct or mediated through Latin translation, that account for Shakespeare’s use of Hellenic myth. In particular, allusions and thematic ties connect classical works to *Macbeth* via direct exposure, translation, or

---

<sup>21</sup> Burnett, “The ‘fiend-like Queen’: Rewriting Lady Macbeth,” 3

<sup>22</sup> Coppelia Kahn, *Man’s Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Los Angeles: UC Press): 180

early modern reception. That is, Lady Macbeth's power and impact originate in Shakespeare's use of mythic models of rage derived from classically female figures.

### **“Unsex Me Here”<sup>23</sup>: Imagining Rage and Maternity**

The obvious role played by feminine archetypes of rage in Hellenic mythology provides both contextual and intertextual inspiration for Lady Macbeth's characterization. The Furies, Clytemnestra, and Lady Macbeth share structural similarities in both behavior and representation, particularly in relation to their gender. All three are defined or described, by others or themselves respectively, as being un-womanly. These descriptions, however, rely not on archetypally masculine terms or structures, but on feminine ones. Classical and early modern authors conspicuously utilize the language of motherhood, bodies, milk, blood, or the absence thereof to describe the Furies, Clytemnestra, and Lady Macbeth. Indeed, from her first ecstatic monologue, Lady Macbeth references both her desire to be unsexed *and* her native femininity, descriptors that evoke the complicated femininity of the rageful women before her.

Upon reading Macbeth's letter about the witches' prophecy regarding his potential reign, she repeatedly grounds her intentions internally, focusing on blood, gall, milk, and her own breasts:

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 the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,  
Wherever in your sightless substances  
You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,

---

<sup>23</sup> 1.4.31

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
 To cry 'Hold, hold!' (1.5.33–44)

Lady Macbeth's disturbing and womanly rage is embedded in the text not only structurally, but also linguistically. That is, the structural similarities between Lady Macbeth's character and ancient archetypes of feminine anger are furthered by ancient linguistic conventions regarding wrath, vengeance, and bodily fluids. The physical references within Lady Macbeth's language, as well as those employed by characters in proximity to her, suggest a particular link between her rage, her power, and her feminine embodiment. This trend most vividly manifests itself here, in Lady Macbeth's ecstatic monologue.

Immediately after her appeal to be unsexed, Lady Macbeth re-contextualizes her potency and rage in feminine terms, deconstructing rigid cultural categories of gender and anger. At once, she asks to be unsexed and invokes a maternal image, "come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall," a request that centers her un-feminizing intent on feminine somatic characteristics and the corruption thereof (1.5.45–46). Like Clytemnestra, whose rage is derived from maternal devastation, Lady Macbeth's power is "conditioned on maternity."<sup>24</sup> The threat suggested by this speech is implicitly grounded in gendered terms, alluding both to the ambiguously gendered witches and to unknown limits of rage in a woman. Indeed, Dympna Callaghan suggests that "in *Macbeth*, the kingdom of darkness is unequivocally female, unequivocally matriarchal, and the fantasy of incipient rebellion of demonic forces is crucial to the maintenance of the godly rule it is supposed to overthrow."<sup>25</sup> Yet, Lady Macbeth's desire to be unsexed thrusts her gender expression in a dark realm of its own, subverting rigid cultural

---

<sup>24</sup> Stephanie Chamberlain, "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England," *College Literature* 32, no. 3 (2005): 73.

<sup>25</sup> Dympna Callaghan, "Wicked Women in *Macbeth*: A Study of Power, Ideology, and the Production of Motherhood," in *Reconsidering the Renaissance*, ed. Mario Di Cesare (Binghamton: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992): 358-359.

categories, loosening her identity and abilities from the expected social performance of ‘female’ or ‘feminine.’

While the witches’ prophecy ostensibly compels Lady Macbeth to put aside her womanhood and tread the ambiguous boundaries of gender, her femaleness is textually inescapable. Janet Adelman wonderfully complicates the traditional interpretation of Lady Macbeth’s unsexing, writing that the imagery of her speech “locates the horror of the scene in Lady Macbeth’s unnatural abrogation of her maternal function, . . . latent within this image of unsexing is the horror of the maternal function itself.”<sup>26</sup> Lady Macbeth’s paradoxical rejection and foregrounding of her feminine fertility calls attention to her maternal potential as well as her willingness to negate it. The ferocity of this prayer situates her power and the “horror” thereof in her ambivalent maternity.

Indeed, Lady Macbeth’s evocative plea to “unsex me here” (1.5.34) could be the private prayer of Clytemnestra, Aeschylus’ own poisonous mother. Lady Macbeth’s unsexing seems to recall the words of the *Oresteia*’s guards, who foreshadow Clytemnestra’s revenge by identifying that in her “breast beats the heart of a man.”<sup>27</sup> The Furies—fearsome, feminine goddesses of violent justice and revenge who are frequently identified as matriarchal threats to the civility of Olympian patriarchy—are similarly unsexed, denied their femininity, their personhood, and their sexuality. The Aeschylean Delphic priestess haltingly describes them as “women, but not women . . . Gorgons, but not Gorgons . . . old women, aged children.”<sup>28</sup> The ambiguity associated with the Furies is transmitted through time. Arthur Golding’s 1567 translation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a text heavily utilized by Shakespeare, describes them as

---

<sup>26</sup> Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 135

<sup>27</sup> Aeschylus, *Agamemnon*, 121

<sup>28</sup> Aeschylus, *Eumenides*, 47-69.

perversions of womanhood dressed in a “garment streaming gorie bloud,” and covered with snakes (4.88.).<sup>29</sup> Consistently, the rage of women is at once verbally denuded of and regrounded in terms of femininity.

This trend is poetically echoed in Lady Macbeth’s monologue, as Shakespeare emphasizes her womanhood through the heavy somatization of intense emotions and the corresponding ailments catalogued by the early modern humoral system. This medical paradigm, which held that all systems in the body relied on the balance of four substances or humors provides context for Shakespeare’s choices. Lady Macbeth’s references to thick blood and gall suggest an unhealthy and unbalanced intensification of choler and gall—both characteristics of wanton emotion in the humoral system. This overflowing of passion could have been seen, in the early modern period, as in antiquity, as a somatic sickness of the humoral system most applicable to women, who were understood to be particularly susceptible to fits of emotion.<sup>30</sup> Gall refers to the emotion of bitter rage, synecdochally to the gallbladder and choler as well as to yellow bile, a bodily secretion associated with anger in the humoral system developed by Hippocrates and Galen.<sup>31</sup>

The humoral system relied on the presence of four basic bodily fluids (blood, black bile, yellow bile, and phlegm), interacting and associated with the four elements (air, fire, water, earth), two of four bodily qualities (hot, cold, dry, wet), and gender. These fluids could exist in excess or paucity and both precipitated and contained the behavior or emotions associated with

---

<sup>29</sup> Arthur Golding, *Metamorphoses* (London: Willyam Seres, 1567); Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*; A. B. Taylor, “Shakespeare and Golding,” *Notes and Queries*, Volume 38, no. 4 (1991): 492–499.

<sup>30</sup> Jacques Jouanna, *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*, ed. Philip Van der Eijk Philip (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012), 335-360.

<sup>31</sup> Jouanna, *Greek Medicine*, 362.

them.<sup>32</sup> Relevantly, blood and choler, or yellow bile/gall, were associated with anger and wrath, and were “the fluids requisite for violent action.”<sup>33</sup> Lady Macbeth’s symptomatic cruelty would have been understood to act “as a current in the blood because it is the effect of choler—the sharp humor produced by the gallbladder.”<sup>34</sup> Further (as blood was associated with heat and choler was associated with heat and air), both her heightened gall and choler were seen as normatively masculine traits.<sup>35</sup> In the formulation of the Galenic humoral system, women were, on the whole, colder and wetter, while men were hotter and drier. This association with coldness and wetness extended negatively to women’s presumed ability to interact with the world reasonably, impactfully, or as individuals with individual agency; the early modern world saw female humoral makeup as effectively precluding women from independent, rational interaction with the world. The humoral system in gendered bodies therefore represents a “paradigmatic case” of Judith Butler’s argument that sexual difference “is never simply a function of material differences which are not in some way both marked and formed by discursive practices.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, by engaging with traditionally masculine humors, Lady Macbeth reaches beyond the boundaries demarcated by the humoral system, at least temporarily, lexically deconstructing gender categories.

That Lady Macbeth’s plea associates gall with milk and blood is significant. Not only does she invoke masculine humors, but she associates them with feminine praxes. Because in the “humoral lexicon . . . signifier and substance easily change places,” Lady Macbeth could well

---

<sup>32</sup> Yellow Bile: (choleric) Dry, hot, violent; Black Bile: dry, cold; Blood: wet, hot; Phlegm: wet, cold.

<sup>33</sup> Jouanna, *Greek Medicine*, 352; Gail Kern Paster, *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 47.

<sup>34</sup> Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 207.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “sex,”* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), 2.

have referred to gall as ‘wrath.’ Shakespeare’s choice to emphasize ‘gall’ keeps her emotions and intentions firmly within her body.<sup>37</sup> In so doing, he not only locates putative masculinity in a maternal form, but also suggests that her cruelty and maleness are somatic, perhaps foreshadowing Lady Macbeth’s eventual physical capitulation to her guilt, which like an illness overwhelms her senses, leaving her debilitated, feverish, and beyond aid.

Thus, while she reaches for a balance of humors that could bequeath the ability to engage with the world rationally and as a fully individuated agent (that is, as a male in the humoral system), Lady Macbeth also contains that potential power in her feminine body, associating her theoretical strength with maternity—with nursing. Her gall does not flow through her blood (though she asks that her blood be fortified, thickened and nourished). It flows through her breasts, as milk. That is to say, Lady Macbeth’s manipulation of the humoral system is transgressive many times over. She not only grasps at normatively masculine humoral traits and seeks a level of power and agency appropriate only to men, but also applies those traits to a woman’s body.

It is worth noting that, according to the *OED*, while the word “gall” in English has German origins, the “pre-Germanic root \*ghol-, \*ghel- . . . is represented also in Greek χολή, χόλος [“cholos,” gall, bile]” which had the same meanings. That Shakespeare borrows a word coded with the same function in the Greek literary tradition allows us to consider that Lady Macbeth’s gall draws from a Greek literary tradition preoccupied with wrath. This Grecian sense of *cholos*, accessible to Shakespeare if not directly from the Greek then via George Chapman’s partial 1598 translation of the *Iliad*, is similarly complex in regards to gender. In the *Iliad* Homer gives Achilles’ rage a negative connotation; it and, therefore, he, are at fault for the gore and

---

<sup>37</sup> Paster, *Humoring the Body*, 51.

horror that ensues. Yet, curiously, the origin of this rage is attributed not to Achilles, but to his mother. By Achilles' own account, his soldiers said of him that "Your mother nursed (*ἔτρεφε*) you with bile."<sup>38</sup> Chapman's translation preserves both the nuances of *ἔτρεφε* as 'nursing' and 'thickening,' as well as the attribution of Achilles' wrath to his mother's toxic milk. He describes Achilles as the "cruel son of Peleüs, whom She that rules the seas / Did only nourish with her gall," providing one expressive model for Lady Macbeth's invocation.<sup>39</sup>

These etymological and ideological associations enable us to consider that Lady Macbeth's invocation of gall and thickening might reference the wrath of Achilles or, more specifically, the wrath of Thetis. The attribution of Achilles' wrath to his mother—specifically through the mechanism of nourishment or nursing—speaks to an apparently diachronic anxiety about the impact of mother's care for their young. Chapman simultaneously acknowledges the power of motherhood while tracing the faults of the son to the mother. This choleric displacement may help to mitigate Achilles of responsibility for his cruelty, but his mother looms ominously in his past, proposing the disruptive and enduring impacts of a mother's will and her bilious milk.

While *ἔτρεφε* idiomatically means "raised" or "nursed," its first or literal definition is "thicken," "curdle," or "congeal." Of course, Shakespeare likely does not directly interpolate this duality; nevertheless, there is a transhistorical resonance in the etymological connection between "raising" and "thickening" in the Greek and in Lady Macbeth's own pleas to not only have her milk be turned to gall, but also "make thick [her] blood." In the *Iliad*, this duality contextually implies the curdling of this nourishment: milk curdled, thickened into bile and employed in the act of strengthening or raising. Shakespeare's usage carries a similar undertone, implying that

---

<sup>38</sup> Homer, *Iliad*, 26.330 "χόλω ἄρα σ' ἔτρεφε μήτηρ."

<sup>39</sup> George Chapman and Alardyce Nicoll, *Chapman's Homer* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1998), 26.294-295.

Lady Macbeth calls out not only for her blood to be literally made more dense, but rather thickened in the sense of, as recorded in the *OED*, “to make more substantial; to strengthen, confirm.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, she calls for her blood to simultaneously grant her resolve and steel *and* curdle or putrefy in order to accomplish her subversive, destabilizing goals.

Golding’s translation of *Metamorphoses* provides an additional and bloodier model for Lady Macbeth. Book IV, the same that details the sordid tale of Pyramus and Thisbe, contains Ovid’s account of the Fury Tisiphone wreaking havoc upon Athamas and Ino, causing the former to go mad and kill their child.<sup>41</sup> In Golding’s translation, Ovid’s account of the Fury vividly pays homage to Chthonic deities and blood, as she dons a garment

streaming gorie bloud, and taketh in hir hand  
A burning Cresset stepte in bloud, and girdeth hir about  
With wreathed Snakes. (4.596–598)<sup>42</sup>

The snakes are explicitly Chthonic – thus connecting the Fury with other feminine forces of rage and power, including Medusa and the Gorgons. Similarly, the Fury’s garb drips with blood, suggesting that she has just emerged from direct combat or the male-dominated sphere of war. However, reading for female-coding rather than male suggests this blood may also have feminine connotations—the blood of menstruation or giving birth. Tisiphone is also covered in snakes that “trayling downe hir brest / Did hisse and spit out poyson greene, and spirt with tongues infest,” viscerally evoking the image of a poisoned or poisonous breast (4.609–610). Golding, translating Ovid’s meaning, signifies a connection between the location of the snakes and their function; the snakes’ venom takes the place of breast milk, which in this case induces violence and madness in

---

<sup>40</sup> See Chapter Two, section two - “I am in Blood.”

<sup>41</sup> According to A.B. Taylor, Tisiphone is also referenced in *Othello* as “black Vengeance” (3.3.454). Taylor, “Shakespeare and Golding,” 492

<sup>42</sup> The Furies were Chthonic deities: underworld gods who predated Olympians, often female, associated with death, birth, and nature, Snakes were symbols of these beings.

their victims. Given that Shakespeare knew and actively drew on Golding's Ovid, this image of Tisiphone may have lingered in his mind, activating his imagination and influencing his depiction of Lady Macbeth's corrupting influence.<sup>43</sup>

The motifs of gall, feminine rage, breasts, and poisonous motherhood can be traced elsewhere in Shakespeare's literary ancestry and library.<sup>44</sup> John Studley's 1581 translation of Seneca's *Agamemnon* similarly depicts the correlation between rage and motherhood, particularly through the association of gall and breasts. More viscerally and comprehensively than Seneca, Studley emphasizes the physical aspect of Clytemnestra's rage:

Outraging in my boiling breast, my burning bones doth beat:  
It suckes the sappy marrow - out the juice it doth convey,  
It frets, it teares, it rents, it gnaws, my guts and gall away.<sup>45</sup>

Using alliteration and caesura to effect a sense of the rhythmic, excruciating pain associated with rage, Studley calls attention to the physicality of Clytemnestra's fury, associating it with her breasts and gall. Moreover, the rage itself is personified not solely as a Fury, but symbolically as an infant. It seems to pantomime nursing, intimately sucking at the "sappy marrow" of Clytemnestra's bones—suggesting a parasitic relationship that may ultimately destroy the host, as it does in the case of Lady Macbeth—and gaining strength as an infant does, through an umbilical connection.

Shakespeare, like others before him, also sucks at this sappy marrow to feed his own literary depiction of Lady Macbeth. Authors of early modern English vernacular poetry observed and reproduced Clytemnestra's association with nursing, nourishment, and Furies. Francis Davison's 1602 *Poetical Rhapsodies*, a collection of his own poems as well as popular verse and

---

<sup>43</sup> A.B. Taylor, "Shakespeare, Studley, & Golding." *The Review of English Studies*, 39, no. 156 (1988): 525.

<sup>44</sup> A.B. Taylor, "Shakespeare, Studley, & Golding," 523.

<sup>45</sup> John Studley, "Agamemnon, 1566," in *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies* ed. James Ker and Jessica Winston (London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012), 228

epigrams, confirms that Clytemnestra's association with nursing had entered the Elizabethan consciousness. One inscription, aptly (if not a little ponderously) titled "Clytemnestra to her son Orestes: Coming to kill her for murdering his father Agamemnon," explicitly connects violence, Furies, and her own "vile" motherhood to breasts and nursing. She appeals to him:

Hold! hold thy hand, vile son of viler mother!  
 Death I deserve, but oh not by thy knife;  
 One parent to revenge wilt thou kill the other,  
 And give her death that gave thee, wretch, thy life?  
 Furies will plague thy murder execrable,  
 Stages will play thee, and all mothers curse thee.  
 To wound this womb or breast, how art thou able,  
 When the one did bear thee, and the other nurse thee.<sup>46</sup>

Studley's Clytemnestra announces a future metatheatrical resonance, which we can envision Lady Macbeth fiercely undertaking. Stages do indeed depict Orestes, condemning him even as they praise him for vanquishing his "bad mother," while Lady Macbeth ultimately performs both Clytemnestra and Orestes (as I will show later). The thematic consonances between Lady Macbeth and Clytemnestra intensify as the latter anticipates the former through shared motifs, including literal and symbolic nursing, nourishing embodied rage, and overly-empowered motherhood.

It is compelling, then, to see Lady Macbeth beg that her "milk be taken for gall" so she can metaphorically "nurse" this ruthlessness, this rage and violence, into being; the rage becomes Lady Macbeth's child, her own Orestes, violence her newborn. Shakespeare may have been inspired by a mythical connection between rage, blood, and acts of motherhood to thrust forward Lady Macbeth's wrathful intentions, to explicitly connect gall and femininity, centering the latter in the nexus of her rage. Her agency and violence, as well as her vindictive dynamism, are

---

<sup>46</sup> Francis Davison, *Poetical Rhapsodies* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1611), 87.

midwifed through Macbeth's actions, intensified by the maternal imagery of her first, wild supplication to violence.

Shakespeare furthers the connection between Lady Macbeth and a rageful feminine principle, conditioned on motherhood and embodiment, when she goads Macbeth. She simultaneously undermines his masculinity and calls attention to his emasculating weakness, illustrated through his hesitancy to slaughter Duncan, by vividly outlining a brutal infanticide:

What beast was't, then,  
That made you break this enterprise to me?  
When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And, to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place  
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:  
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now  
Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know  
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. (1.7.47–59)

Her milk traded for gall, Lady Macbeth identifies the sticking place of masculinity as the fulfillment of a promise to murder. Her palpable description of imagined infanticide serves to imply that she—and not Macbeth—has the ability to be “so much more the man,” to effectively appropriate and transcend masculinity because of her proclaimed dedication to bravery (1.7.51). Her seeming willingness to eschew the bonds of motherhood enables her to usurp his masculinity and lean into the purest articulation of empowered feminine furor.

However, Lady Macbeth's usurpation of a strength that she identifies with masculinity is positioned in feminine terms. She disowns the masculine power that, in the world of *Macbeth*, is expressed through the use of physical force. As Stephanie Chamberlain writes,

Macbeth's strength as well as his valor is directly linked to the battlefield, and is, in fact, based upon his ability to carve his enemy “from the nave to th' chops” (1.2.22). Although

she may well fantasize killing an infant, Lady Macbeth expressly rejects the masculine power which would allow her to wield a dagger.<sup>47</sup>

While her indirect or at least secondary enactments of violence and rage may suggest exclusion from active participation in patriarchal systems, her indirect and direct anger can be seen as a marker of her agency, a subversive manifestation of a distinct and ambiguously alternative gender identity. Ultimately, rather than occupy or identify with the male, she catachrestically destabilizes the feminine. Her violence is couched in maternal terms; she negotiates her seemingly masculine empowerment within the bounds of expected femininity - namely, motherhood. In so doing, she perhaps identifies a heretofore unknown or liminal space for power, reliant on the destruction of presumed behavior. Indeed, the theoretically hallowed sanctity of the intimate bond between mother and child disintegrates under the weight of incomprehensible and nauseating brutality.

Lady Macbeth's infanticidal fantasy, which so tangibly suggests the terrible threat of unstable maternity, echoes earlier mythical depictions of infanticides, often explicitly tied to feminine power. The scene from Golding's *Metamorphoses* that describes Tisiphone also anticipates Lady Macbeth's descriptions, providing a direct linguistic antecedent for her haunting claim that she would "Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out" (1.7.57-58). Acting on Juno's account, Tisiphone uses blood and venomous snakes to poison the minds of Athamas and Ino (4.607-610). "Starke madde," Athamas seizes

From betweene  
The mothers armes his little babe *Learchus* smyling on him  
And reaching foorth his preatie armes, and floong him fiercely from him  
A twice or thrice as from a slyng: and dash't his tender head  
Against a hard and rugged stone until he sawe him dead. (4.637-640)

---

<sup>47</sup> Chamberlain, "Fantasizing Infanticide," 79

The use of the word “dashed” in particular is very suggestive. Because Shakespeare clearly knew this text, there’s every reason to believe that he absorbed linguistic characteristics and motifs embedded in Golding’s rendering of the archetypal raging feminine. Although Athamas kills the child, it is Tisiphone who compels him to do so; the infanticide is therefore caused by a pitiless woman, a link recursively intensified within the text, as Tisiphone’s actions are prompted by Juno’s wrath. These evocative ideas must have resonated and appealed to a writer hoping to illustrate a fearsome, powerful woman; Shakespeare wielded these images and words to strengthen his depiction of Lady Macbeth’s violence and vitality.

Golding’s Ovid not only precedes Shakespeare’s depiction of Lady Macbeth, but also indirectly mediates a connection between *Macbeth* and the works of Aeschylus and Euripides. Golding and Ovid respond to mythic conceptions of the Furies, representing them as wreathed in snakes, as in *Eumenides* (visually eliding them with other feminine archetypes of rage, such as Medusa), and employing the motif of poisoned, bloody breast milk. This latter image also appears in *Choephoroi*, when Clytemnestra dreams that she has given birth to a snake, symbolically Orestes, and nurses it with bloody, venomous milk. Ovid, who scholars accept relied on intertextuality, repeatedly references Greek tragedy in his work, including imagery and associations present in Aeschylus’ *Oresteia*.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Ovid’s accepted use of Greek material suggests that he may have drawn the description of the infant’s slaughter from a specific source: Euripides’ *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

---

<sup>48</sup> For scholarship on Roman literary debt to Greek tragedy, see, for example: Ingo Gildenhard and Martin Revermann, *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the Fourth Century BCE to the Middle Ages*, (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010); and Dan Curley, *Tragedy in Ovid: Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Euripides' works in translation, including *Medea*, *Orestes*, and other plays that directly engaged with the Aeschylean model (though transforming and diverging from it in crucial ways) offered significant source material for Shakespeare.<sup>49</sup> Due partially to the tremendous influence of Erasmus, Euripides was frequently translated into Latin and sometimes into English.<sup>50</sup> *Iphigenia at Aulis* was a particularly common choice for translation, turned first into Latin by Erasmus in 1506, then notably into English twice: first by Lady Jane Lumley (c. 1556), then by George Peele (c. 1580, though we no longer have his translation). While the phrasing of Lady Macbeth's visceral promise that she would have "Pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash'd the brains out" is most likely mediated through Golding's *Metamorphoses*, it is possible that Shakespeare directly reproduces the line from the Greek text or from Erasmus' translation (7.3.56–58).<sup>51</sup> Indeed, Euripides writes Clytemnestra's bitter appeal to Agamemnon nearly identically. In the original Greek, Clytemnestra describes how Agamemnon "dashed my infant on the ground, tearing him brutally from my breast."<sup>52</sup> Erasmus translates the line similarly: "And, with uncontrollable violence, you tore my little boy from my breast and violently slaughtered him."<sup>53</sup> Lady Macbeth's brutal words echo a host of mythological grieving mothers and enraged avengers; Shakespeare calls upon a gallery of rageful women to bring Lady Macbeth to life, highlighting her seeming cruelty and power in relation to her maternity.

Yet, despite rhetorically mimicking Clytemnestra's words and identifying with motherhood, Lady Macbeth symbolically takes the place of the king, playing Agamemnon in the

---

<sup>49</sup> For a thorough compendium on the subject, see Carla Southren, "Shakespeare and the Renaissance Reception of Euripides." PhD diss. (University of York, 2018).

<sup>50</sup> Schleiner, "Latinized Greek Drama," 31.

<sup>51</sup> Lady Jane's translation redacts the pertinent line and we cannot compare Peele's, though the latter may have preserved the phrasing.

<sup>52</sup> Euripides, *Iphigenia at Aulis*, 1151-1152: "βρέφος τε τοῦμὸν σὺ προσούδισας πάλω, / μαστῶν βιαίως τῶν ἐμῶν ἀποσπάσας"

<sup>53</sup> "Prius, ac puello fortis ex usu tuae / Itidem perempto, quem cuidem per vim meo / Immitis ad necem reuulseras sinu."

verbal pantomime. Indeed, she reverses the origin and directionality of Clytemnestra's wrath, therefore aligning more closely with Tisiphone; rather than deriving rage as a *consequence* of infanticide, Lady Macbeth employs the imagined act as *proof* of power and vitriol. The consequence is that, as Chamberlain argues, "the images of nursing and infanticide that frame Lady Macbeth's act one fantasy invoke a maternal agency" grounded in mythological precedent.<sup>54</sup>

These layers of mythological reception further complicate Lady Macbeth's already complex relationship with power and gender, rendering her both more and less feminine. Through association with Tisiphone and the deconstructed and destabilizing gendering of the Furies, Lady Macbeth is somewhat divested of her femininity, situated at the intersection of womanhood and the pointed lack thereof. Jean de Saint-Ravy's widely disseminated 1555 Latin translation of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* goes one step further. Saint-Ravy condemns Clytemnestra's un-accommodating femininity, attributing to her the downfall of a kingdom and clearly providing a model for Lady Macbeth.<sup>55</sup> Simultaneously, and in juxtaposition to her divested womanhood, Shakespeare's echoing of Clytemnestra associates Lady Macbeth with powerful motherhood, capable of destabilizing both hegemonic gender binaries and patriarchal political bodies - the House of Atreus and the Kingdom of Scotland, respectively.

Of course, there are key distinctions between Lady Macbeth, the Furies, and Clytemnestra's respective encounters with rage, particularly in terms of infanticide (though none directly achieves the death of infants). The Furies incite, but are separate from the physical

---

<sup>54</sup> Chamberlain, "Fantasizing Infanticide," 73.

<sup>55</sup> Schleiner, "Latinized Greek Drama," 31; "Intempestive vero inimicum coniugium / execratum aedibus muliebria que consilia menis / pro viro inimicis culpando cultus."; Jean de Saint-Ravy, *Aeschyli poetae vetustissimi tragoediae sex, quot quidem extant, summa fide ac diligentia e Greco in Latinum sermonem, pro utriusque linguae tyronibus, ad verbum conversae* (Basel, 1555), 160.

action. Clytemnestra witnesses and eventually sharpens the rage she feels at the murder of her children into a motive, a weapon used to slaughter the perpetrator Agamemnon. Lady Macbeth promises in hypotheticals, even envisions, but does not do.<sup>56</sup> These crucial differences in proximity to and intention regarding infanticide suggest that Shakespeare may have looked elsewhere, perhaps finding inspiration in the figure of Medea.

Lady Macbeth echoes the perceived ruthlessness of Ovid's and Seneca's Medeas. Lady Macbeth especially resonates with Seneca's *Medea*, particularly given that, as Katherine Heavey has argued, "both women regard femininity as incompatible with their bloody plots, and call on supernatural forces to help them overcome any lingering mercy in their souls."<sup>57</sup> Studley's 1566 characteristically bloody translation and expansion of Seneca's *Medea* provides a rhetorically homologous template for Lady Macbeth, who invokes beings of "direst cruelty" in an attempt to "thicken" her blood and "unsex" her (1.5.38–41).<sup>58</sup> So too does Studley's *Medea* command of herself that,

If anye lustye lyfe as yet  
within thy soule do reste,  
I sought of auncient corage styll  
doe dwell within my breste,  
Exile all folysh female feare.<sup>59</sup>

In order to kill her children ("through euery gut and gall" – yet another possible precedent for Lady Macbeth's bilious milk), Medea suggestively and presciently "unsexes" herself – exiling all "foolish female fear." Like Lady Macbeth, Medea simultaneously steels herself and seek external aid from supernatural beings. The two violent mothers ask that their hearts be hardened,

---

<sup>56</sup> Marvin Rosenberg, "Lady Macbeth's Indispensable Child," *Educational Theatre Journal* 26, 1 (1974): 14.

<sup>57</sup> Katherine Heavey, *The Early Modern Medea Medea in English Literature, 1558-1688* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 107.

<sup>58</sup> Inga Stina Ewbank, "'Striking too short at Greeks': The Transmission of Agamemnon to the English Renaissance Stage," in *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004*, ed. by Fiona Macintosh and Pantelis Michelakis, 37-42 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 40.

<sup>59</sup> John Studley, *Medea* (London: Thomas Colwell, 1566): ll.291-306.

their rage thickened in their blood, and their murderousness intensified and narrowed in a demonstration of infanticidal motherhood.

Anxiety and fascination regarding maternal power and motherhood in early modern England, Sylvia Federici writes, “motivated attempts to understand and control, even repudiate it.”<sup>60</sup> Historians identify the era as a period of increasingly severe criminalization of feminine existence through new legal recourse against adultery, witchcraft, prostitution, the production of bastards, and infanticide.<sup>61</sup> Sixteenth and early seventeenth century English literature on the subject of maternity points to a tension between the virtues and necessity of mothers, and the fears associated with the power a mother has to assert agency over lineage. Christopher Newstead’s 1620 *An apology for women: or women’s defence* represents this anxiety, providing a likely ideological backdrop to Shakespeare’s perspective, arguing both that mothers are owed significant gratitude and that their power lies in the fact that children can be certain of their mothers, but only know their father’s identity through their mother’s narrative.<sup>62</sup> This, theoretically, accords mothers significant power to undermine or overrule patrilineal systems, just as (as in the case of *Macbeth* or *Agamemnon*) it accords men significant power to disrupt other patrilineages.

In other words, patriarchal identity in the early modern period was, as Chamberlain writes, “conditioned upon the perpetuation of the patrilineal line. Without an heir to continue the family name, lineal identity would be lost.”<sup>63</sup> Thus, as in the case of Lady Macbeth who would

---

<sup>60</sup> Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars*, 283.

<sup>61</sup> Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, The Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 186; Katharine Hodgkin, “Gender, Mind, and Body: Feminism and Psychoanalysis,” in *Advances in Witchcraft Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 186; Christina Lerner, “Was Witch Hunting Woman Hunting,” in *The Witchcraft Reader*, ed. Darren Oldridge (New York: Routledge, 2008), 254

<sup>62</sup> Kate Aughterson, *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook: Constructions of Femininity in England* (New York: Routledge), 114

<sup>63</sup> Chamberlain, “Fantasizing Infanticide,” 84.

apparently kill Macbeth's own child to secure his future power, despite consequently condemning him to reign without patrilineage, "maternal agency could undermine the patrilineal process even as it appeared to support it."<sup>64</sup>

Questions of lineage and maternal influence explicitly thread through both Lady Macbeth's speech and the play as a whole. Although Lady Macbeth unequivocally had and nursed a child, Macduff reveals that Macbeth "has no children" (4.3.222). The implication is that Lady Macbeth had and lost a child—Macbeth's child—and recently, since she still has milk to trade for gall. Her ruthlessness takes on new shades of impact; the couple have likely just lost a child, and she leverages that loss to assert power over both Scotland and Macbeth, suggesting her ability to disrupt patrilineage even in the face of grief. Further, her speech highlights the tension constantly rising between her maternity and her supernatural ruthlessness. This is particularly true in comparison to the other female characters in the play; Joanna Levin points out that, unlike the witches or Lady Macduff, Lady Macbeth never explicitly receives the title of "witch or mother, but her diabolism and reproductive functions (as well as the relation between the two) are always at issue."<sup>65</sup> Lady Macbeth's diabolical motherhood, even as a consequence of grief or loss, theoretically denies Macbeth further children. Though she is clearly not infertile (she has nursed a baby, presumably her own), Lady Macbeth's disordered and deferred motherhood lies in the background of Macbeth's acknowledgement that the Scots have given him a "fruitless crown, / And put a barren sceptre in my grip / Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand, / No son of mine succeeding" (3.163–66). Their lack of a child ultimately disrupts the natural conclusion of Macbeth's coup; Banquo's line, not his, will inherit power. Lady Macbeth's control over the existence or death of their infant thus taps deeply into societal anxieties about

---

<sup>64</sup> Chamberlain, "Fantasizing Infanticide," 74.

<sup>65</sup> Joanna Levin, "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," *ELH* 69, no. 1 (2002): 39.

inheritance, maternity, and the violence associated with lineal purity. This anxiety is especially relevant as *Macbeth* was written for King James, shortly after Queen Elizabeth I's death. The conclusion of *Macbeth* can thus be read as a rectification: a return to a stable society, led by a man with the capacity to issue more children of stable lineage.

The sense of pride and defiance redolent in Lady Macbeth's infanticidal revelation is particularly arresting. The empowerment she gains from this imagined scenario is absolute; if she is, indeed, attempting to free herself from the rigid delineations of gender that entrap her, such a fantasy demonstrates both her will and her desperation. Her empowerment in this fantasy is conditional on the enactment of brutality despite maternal love; she explicitly knows "How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.56). Uncharacteristically, Lady Macbeth verbally centers tenderness and love here. In doing so, she emphasizes her role as a mother and a guardian of growth, a role echoed in her facilitation of Macbeth's coup. Her love for the infant reframes the moment as an act of sacrifice, a willing choice made for the sake of power and individuation. That the baby is nursing when she slaughters it serves to emphasize what Chamberlain describes as the "uncertainties if not the dangers of unchecked maternal agency."<sup>66</sup> In her fantasizing, Lady Macbeth identifies and capitalizes on the fears surrounding motherhood and femininity, exploiting the heady sense that a mother could at one moment nourish and at the next spill the brains of an infant, willfully severing a sacred maternal relationship while emphasizing the power of the position.

Also revealing is that this imagined brutality echoes and reverses the maternal imagery in Lady Macbeth's first invocation to the spirits of murder. In that invocation, she pleads that her milk be traded for gall, theoretically to 'thicken' or nurse the infant of normatively masculine

---

<sup>66</sup> Chamberlain, "Fantasizing Infanticide," 81.

rage, characterized in *Macbeth* by regicidal political machinations and attempts to forge individual power. Perhaps to emphasize her intentions, this speech imagines Lady Macbeth rupturing her connection to a literal infant. The metaphorical baby comprised of her intentions overwhelms what might be seen as a natural or literal infant, implying that she retains her maternal role while forsaking, even rejecting, the space allocated for mothers in a patriarchal system.

Lady Macbeth's first invocation strengthens her role as 'mother' to Macbeth's political rise, while this later speech reverses the pattern. Initially, she conjures up images of a child enveloped in a blanket, as she asks "that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, / Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark, / To cry 'Hold, hold!'" (1.5.42–44). The "blanket of the dark" here seems to swaddle or obscure her machinations and forwarding of Macbeth's ambitions, protecting them from outside interference or harm. In other words, she announces her intention to protect and nourish his fated ambition, using maternal language and imagery to establish herself as the symbolic mother. Then, in opposition, she wrenches a natural if imagined baby (supposedly the inheritor of Macbeth's imagined kingdom) from the protective hold of her embrace and the nourishment of her breast and spills its brains on the floor. Lady Macbeth's imagined violence towards a real infant inverts her early protection of Macbeth's ambition, in the figurative language of a swaddled baby, solidifying her attachment to that ambition. This reversal sinks her further into disruptive motherhood, such that she carves a space for herself outside of any presumptive expression of maternity or femininity without rejecting either. She is instead a mother of rage, power, and gall.

Even Macbeth addresses her increasing appearance of unnatural womanhood, identifying her valor. Yet, he describes her seeming masculinity—the alleged maleness of her actions, the

fervor of her martial talent—in feminine terms. Macbeth tells her that she should “Bring forth men-children only; / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males” (1.7.72–73). The irony of this praise is cutting. Macbeth divests Lady Macbeth of her own intensely feminine “mettle,” grounded as it is in motherhood, and relocates it to a subordinate position. She can only engage with this “mettle” if she is a mother to men. Yet, the inverse also holds sway. Given the maternal language suffusing her speeches and ambitions, her maternal power is part (or the source) of her toughness.

### **“Rarer Monsters”<sup>67</sup>: Bewitching the Gorgon**

Shakespeare juxtaposes Lady Macbeth’s tender and destabilizing motherhood with the monstrous feminine, particularly in relation to her connections with both the witches and the Gorgons of mythology. Lady Macbeth’s intratextual affiliation with the witches has been duly and closely examined by Shakespearean scholars, many of whom catalogue the witches along with Lady Macbeth as catalyzing provocateurs to Macbeth’s ambition. Frances Dolan suggests that “*Macbeth* uses female characters—the witches and Lady Macbeth—to instill ambition, translate that ambition into violent action, and thus cast doubt on ambition and agency as associated with violence.”<sup>68</sup> Carol Thomas Neely likewise claims that they “are indirectly identified with each other by their departures from prescribed female subordination, by their parallel role as catalysts to Macbeth’s actions, and by the structure and symbolism of the play.”<sup>69</sup> In both cases, the non-normative femininity of the characters undermines the efficacy and honor

---

<sup>67</sup> 5.8.25

<sup>68</sup> Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550-1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 227.

<sup>69</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), 57; Peter Stallybrass, “Macbeth and Witchcraft.” In *Focus on Macbeth*, ed. John Russell Brown, 189-209 (London: Routledge, 1982), 194

of Macbeth's actions; the feminine origins of putatively masculine goals reposition and destabilize the action itself, ultimately resulting in its cosmic condemnation.

Leah Marcus writes that Lady Macbeth's "sexual ambivalence and dominance are allied with the demonic and mirror the obscure gender identifications of the bearded witches."<sup>70</sup> However, a further, powerful connection between Lady Macbeth and the "midnight hags" (4.1.63) can be found in "the early modern association of witchcraft with motherhood."<sup>71</sup> This association elaborates upon a myth of female power using the image of the unruly witch figure who threatens hegemonic sex and gender systems.

Much of the witch-figures' destabilizing power derives from an early modern association between witches and noxious motherhood. As Callaghan explains, witches in the early modern period were "imaged as the mother in an idea which has strong associations with the ancient fertility goddess under whose auspices all procreative power was placed."<sup>72</sup> In addition, witch-hunters in the early modern period apparently identified witches by the "presence of an extra nipple or teat, which was used to nurse Satan's familiars, providing additional linkage between witchcraft and motherhood."<sup>73</sup> As a result, the early modern witch is symbolically aligned with motherhood, but as Gail Kern Paster writes, "not only do witches resemble lactating mothers, but thanks to the witch-hunters' fetishistic attention to the witch's teat, lactating mothers come to resemble witches."<sup>74</sup> Early modern witches, in this way, come to represent the possibility of a supernaturally empowered mother, implicitly poisoning her child.

---

<sup>70</sup> Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 104.

<sup>71</sup> Chamberlain, "Fantasizing Infanticide," 81.

<sup>72</sup> Callaghan. "Wicked Women in Macbeth," 358.

<sup>73</sup> Chamberlain, "Fantasizing Infanticide," 81.

<sup>74</sup> Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 259.

Of course, the witches of *Macbeth* are not literally maternal figures in the play.<sup>75</sup>

However, due in part to the early modern association of witchcraft with corrupted motherhood and nursing, the witches function as metaphorical mothers, nurturing Macbeth's violent ambition, nourishing him with the tainted milk of violence. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, explicitly evokes the image of a lactating mother and, in trading her milk for gall, similarly aids in the nursing of Macbeth's corrupt ambitions. Likewise, given the contemporary connection between breasts, nipples, and the supernaturally empowered or evil woman, Lady Macbeth's disturbing association with a lactating mother invokes anxieties regarding powerful and supernatural femaleness.

Indeed, late sixteenth and early seventeenth century culture engendered much debate about the necessary but unstable, even dangerous, effects of maternal influence and breast milk.<sup>76</sup> In short, "the Jacobean did not unambivalently connect nursing" and the "milk of human kindness" (1.5.17).<sup>77</sup> Maternal milk could both enrich and pollute the morals of the vulnerable,

---

<sup>75</sup> It is worth noting that the witches are referred to as hags, defined by the *OED* as a term etymologically utilized in reference to "an evil spirit, dæmon, or infernal being, in female form: applied in early use to the Furies, Harpies, etc. of Græco-Latin mythology." While the witches are not explicitly Furies, there is significant scholarship examining the connection between them. See Arthur R. McGee, "'Macbeth' and The Furies," in *Shakespeare Survey*, ed. Kenneth Muir, 55–67. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967); Edward H. Thompson, "Macbeth King James and the Witches," in *Studii de limbi si literature modern: studii de anglistica si mericanisticai*, ed. Hortensia Parlog (Romania: Timisoara University Press, 1994); Elizabeth Truax, "Macbeth and Hercules," *Comparative Drama* 23, no. 4 (1989): 359-76; Laura Shamas, *We Three: The Mythology of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters*, New York: Lang, 2007.

<sup>76</sup> Charles Dodd, *Dodd's Church History of England From the Commencement of the Sixteenth Century to the Revolution In 1688*, ed. by Mark Aloysius Tierney (London: Charles Dolman, 1841), 11; Henry Neill Paul, *The royal play of Macbeth; when, why, and how it was written by Shakespeare* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 388. NB: King James I believed that milk, whether nursed from a mother or a wet nurse, played a powerful role in determining character. This idea even bolstered his attempts to legitimize his place as a Scottish royal on the English throne. Emphasizing the fact that he had been nursed by a Protestant instead of by his Catholic mother, Mary of Scots, James stood before the Protestant English Parliament in 1603 and declared, "I thank God I sucked the milk of God's truth with the milk of my nurse" (Dodd, 11). Earlier, he had announced much the same to the Pope, writing that he converted because he "suckte Protestante's milke" (Paul, 388). Conversely, James also blamed his unwieldy gait and tendency towards drinking on the same nurse, even attending a 1604 debate on the moral ramifications of breast milk and breast-feeding (Paul, 380).

<sup>77</sup> Levin, "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," 39.

nursing infant. Thus, through consistent textual references to nursing, Lady Macbeth serves as a manifestation of early modern fears about, as Adelman writes, “maternal nursery – a fear reflected, for example, in the common worries about the various ills (including female blood itself) that can be transmitted through nursing.”<sup>78</sup> Such fears speak to the muddled boundary between motherhood as a sanctified necessity and what Levin describes as “antimothering, the ever-present danger of perverse nurture.”<sup>79</sup> The identification of lactation with witchcraft lends credence to Adelman’s claim that Lady Macbeth does not ask spirits to exchange her milk *for* gall so much as she instructs them to take her milk *as* gall, offering her own breasts for the “murdering ministers” to suck at, nourishing their evil.<sup>80</sup> Here, maternal nursery is inherently polluting, capable of permanently corrupting a human, and equal to the forces of witchcraft. Witchcraft, thus, “extended and elaborated dominant fears of noxious, perverse mothering. Just as maternal milk could transmit pestilence and immorality, so could witches suckle their demonic familiars and nourish them with evil.”<sup>81</sup> Lady Macbeth’s supplication to the murdering ministers recalls demonic invocation or witchcraft, even as it simultaneously extends to the lifegiving process of breastfeeding – the functions of gall and milk metonymically and monstrously elided.

The witches’ and Lady Macbeth’s monstrosity is further amplified through the disruption of rigid gender identification. Banquo’s first interaction with the witches identifies their turbulent gender presentation, saying “You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (1.3.45–47). A hairy chin on a woman could also be read as a typical symptom of menopause, a symptom that early modern writers believed had been noticed

---

<sup>78</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 137

<sup>79</sup> Levin, “Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria,” 40.

<sup>80</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 138

<sup>81</sup> Levin, “Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria,” 44.

by the Greeks. In Nicholas Culpeper's 1662 *A Directory for Midwives: Or, A Guide for Women, in their Conception, Bearing; And Suckling their Children*, Culpeper quotes Aristotle as saying "that some Women have hairs in their Chin, when their Courses [menses] stop."<sup>82</sup> In the ponderously titled medical text, *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse wherein Methodically are handled all uterine affects, or diseases arising from the wombe*, John Sadler cites Hippocrates' account of a woman who, when "her termes were suppress," had "a beard, with a countenance like a man."<sup>83</sup> Either understanding (beards as the mark of a manly/gender non-conforming woman or an infertile woman) betrays Banquo's deep and obvious discomfort with alternate expressions of womanhood, suggesting the strong likelihood of Greek influence on Shakespeare's characterization of the witches.

Indeed, in his dismay, Banquo echoes the sensibility of the Delphic oracle's first interaction with the Furies in *Eumenides*. She vacillatingly catalogues their visual characteristics, describing the Furies as a "shocking band of women [that] slept, resting on thrones; not women, but Gorgons I call them, but neither do they take the form of Gorgons."<sup>84</sup> While the Delphic oracle seems to waver between categories of humanity and monstrosity, the Furies and the Gorgons alike explicitly evade distinctions of age and gender and in their monstrosity are stripped of feminine attributes or appearance.<sup>85</sup> In both cases, the observer visually diagnoses

---

<sup>82</sup> Nicholas Culpeper, *A Directory for Midwives: Or, A Guide for Women, in their Conception, Bearing; And Suckling their Children* (London: Peter Cole, 1662), 20.

<sup>83</sup> John Sadler, *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse wherein Methodically are handled all uterine affects, or diseases arising from the wombe* (London: Anne Griffin, 1636), 17.

<sup>84</sup> My translation from the Saint-Ravy *Oresteia*: "ante virum hunc mirabilis manipulus / dormit mulierum in solis sedens / non mulieres, sed Gorgonas dico / neque rursus Gorgiis assimilabo formis" (page 178). "Before this man, a shocking band of women slept, resting on thrones; not women, but Gorgons I call them, but neither do they take the form of Gorgons." The scene appears to be a direct translation as opposed to a truncated paraphrasing. It appears in the Aeschylean original as follows: "πρόσθεν δὲ / τάνδρὸς τοῦδε θαυμαστὸς λόχος / εὔδει γυναικῶν ἐν θρόνοισιν ἡμενος. / οὔτοι γυναῖκας, ἀλλὰ Γοργόνας λέγω, / οὐδ' αὖτε Γοργείοισιν εἰκάσω τύποις" (46-49).

<sup>85</sup> P.G. Maxwell-Stuart, "The Appearance of Aeschylus' Erinyes," *Greece & Rome* 20, no. 1 (1973): 82.

ambiguous gender presentations as a primary source of anxiety or horror, eliding discomfort in the face of danger with discomfort in the face of sexual transgression.

This same revulsion in the face of collapsed gender distinctions might be elicited – in an audience – by Lady Macbeth’s urgency to be unsexed and yet maternal. These explicit declarations of support, via unsexing and maternal ferocity, only emphasize the degree to which her intentions to aid Macbeth are homologous with those of the witches. In this way, she aggressively renegotiates the boundaries of femaleness and aligns these newly established boundaries with intratextual manifestations of monstrosity.

Macduff’s discovery of Duncan’s corpse and subsequent invocation of the Gorgon also serve to identify Lady Macbeth with the monstrous and ambiguously un-feminized female. Overwhelmed by the grotesqueries of Duncan’s newly and unjustly slain body, Macduff reacts viscerally, crying out “O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart / Cannot conceive nor name thee!” and tells those around him to “Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight / With a new Gorgon” (2.3.37–38; 45–46). Transformed by death into the likeness of Medusa, a feminine monster that transfixes the (typically male) spectator, the king’s unseen body induces, as Tassi claims, “a sense of limitless, uncontained horror.”<sup>86</sup> Lady Macbeth enters immediately thereafter, her appearance rhetorically framed as the Medusa, a visual representation of Macduff’s whirling horror. In other words, Macduff’s reference to Medusa operates as a means to announce Lady Macbeth’s arrival. Because the obscene sight of Duncan’s body lies offstage, the specific identity of the “new Gorgon” is obscure. Instead, the hovering term suggests the omnipresent background of classical female monsters. Anyone could fill the space implied by the name, but because the “horrid image” (1.3.134) of the king’s body is only rhetorically invoked, the audience’s

---

<sup>86</sup> Marguerite Tassi, “The ‘new Gorgon’: Eros, Terror and Violence in Macbeth,” in *Shakespeare’s Erotic Mythology and Ovidian Renaissance Culture*, ed. by Agnes LaFont (London: Routledge, 2013), 156.

imagination is linguistically pushed. By proximity and gender, this confers transformational and feminized horror onto Lady Macbeth when she, not the dead body, emerges first onto the stage.

The dramatic irony provoked by the audience's awareness of Lady Macbeth's active role in the regicide serves to encourage this transference of mythopoetic identity. While Macduff's reference to the Gorgon explicitly identifies Duncan's body and head as the site of monstrosity and his corpse as the herald of political inertia and tragedy, the comparison is textually and sexually thrust onto Lady Macbeth herself. Lady Macbeth's proximal entrance emphasizes her connection to the Gorgon, therefore projecting the myth's complex sexual implications onto her body, suggesting her apparently eroded femaleness and disruptive power over male agency and dominance.

The associations implied by Macduff's comparison are twofold. Medusa, the Gorgon herself, is a transformed and transformative figure. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (and Golding's translation thereof) presents her story with a significant bias. In this translation, Medusa's transformation into the man-freezing and snake-haired Gorgon is a deserved punishment meted out for violating the purity the temple where Poseidon raped her. This misogynistically inflected version of the myth retains the dual implications of the original, such that Medusa is at once woman and un-woman, beautiful and ugly, damned and "abused" (4.972). Indeed, Golding's Perseus first describes her as "most bewtiful," such that "many suters unto hir did earnestly resort," but then suggests that her sexual allure is nullified by the transformation (4.970–971). Soaked in blood, Perseus describes how men now turn away from "Medusas ougly head" (5.316), now crowned by Chthonic snakes and capable of turning men to stone, her body and beauty rendered ugly, unworthy of sexual appreciation and therefore un-feminine.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>87</sup> Recalling menopause and the witches; sexiness and sexual viability is seen as an essential defining factor of womanhood. To be deprived of her suitors therefore similarly divests Medusa of her femininity.

The symbolism of the myth is bifurcated. On the one hand, Medusa is a beautiful and vulnerable woman whose body is established as a site for sexual exploitation. On the other, she is saved from repeated exploitation via her transformation into a monster – an explicitly feminine yet un-woman monster capable of literally turning men to stone, sexually neutering them in a state of what might be termed impotent priapism.

She meets her end ironically; Perseus, a son of Poseidon, symbolically repeats the rape that initiated Medusa's transformation, beheading her and using her body and power for his own martial and marital gratification. Perseus kills the sea snake Cetus, marries its victim, Andromeda, and uses the Gorgon's head to vanquish her previous suitor, Phineas. Medusa's mythological body is a symbolic site, simultaneously representing female weakness at the hands of male exploitation and male subjugation at the hands of female rage and power.

Macduff's horror at the scene thus further functions as an inversion of Lady Macbeth's own desired gender transformation or inter-sexuality. Because the landscape of *Macbeth* primes us to equate maleness with violence, the gentle meekness of a leader like Duncan, which inspires in Macbeth "pity, like a newborn babe," can be understood as femaleness (1.7.21). In other words, Duncan, like Lady Macbeth, is gender-disordered. In the chaotic moments after the discovery of the regicide, Macbeth discloses his "violent love" for Duncan - the masculine love that pushes him to slaughter the guards in spite of reason. Graphically and sensuously describing the body of Duncan, Macbeth says:

Here lay Duncan,  
His silver skin laced with his golden blood;  
And his gash'd stabs look'd like a Breach in nature  
For ruin's wasteful entrance. (2.3.103–7)

This profusion of violent love for Duncan's "breached" body, penetrated and "gash'd" by ruin, an affront to nature, symbolically suggests a rape.<sup>88</sup> Macduff's claim that Duncan is "a new Gorgon" may thus conflate the rape of Medusa with that of the king, implying, as Adelman has argued, 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 was 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.<sup>89</sup>

While Duncan and his sons are revealed by the comparison as unworthy leaders, given their vulnerability to femininity and their unnaturally breached or penetrated bodies, Lady Macbeth's appellation of "new Gorgon" and her "unsexing" both operate to propose her own body as an alternative to Duncan's weakened one, positioning her as ambiguously gendered or sexed: a Gorgonized woman.

Therefore, Macduff's evocative and mythopoetic language operates on multiple levels. Duncan's feminized and metaphorically raped body is a sight too horrible to comprehend without devastation, the king's body functioning as the metaphysical battleground of gender dynamics within the play. Shakespeare's subtle framing of Lady Macbeth as the Gorgon, conveyed through the proximity of her arrival to Macduff's reference, identifies her with the mythologically female monster infamous for killing men by freezing them in place with a lethal gaze.<sup>90</sup>

Taken in conjunction with Lady Macbeth's own powerful identification with motherhood, the projection of the Medusa myth onto her body is significant. Shakespeare

---

<sup>88</sup> Tassi, "The 'new Gorgon,'" 156.

<sup>89</sup> Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers*, 133.

<sup>90</sup> This obvious inversion of the male gaze is likewise interesting; Medusa effectively turns the male gaze back onto her interlopers, turning them into stone as punishment for looking at her. Lady Macbeth's metaphorical gaze might be implied to do something similar - freezing men in place in terms of autonomy.

contextually nominates Lady Macbeth as an alternative candidate for power, even regency, while locating that power in a liminally gendered space. She is at once maternal (therefore sexually experienced) and sexually repulsive; at once feminine and unsexed; at once vulnerable to symbolic or literal rape by male figures and destabilizing to masculine power; at once untouchable and exploitable.

## **CHAPTER TWO THE LADY'S DEATH: SLEEP, BLOOD, and MADNESS**

Lady Macbeth's catachrestic gendering and the ambiguity of her power also manifest in her culminating inability to purify or absolve herself. She becomes and remains miasmatic: stained and doomed by both her deeds and her damning affiliation with Medusa, Clytemnestra, and the Furies - all female figures who meet their ends at the hands of patriarchy. Her guilt, and the guilt implied by the classical figures whose behavior and motifs she inherits, overwhelm her. She goes mad from sleeplessness, falling prey to the one most terrifying punishments wrought by the Furies. Indeed, inadvertently evoking the Furies, Lady Macbeth at first wears their fearsome legacy like armor, embodying their feminine power to enact a kind of divine justice, as Clytemnestra does before her. Yet, if the first four acts of *Macbeth* cast Lady Macbeth as a sort of early modern Fury, modeled after Clytemnestra or Medusa, the fifth act transforms her into their victim, a sort of Orestes: at the mercy of patriarchal structures, raving, sleepless, hounded by her own guilt and irrevocably blood-stained hands.

### “Sleep No More”<sup>91</sup>: Unsexing Masculinity, Infirmary, and Sleep

In antiquity, the Furies were associated with punishment, rage, and insomnia or nightmares. They might be called upon to drive murderers insane, as in the case of Orestes, or “in order that they might curse a woman with sleeplessness, as a spell in a late papyrus requests Erinys [the Furies] to do.”<sup>92</sup> This ancient association between the Furies, guilt, and insomnia persists into early modernity. Thomas Rogers’ 1576 medical text, *A Philosophical Discourse, Entitled, The Anatomy of the Mind*, discusses the causes and symptoms of fear. Rogers writes that fear causes “retributive delusions” and occurs in people, like “Orestes . . . cruelly tormented by his mother’s furies,” whose

Consciences will not suffer to be at quiet, but continually object unto their senses most horrible sights of strange things which will at no time suffer them to be at rest but continually assault them and seem to take vengeance for their transgressing.<sup>93</sup>

Likewise, in his 1591 text, *Catharos. Diogenes in his Singularity*, Thomas Lodge identifies “the furies that agitated Orestes” as nightmares that “will break thy sleeps because thy conscience beats thy brain and procures thy bane.”<sup>94</sup> Robert Miola identifies Anglican minister Thomas Scott who, in a sermon on repentance and absolution, discusses “frantic Orestes of whom mention is made in Euripides,” who “looked in his book and there he found written, ‘Blood will have blood,’” and thereupon, though he was acquit by the law, he presently ran mad.”<sup>95</sup> Miola notes that this “ancient Orestes appears to be reading the same book as Shakespeare’s later Macbeth,” who feverishly muses on revenge, saying that “It will have blood, they say; blood will

---

<sup>91</sup> 2.2.35.

<sup>92</sup> Sara Iles Johnston *Restless Dead Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 271.

<sup>93</sup> Thomas Rogers, *A philosophicall discourse, entituled, The anatomie of the minde. Nevylie made and set forth by T.R* (London: John Charelwood for Andrew Maunsell, 1576), 36

<sup>94</sup> Thomas Lodge *Catharos. Diogenes in his Singularity* (London: William Hoskins, 1591), 32

<sup>95</sup> Scott, page 3; Miola, “Representing Orestes’ Revenge,” 153.

have blood” (3.4.123).<sup>96</sup> These medical and philosophical texts intimately link Orestes and the Furies outside of mythopoesis, utilizing the mythic structure as a medical paradigm beyond mythopoetic bounds. Thus, Orestes served not only as an archetype of early modern guilt and vengeance, informing Shakespeare’s depictions of Lord and Lady Macbeth, but as a primary model for psychosomatic illness derived from a conscience ravaged by the Furies, suffering from madness, sleeplessness, and nightmares.<sup>97</sup>

Yet, despite psychosomatic symptoms of a guilty, blood-soaked conscience shared in common, Orestes and Lady Macbeth differ significantly in several ways. Despite the fact that Orestes himself committed the murder, he is able to purify himself, to literally wash his hands clean of blood. Orestes finds divine and psychological absolution in the face of his crime, legally defending himself in a court of law. Lady Macbeth does not, cannot, and dies for it.

Evidence of Lady Macbeth’s inability to cleanse herself first manifests in a reference to madness and insomnia immediately after the murder of Duncan. In the lines that follow Duncan’s death, Lady Macbeth articulates her own eventual torture at the hands of guilt, which is precisely identical to the torture meted out by the Furies both to Orestes and to Clytemnestra before him. These torments also directly map onto the symptoms of guilt and psychosomatic anguish illustrated by early modern medical and philosophical texts.

In the aftermath of Duncan’s death, Macbeth recoils in guilt at having killed the king. His shame perturbs Lady Macbeth, who, in an attempt to aid him, prophesies her own fate. She warns him that “These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad” (2.2.33–34). The charged exchange that follows outlines the internal logic of mental health

---

<sup>96</sup> Miola, “Representing Orestes’ Revenge,” 152.

<sup>97</sup> Carol Thomas Neely, ““ Documents in Madness”: Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare’s Tragedies and Early Modern Culture” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.3 (1991): 315-338

within the play and delineated by early modern authors. Simultaneously, it contrasts Lady Macbeth's increasing power against Macbeth's increasing emasculation, creating further divergence between the characters. Macbeth tells her that in the midst of the murder, he thought he heard "a voice cry 'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep' – the innocent sleep" (2.2.35–36). Then, in a rhetorical move that connects sleep with sanity, he defines sleep as that which

knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,  
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,  
Balm of hurt minds. . . (2.2.36–38)

Fearing that he has at once murdered sleep and made himself the victim of sleeplessness, Macbeth emphasizes the early modern link between a clean conscience and sleepfulness, as identified by Rogers and Lodge. Not only does he explicitly equate sleep to an "innocent" thing—that which cures the mind and keeps it whole, sane, and untainted by the deeds of day—but also identifies himself as the assassin thereof. By casting himself as the murderer of "innocent sleep," Macbeth simultaneously and unequivocally denies himself and his Lady any chance at either acquittal for justified murder or, like Orestes before them, deliverance from the stain of guilt via the absolution that sleep offers. He begins to recoil from the task, saying that

I'll go no more:  
I am afraid to think what I have done;  
Look on't again I dare not. (2.2.54–56)

Intuitively sensing the damage done to his own body and psyche by the task, he turns away, both physically and mentally. His fear overwhelms him and intensifies his own sense of conscience, opening him up to the punishments wrought by guilt.

Macbeth's increasing paranoia, paired with the suggestion that he might be driven to hallucination or violent self-harm conveys the sense that he is unstable, that he may no longer be reliable as an agent or a man. This, at least, is how it must seem to Lady Macbeth, who

scathingly reproaches him. Disgusted by his martial impotence, she announces her intention to replace him as primary executor:

Infirm of purpose!  
Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead  
Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood  
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,  
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal;  
For it must seem their guilt. (2.2.57–62)

In a demonstration of red-toothed leadership reminiscent of Clytemnestra, Lady Macbeth supplants Macbeth in the active masculine role. Notably, this occurs at a moment of recursive transferal; just as Lady Macbeth transfers the active role from Macbeth to herself, so she intends to transfer blame from the two of them onto the grooms. She justifies this transition by juxtaposing her apparent sanity, her adult bravery in the face of what she describes as a childishly imagined “painted devil.” Her capability is heightened in contrast to his “infirmity,” a term the *OED* defines not only as limpness of body and action but also “persons, with reference to the mind: Not firm or strong in character or purpose; weak, frail, irresolute. Also of the mind, judgement, etc.” Wielding the phrase both in terms of its phallic associations and its psychological implications, she emasculates Macbeth and emphasizes her own mental acuity and superiority.

He, therefore, not only is cowardly and susceptible to the infirmities of the mind, but has had his manhood challenged and found wanting. The ‘dagger,’ which represents both Macbeth’s masculinity and his ability to act violently (or at all), must instead be seized by and transferred to her. Because Lady Macbeth’s understanding of masculinity is predicated on violence, this phallic transplantation causes her to shift from accessory to agent. By actively seizing the daggers from her husband, she fully inhabits the role and conscience of a murderer, becoming metaphorically transgendered, her un- or re- sexing coming to fruition. By completing her husband’s actions, she

occupies the space intended for his masculine body, inhabiting both it and the consequences of its deeds. She collapses the distinction between herself and Macbeth in both deed and gender, suggesting an inherent, if disruptive, similarity. Simultaneously, she underscores their difference, implying that her coldly rational bravery – that is, her masculinity – reinforces her superiority and power, which until now have been premised on her savage femininity and violent motherhood.

Yet, despite Lady Macbeth's repeated attempts to distinguish herself from her own femininity during the murder scene, the structure of shame, guilt, and pollution proposed in *Macbeth* solidifies her womanhood. When Macbeth later balks at the ghost of Banquo, which no one else can see, Lady Macbeth takes her disdain for his inability to perform masculinity and makes it text. She first dismisses his vision, saying that it

is the very painting of your fear:  
 This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said,  
 Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts,  
 Impostors to true fear, would well become  
 A woman's story at a winter's fire . . . Shame itself! (3.4.64–69)

Lady Macbeth links his fear and shame to this hallucination. In doing so, she equates both with “the air-drawn” dagger that, like the dagger she took, comes to be an insubstantial symbol of his unsubstantiated, phallic masculinity. Identifying his vision and emotional reactions with womanliness—or with his failure to emulate manliness—she asks if he has been “quite unmanned in folly?” (3.4.77). Where she is “unsexed,” he is unmanned. Where her unsexing does not solely make her masculine, but rather enables her to function as an agent in a gory plot, his psychosomatic reactions unman and neuter him, aligning him with early modern femininity. In this way, she seems to regard his psychosomatic reactions to guilt as inextricable from a failure of masculinity, understanding the “horrible sights of strange things,” which Rogers identified with both guilty consciences and Orestes, as specifically unmanly (perhaps even

womanly) suffering. Seen this way, to suffer the punishments meted out for stained hands, by the symbolic Furies, is to be feminine.

It is at this point that Lady Macbeth identifies sleep as the single most important curative to the bloodstains that taint them both, threatening to spread and corrupt their world. The importance of sleep cannot be understated, in either the play or in early modern medical thought. In *The haven of health*, early modern physician Thomas Cogan wrote that “The benefit of sleepe, or the necessity rather needeth no prooffe, for that without it no living creature may long endure.”<sup>98</sup> The extreme consequences of these nightmares is modeled by Macbeth’s own experience, which not only provide a likely analogy for Lady Macbeth’s interior torment but also foreshadow her suicide. Indeed, overwhelmed by his fear and the consequences of his actions, Macbeth is found by the Furies, who infiltrate his sleep and provide a less extreme example of Lady Macbeth’s fate. Despite his wife’s warnings and interventions, which served to redirect the flow of causality, he would rather let the world crumble than

eat our meal in fear and sleep  
In the affliction of these terrible dreams  
That shake us nightly: better be with the dead,  
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,  
Than on the torture of the mind to lie  
In restless ecstasy. (3.2.19-24)

The language of nightmares and restless ecstasy employed by Macbeth implicitly evokes language of texts about Furies; he is driven to distraction, visualizing death as an escape from nightmarish guilt. The furies of guilt hound him relentlessly, robbing of him of peace in a manner viscerally evocative of the mythic beings.

Macbeth’s “restless ecstasy” implicitly references Aeschylus; the language used to describe his suffering at the hands of the Furies serves to invoke the invisible backdrop of

---

<sup>98</sup> Thomas Cogan, *The haven of health* (London: Anne Griffin, 1607), 261.

classical influence. Indeed, Aeschylus' *Choephoroi* highlights the connection between the Furies and hallucinatory nightmares, focusing intently on the psychological consequences of guilt, vengeance, and rage for both Clytemnestra and Orestes. Clytemnestra, explicitly identified with the Furies in the Saint-Ravy *Oresteia* and in early modern texts, suffers dreams, nightmares featuring blood and snakes. The Saint-Ravy *Oresteia* similarly includes Apollo's dire warning, which warns of nightmares and fear:

He also told [me] about the attack of the Furies, drawn from my father's blood; Seeming to see clearly in the dark, eyebrows moving. For she is as a dart out of shadowy hell, falling from the murder of your father. Rage, fear, and futile night will move, terrify, and persecute you throughout the world.<sup>99</sup>

The Furies, so deeply associated with blood and the extraction thereof in payment, also pursue the guilty through sleep, marking them and leaving them writhing, eyes open but seeing nothing.

In the *Oresteia*, and in its later translations, disruptions of sleep and dreaming figure prominently, signaling unrest. As in *Macbeth*, the language in the *Oresteia* used to describe sleep creates "a strong sense of incongruity by inverting traditional epic depictions of dreams and sleep."<sup>100</sup> Introducing the action of *Agamemnon* in every translation, a restless, anxious night Watchman describes how his sleep has been tainted, leaving him crying, unable to rest. Claire Catenaccio argues that *Macbeth* is now watched over - guarded - by fear instead of dreams and "sleep itself, traditionally "sweet," has become for the Watchman a disease for which he must seek a "cure."<sup>101</sup> As in *Macbeth*, the *Oresteia* understands disrupted sleep as a disease, an inversion of its true role as guardian and caretaker of sanity and good health.<sup>102</sup> This perverted

---

<sup>99</sup> Roughly, from "Aliosque clamat impetus furiarum, / sanguine paterno factos. / Videntem clarum supercilium in tenebris versante. / Tenebrosum enim inferorum iaculum / ex parricidis cadentibus in genus. / Et rabies et timor vanus noctis / movet, terret, et persequitur per urbem" (149).

<sup>100</sup> Claire Catenaccio, "Dream as Image and Action in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*." *Greek, Roman, & Byzantine Studies* 51 (2011): 203.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Catenaccio, "Dreams as Image," 204.

depiction of sleep and dreams, which so utterly presages the Macbeth's experiences and fears, communicates subtextually what the Watchman also states openly: all is not well within the silent palace, just as all is not well within castle of Glamis.

It is worth briefly digressing to elaborate on the connection between Clytemnestra and the Furies and thus the implied connection between Clytemnestra and the Watchman's disturbed sleep. The Watchman begins his discussion of sleeplessness by slyly identifying "manhearted" ("γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ" or "cor *virile*") Clytemnestra as the root of his sleeplessness; she commands him to stay awake, standing guard for what he senses are sinister reasons.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, the Saint Ravy *Oresteia* may directly, if somewhat ambiguously, refer to Clytemnestra as a Fury.<sup>104</sup> The Latin either implies that a Fury ushers Orestes back into the home, or that a *specific, epithetical* Fury - that is, Clytemnestra - ushers Orestes in.<sup>105</sup> This interpretation is consistent with a trend suggesting that the early modern imagination more deliberately drew a line between Clytemnestra and the Furies than that drawn in Greek tragedy. In Thomas Goffe's 1613 *The Tragedy of Orestes*, Clytemnestra explicitly refers to herself as a potential Fury, implying her fully actualized self, her true form is, in fact, that of a Fury: "Now I am Clytemnestra right, now I deserve / To adde one more to the three Furies, now" (1.4.83). This explicit connection adds texture and resonance to the idea of Lady Macbeth tortured by dreams, suffering the paradoxically self-inflicted punishment of the Furies, who likewise turned their eyes on Clytemnestra.

<sup>103</sup> In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*; "Ὀδε γὰρ κρατεῖ / γυναικὸς ἀνδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ": "for so commands the woman hoping for a manly heart" (10-11). In the Saint-Ravy *Oresteia*; "Nunc enim imperaturum / Mulieri spero cor virile": "Now commands the woman, hoping for a man's heart" (126).

<sup>104</sup> "Filium infert domum/aedium amiquarum/ luit scelus/tempore celebris erinnyes." Saint-Ravy, *Oresteia*, 161.

<sup>105</sup> The Aeschylean *Oresteia*, on the other hand, has the Furies conducting Orestes into the house; "τέκνον δ' ἐπισφάει δόμοισιν / αἱμάτων παλαιτέρων τίνειν μύσος / χρόνω κλυτὰ βυσσόφρων Ἐρινύς" (649-65): "At last the glorious and deeply-thinking Erinyes brings the child into the house to pay a price for the long-ago stain of blood."

Indeed, the somnambulism that becomes so characteristic of Lady Macbeth invokes Clytemnestra, whose own wakefulness is deeply rooted in dreams, motherhood, and gall. In *Choephoroi*, Clytemnestra desperately sacrifices to the gods, pouring out libations because she is “shaken by dreams and the rousing terrors of the night” (523-4).<sup>106</sup> These dreams, the chorus explains to a fascinated and revolted Orestes, feature Clytemnestra giving birth to a serpent, swaddling it, and nursing it. To her extreme horror, it does not only draw milk, but also clots of blood that could represent the effects of snake venom on human blood.<sup>107</sup> In the early modern period, the clotted blood of Clytemnestra’s breast milk could have suggested the link between menstrual blood, nursing, and poisonous milk - the same link exploited by Shakespeare in his depiction of Lady Macbeth’s bilious breast milk. The connections drawn between dreams, motherhood, and bile are explicit, and are echoed in Lady Macbeth. Further, in both Aeschylus’ original and Saint-Ravy’s translation of the *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra seeks a cure for these dreams through libations, positioning them, as the Watchman does before her, as a disease needing a cure. The prophetic vision of giving birth to the serpent, which Orestes identifies as himself, deeply disturbs Clytemnestra, leaving her sleepless, unstable and open to attack.

In a moment of chilling consonance across millennia, Macbeth identically invokes serpentine imagery. Macbeth tells his Lady that they remain endangered, open to retaliation for the murder of Duncan. They have only “scotch’d the snake, not kill’d it: / She’ll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice / Remains in danger of her former tooth;” the regenerative properties of the snake and its lethal venom promise to jeopardize their status and lives (3.2.15–

---

<sup>106</sup> “Ἐκ τ’ ὄνειράτων / καὶ νυκτιπλάγκτων δειμάτων πεπαλμένη.” In the Saint-Ravy *Oresteia*, Clytemnestra likewise sends libations to the dead because she is drawn out of sleep, damaged by the terrors of night, flying about: “Ex somniis, / et noctu errantium terlicolorum laesa / inferias misit has impia mulier” (158).

<sup>107</sup> Aeschylus, *Libation Bearers*, lines 527-550; Saint-Ravy, *Oresteia*, 157

17). As in the *Oresteia*, danger takes the form of a snake, although the serpent in question is represented with different genders in the Orestes myth and *Macbeth*.<sup>108</sup> Where Clytemnestra links the snake of her dreams with her son, Macbeth's invocation of a female snake emphasizes the links between the animal and the Furies, those embodiments of revenge, while referring to the feminine origins of his actions. In this way, Shakespeare draws on mythical associations with snakes and their feminine nature, providing a gendered and intertextual backdrop to Macbeth's sleepless anxieties.<sup>109</sup>

The snake thus symbolizes the powerful but dangerous influence of female figures upon his deeds. The Macbeths' plague of hallucinations and nightmares receives classical notions of guilt and shame that robustly appear in early modern medical texts. Linking sleeplessness to their actions, particularly in the case of Lady Macbeth, suggests a profound connection to complexly gendered classical figures who were in some manner liable to mental and political instability. Thus, Lady Macbeth's actions served to thoroughly destabilize not only their nation, but also her and her husband's minds and genders; haunted by phallic visions of snakes and daggers, the Lord and Lady find cohort in the classical, gender-flouting regicides, Clytemnestra and Orestes.

**“I Am in Blood”<sup>110</sup>: Embodying Guilt as Pollution, Putrefaction, and Insomnia**

Lady Macbeth's relationship to sleep evokes templates involving the Furies, mirroring Clytemnestra and Orestes' dramatic tradition. Her sleeplessness, however, is further inextricably related to her discussion of and relationship with blood - maternal or otherwise. This relationship draws her closer in structure to Orestes, figuring her as a non-binary, feminine figure of rage

---

<sup>108</sup> Robert S. Miola, “Orestes and the Light of Day,” *Comparative Drama* 51, no. 4 (2017): 592.

<sup>109</sup> Medusa and the Furies are repeatedly described as having snakes for hair. Likewise, Clytemnestra is often described as being, in some sense, snakelike, particularly through association with snakes, dragons, and comparison with Scylla, the snakish six-headed mother of monsters.

<sup>110</sup> 3.3.2

trapped in a masculine paradigm that offers her no recourse. This chapter explores her increasing madness and developing similarity to an Oresteic anti-heroic structure.

Having apparently expropriated Macbeth's masculinity and body, Lady Macbeth also assumes his guilt in a moment that irrevocably stains her and further upends rigid gender expectations. Her hands, she says, "are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (2.2.64–65). She positions herself in relation to him, joining and surpassing him in masculinity; her assertion that her hands are as bloody as his serves to unite them in guilt, while her claim that she would be ashamed to display similar white-heartedness functions to distance her from Macbeth's problematic emotional femininity, which she fundamentally understands as psychological and physical weakness. Indeed, Adelman writes that within the context of *Macbeth*, association with women carries the meaning of 'vulnerability,' "as though vulnerability itself is the taint deriving from woman."<sup>111</sup> However, this revulsion at displaying any cowardice reinforces Lady Macbeth's belief that "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (2.2.33–34). She refuses to allow her heart to be as womanishly white or as cowardly as Macbeth's, refuses to allow "pity, like a newborn babe" (1.7.21) to affect her, choosing instead to kill any inclinations - dashing them, so to speak, on the floor.

Yet, it is this show of apparently masculine bravery that allows the pollution of guilt to indelibly mark her hands and heart. This blending of masculinity and femininity in her undoing point to a failure of the gender binary, a growing irrelevance of any such dichotomy, suggesting that Lady Macbeth's unsexing and Macbeth's unmaning are not simply a matter of exchanged

---

<sup>111</sup> Janet Adelman, "Born of woman: Fantasies of maternal power in *Macbeth*," in *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, ed. by Shirley Nelson Garner, and Madelon Sprengnether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 117.

genders but rather evidence of a more complex dissolution of the gender binary. She is not made more manly in her unsexing, but repositioned in relation to the gender binary, inhabiting a liminal identity enabled by both her femininity and her appropriation of masculinely coded behavior. This unseen and unacknowledged identity contributes to her inability to deeply and psychologically confront deed or stain (and therefore purify herself), dooming her to a slow and ravaging psychological destruction at the hands of the Furies.

Lady Macbeth's admission that her hands "are of your colour" also serves as the first appearance of her red hands with their eventual damned spots. At last, the blood she demands ends up on her hands; she is (metaphorically) dripping with it. This is a motif that echoes descriptions of both Orestes and Clytemnestra, whose hands and deeds are consistently described as red or bloodstained – descriptors that also serve to mark them as polluted, miasmatic. Indeed, both their psychological pollution and their manual bloodiness, which indicate the direct role they take in murder, infiltrate many the adaptations of the Orestes story that Shakespeare likely drew from. Seneca's *Agamemnon* evocatively describes Clytemnestra as having "hands still soaked with fresh blood."<sup>112</sup> John Studley's 1566 translation of Seneca's play emphasizes the carnage, describing Clytemnestra's "gory handes new bathed in blood / as yet they be not drye."<sup>113</sup> Likewise, the *Eumenides* section of the Saint-Ravy *Oresteia* describes Orestes as "polluted by blood, his hands dripping."<sup>114</sup> The stain of blood on both their hands serves as a mark of their wrongdoing, shame, and guilt, predicating their psychosomatic suffering.

Thus, when Lady Macbeth shares in the murder, marking her hands with blood, she simultaneously ensures that she will be ravaged by the Furies' torments. Her transition from

---

<sup>112</sup> Seneca, *Agamemnon*, 949; "Manus recenti sanguine etiamnunc madent"

<sup>113</sup> Studley, *Agamemnon*, 2.2.345.

<sup>114</sup> Saint-Ravy, *Oresteia*, 178; "Pollutum sanguine, pandentem manus."

murder to bloodstained hands to torment signals the symbolic backdrop of the Furies, looming behind the action in *Macbeth*. This torment, however, depends on her inability to purify herself of pollution, although she tries. Hearing a knocking at the door, she tells Macbeth that

A little water clears us of this deed.  
How easy is it, then! Your constancy  
Hath left you unattended. (2.2.66–69)

In a moment of terrible irony, Lady Macbeth attempts to use a little water to clear their hands of both blood and deed, wishfully commenting on the apparent ease of purification. Unable to grasp the drastic, sleep-killing consequences of her actions, she speaks patronizingly to Macbeth, directing his behavior and scolding him, addressing him in the manner of a mother speaking to a young, child. In this way, she reiterates her authority over him, reverting to maternal language as an expression of power. Yet the blood and the deed are indelible, irremovable and unredeemable. The knocking Lord and Lady Macbeth hear at the door, which prompts her to issue this series of instructions, thus metaphorically comes to represent guilt, the furies, and the promise of her own madness. Indeed, this act of attempted purification later comes to define her madness, inextricably attaching guilt to the stains of blood and absolution to purification, invoking Orestes and Clytemnestra and importing shadowy echoes of their stories into the world of the play.

Finally incapacitated by her guilt, her violent complicity, and actively bloody role she played in securing her husband's crown, Lady Macbeth wanders the halls of her home, wringing her hands. A doctor called to inspect her observes her, asking her maid "What is it she does now? Look, how she rubs her hands" (5.2.19). The maid responds that "It is an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands: I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour" (5.2.20–22). As if in concurrence, Lady Macbeth remarks "Yet here's a spot" (5.2.23). Her insanity is directly connected to the invisible stain of blood on her hand, highlighting the impact of pollution or polluted acts upon the body of Lady Macbeth. The contamination of Lady

Macbeth's soul and body manifests in the spots of blood that she cannot ease or purify, a motif that echoes classical archetypes regarding blood, redemption, and pollution within the *Oresteia*.

The concept of *miasma* or pollution in the *Oresteia*, as in Greek myth and culture in general, was inextricably linked to blood and wild feminine figures in need of controlling. Towards the end of the *Oresteia*, we learn that although Orestes has been purified by Apollo at Delphi, the Furies are still able to pursue him to Athens because he leaves a trail of blood - the symbol of his pollution. Once there, they threaten, in turn, to irreversibly pollute the fields of Athens, poisoning them so that they may never again bear fruit; in other words, extending Orestes' pollution to the whole of Athens. For the ancient Greeks, pollution in an individual or a group was caused by a desecrating, desecrated act: the spilling of blood or a homicide.<sup>115</sup> Further, this pollution had the unmitigated potential to spread crime, shame, and dishonor like a disease. Therefore, miasmatic acts were considered under a separate set of laws scripted to stop the potential spread of contagious pollution. The bearer was required to be purified, either through ritual, legal acquittal, or death. Until such purification could be achieved, the bearer of pollution was indelibly stained, specifically by blood. Like the Furies, *miasma* and its potential to spread were associated with blood, both real and metaphorical. As Margaret Visser writes,

The image which lay behind the fear of the spread of crime through contagion, just as surely as the image of the "spot" upon honor previously immaculate, was of actual physical blood, staining and spreading and demanding attention. Actual physical blood was shed in the beginning; it spattered on the hands of the killer, and there it remained, only now endowed with the power to infect whoever touched it. This contagious blood was invisible, but . . . it could stain anyone it touched, good or bad.<sup>116</sup>

Pollution in classical Greece, much like, as we shall see, maternal/menstrual influence in early modern England, was contagious, marked by blood, and inevitable.

---

<sup>115</sup> Margaret Visser, "Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45:2 (1984): 193

<sup>116</sup> Visser, "Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens," 198.

Lady Macbeth's pollution and subsequent madness are irrevocably linked to blood not only through classical references but through early modern somatic terminology related to menstruation. Contrasting with her repeated linguistic assertions of motherhood, Lady Macbeth's initial request to be "unsexed" is accompanied by a coded request for amenorrhea. As Jenijoy La Belle argues, when Lady Macbeth asks that "no compunctious visitings of Nature" shake her "fell purpose," she refers not only to movements towards natural or maternal feelings of pity, but also to menstrual cycles.<sup>117</sup> La Belle points to Thomas Brugis who, in his 1652 *Vade Mecum: Or, A Companion For A Chyrurgion*, writes about "the overmuch flowing of womens naturall visits," which the *OED* defines as "occurrences of menstruation."<sup>118</sup> This biological framework adds new depth to earlier images in Lady Macbeth's speech; when she pleads, "make thicke my blood, / Stop up th' access and passage to remorse," she may simultaneously be pleading for the flow of menstruation to cease, for her genitalia (a more literal representation of femininity) to be literally as well as metaphorically obstructed.<sup>119</sup> Because the early modern female body might be described as "leaky, permeable, and unruly, the ideal male body was sealed, controlled, and self-governed."<sup>120</sup> Thus, by intervening in her menstruation, Lady Macbeth distances herself from the biological processes of womanhood, a distancing framed as an unnatural intervention in feminine existence - namely, the cessation of fertility cycles or pregnancy.

---

<sup>117</sup> Jenijoy La Belle, "'A Strange Infirmity': Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31:3 (1980): 383.

<sup>118</sup> Thomas Brugis, *Vade Mecum: Or, A Companion For A Chyrurgion* (London: Thomas Williams, 1652): 113. See also: Brugis, *The Marrow of Physicke* (1640), where the author refers to "the retention of Womens Visits."

<sup>119</sup> La Belle, "Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhea," 382; The term "passage" can be understood as a Renaissance medical term for the path through which uterine blood is discharged. In his 1560 medical text, *The Byrth of Mankynde, otherwyse named the Womans Booke*, Thomas Raynalde identifies it as such, writing "The necke of this wombe, otherwise callyd the womans privite, we wyll call the womb passage, or the privy passage."

<sup>120</sup> Alanna Nissen, "Transgression, Pollution, Deformity, Bewitchment: Menstruation and Supernatural Threat in Late Medieval and Early Modern England, 1250 - 1750." (Master's Thesis, State University of New York Empire State College, 2017); Peggy McCracken, *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature, Middle Ages Series* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 14.

The process of menstruation was seen as a necessary and positive means of purification, through which the humors could be rebalanced and pollution expelled.<sup>121</sup> However, this model depends on the expulsion - rather than the retention - of blood.<sup>122</sup> Thus, early modern medical texts identify the retention of menstrual blood, the thickening and stopping up of blood and one possible consequence of Lady Macbeth's unnatural intervention, as putrefactory and polluting. In *The Marrow of Physicke*, Brugis writes of "menstruous fluxe," stating that "blood restrained putrifies," causing systemic dysregulation - including, it should be mentioned, insomnia.<sup>123</sup> Echoing Lady Macbeth's call for thickened blood and obstruction of passage, *Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse* notes that in the case of a "suppression of the Termes [menstruation]," blood thickens, coagulates, and putrefies. It becomes "viscuous and grosse, condensing and binding up the passages, that it cannot flow forth."<sup>124</sup> In a 1656 midwife's compendium, *The Compleat Midwife's Practice Enlarged, In the most weighty and high concernments of the Birth of Man*, the author notes that such a stoppage of menstruation would result in an infected womb, "the burden of putrified blood."<sup>125</sup> The thickening of Lady Macbeth's blood may therefore be read as biologically, psychosomatically causal to her later pollution and inability to cleanse.

---

<sup>121</sup> Michael Stolberg, "The Monthly Malady: A History of Premenstrual Suffering." *Medical History* 44, no. 3 (2000): 311; See also Valeria Finucci & Kevin Brownlee Finucci, Valeria, and Brownlee, Kevin. *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction in Literature and History from Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001; Patricia Crawford, "Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past & Present*, no. 91 (1981): 50; Michael Stolberg, "Menstruation and Sexual Difference in Early Modern Medicine," in *Menstruation: A Cultural History*, ed. Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie (New York: Palgrave, 2005), 91; Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 17.

<sup>122</sup> There were two models of menstruation: cathartic and plethoric. The cathartic model envisioned menstruation as a means of expelling impurities, while the plethoric model (based on the presumption of female inferiority) understood menstruation as the removal of an excess of blood.

<sup>123</sup> Thomas Brugis, *The Marrow of Physicke*, 69

<sup>124</sup> Sadler, *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse*, 15

<sup>125</sup> Thomas Chamberlayne, *The Compleat Midwife's Practice Enlarged, In the most weighty and high concernments of the Birth of Man*, 19

Of course, the cessation of menstruation may also be achieved by natural means, namely, through pregnancy, which likewise would “stop up the access and passage to remorse.” Given Lady Macbeth’s constant use of maternal language to frame her actions, deviant or otherwise (as in the case of her dashed infant and her call for bilious breast milk), as well as her consistent depiction as the birther or nurturer of Macbeth’s ambitions and deeds, this may be a more internally consistent perspective. However, because much of the early modern medical cohort believed that fetuses were nourished with menstrual blood in utero, the polluting effects of menstrual blood remain salient.<sup>126</sup> While the process of menstruating itself was seen as both positive and necessary, early modern texts frequently identify menstrual blood itself as excrementary: inherently polluted and polluting. Menstrual blood was, and still is, constructed as filth and menstruation as problematic (if necessary) leaking, so that men might confidently separate themselves from it to establish their own bodies as, to borrow a phrase from Kristeva, “clean and proper.”<sup>127</sup> In the 1615 medical text *Mikrokosmographia*, author and physician Helkiah Crooke suggests that menstrual blood is impure, redundant, and diseased. He summarizes his beliefs plainly: “It is an excrement.”<sup>128</sup>

The dissonant early modern belief that menstrual blood was polluted and that fetuses consumed it from conception suggests that motherhood and mothers had the capacity to be inherently poisonous. This fear is expressed in John Oliver’s *Present for Teeming Women*, a set of instructions and meditations for women to use in labor. Printed and published by two women, the manual is written from the perspective of a pregnant woman, who at one point anxiously

---

<sup>126</sup> Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 80.

<sup>127</sup> Paster, *The Body Embarrassed*, 24; Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 203.

<sup>128</sup> Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia* (London: William Iaggard: 1615), 290.

describes the physical and spiritual impact her own polluted blood must have upon her infant, fearing that she corrupts it:

Oh how sad & deplorable are those deeper sicknesses and maladies, which I have brought upon it! Its body partaking of my substance, partakes unavoidably of my natural pollution. Its Soul, though it come immediately from the Father of Spirits, yet (I know not how) is upon its infusion into this tender infant, subjected to the common misery of the Children of Adam; who having lost the image and likeness of God, sinne and corruption must needs follow. I am an unclean vessel, and how can any clean thing come out of me?<sup>129</sup>

If, as I have suggested before, Lady Macbeth is the metaphorical mother of Macbeth's ambitions and deeds, then it is not merely her galled milk that poisons him, but also her very blood that pollutes these ambitions and deeds. Thus, when she partakes more completely in the act, merging his ambitions, power, and gender expression more completely with her own, she pollutes and poisons herself. Her thickened blood (whether 'retained' or fed to a symbolic infant) is that which nourishes the act and causes the blood of the guards to stick so indelibly to her hands. The contamination of Lady Macbeth's blood in conjunction with her violent aspirations are central to her arc, culminating in her stained hands and obsessive hand-washing. Likewise, this hand-washing, this insatiable urge towards purification, corresponds to her sleepwalking.

At the point of the night "almost at odds with morning, which is which," Macbeth warns his wife that "blood shall have blood" (3.4.128, 133). This Oresteian exchange explicitly occurs at a transitory time that Shakespeare identifies by its neitherness, for its incomprehensibility, mirroring the incomprehensibility of Lady Macbeth's fate and identity, devolves into Macbeth's musings on how far gone he is, saying, "I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / . . . Strange things I have in head, that will to hand; / Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd." His lady responds medicinally; "You lack the season of all natures, sleep" (4.3.142–

---

<sup>129</sup> John Oliver, *A present to be given to teeming women, by their husbands, or friends. Containing directions for women with child* (London: Sarah Griffin, 1616), 53-54.

147). Blood is deeply and inextricably connected to sleeplessness here, linked synecdochally through the psychosomatic consequences of pollution. The blood referenced by Macbeth refers more directly to the blood he himself has wrought - that which he leached at knifepoint from the murdered king, his guards, and Banquo. However, since the bloodiness of these deeds are metaphorically birthed by Lady Macbeth, the river of blood into which Macbeth has stepped so far can be symbolically understood as *her* blood - the blood of pollution and disease, subtextually linked to the putrefied blood of her menstrual cycle that, in being “made thick” so as to fulfill the witches’ prophecy, frames the action of the play. Indeed, classical concerns about bloody miasma might be justifiably compared to early modern anxieties regarding menstrual putrefaction and the potential spread of immorality and corruption via maternal influence - in utero, through nursing, or through ideological impact. The language of blood, pollution, and nightmares in Macbeth repeatedly evokes language of texts about Furies, Clytemnestra, and Orestes, increasingly linking Lady Macbeth to the latter.

**“Minister to a mind diseased”:<sup>130</sup> Transgressive Purity, Orestes, and Lady Macbeth**

The ideological connection between blood, pollution, and nightmares taken in conjunction with the textual connection made between the former motifs and gender complicates the continuum of malevolence seemingly embodied in Lady Macbeth’s contamination. Because she has neither recourse nor patronage, Lady Macbeth kills herself, succumbing to the consequences of pollution and the sleeping frenzy that identify her with classical predecessors. In so doing, Shakespeare depicts her as an inverted Orestes, eliding the roles of poisonous mother and corrupted hero.

---

<sup>130</sup> 5.3.42

Indeed, the early modern imagination was gripped by Orestes.<sup>131</sup> No less than four early modern plays explore this character, before and after Shakespeare, including Thomas Pickering's 1567 *Horestes*, the first revenge play in English; the authorless 1568 play commissioned by the Revels Office, *Prodigality*; Thomas Dekker and Henry Chettle's lost 1599 play *The Tragedy of Agamemnon or Orestes Furens*; and Thomas Goffe's 1633 *The Tragedy of Orestes*.<sup>132</sup> These plays all (allegedly) emphasize key features of the myth, particularly, as Miola writes, "the struggle with conscience and divine mandate, the madness, either cause or consequence of action, and the matricide."<sup>133</sup> This preoccupation with Orestes – and particularly with his madness and sleeplessness – also figured largely in early modern medical and philosophical texts, which discussed insomnia, nightmares, and hallucinations as consequences of guilt. These texts offer an illuminating view regarding the madness of Lady Macbeth, so thoroughly prefigured by the torment of Orestes by the Furies, as outlined in the plays of Aeschylus and Euripides.

Lady Macbeth visualizes her shame as pollution and then actualizes death as an escape from nightmarish guilt. The consequences she eventually faces are identical to Orestes' punishments; Lady Macbeth eventually shares his increasing frenzy (depicted in the *Oresteia* and elsewhere), his disturbed, heated sleep, and his torture at the hands of the Furies - which, as we have seen, often symbolize psychological guilt in early modern medical literature.<sup>134</sup> Goffe's

---

<sup>131</sup> Miola, "Orestes and the Light of Day," 595.

<sup>132</sup> Martin Wiggins, *British Drama 1533-1642: A Catalogue: V. II: 1567-1589* (Oxford: Oxford U. Press, 2012), 21.

<sup>133</sup> Robert S. Miola, "Representing Orestes' Revenge," *Classical Receptions Journal* 9 (2017): 147.

<sup>134</sup> There are academic disagreements about the Furies' physical presence in classical literature. Some argue that the Furies come for retribution, and that their appearance is the just *consequence* of a wrongful deed (see Maxwell-Stuart). Others imply that the Furies are, in fact, manifestations of internal guilt. In other words, there's some dissent regarding the physicality or divinity of the Furies (See Maxwell-Stuart, Iles, and Matheson). Because they are functionally invisible to all but the hunted (save for in *Eumenides*), there is some suggestion that they do not actually exist. In this way, they can be seen as more analogous to early modern representations in medical literature in the sense that they are manifestations of guilt, rather than beings in and of themselves.

*Tragedie of Orestes* provides an early modern comparison. Goffe's Orestes echoes Macbeth's words and Lady Macbeth's behavior, asking "What horrid dreams affright me? I see naught / That I should feare, and yet me thinks I feare" (1.5.1–2). Indeed, this Orestes' nocturnal suffering directly parallels Lady Macbeth's, and both discomfort is characterized by the same wide-eyed senselessness described to the Aeschylean Orestes by Apollo in the Saint-Ravy *Oresteia*, her eyebrows moving, but her eyes seeing nothing. As the doctor notes, "her eyes are open" but "their sense is shut" (5.1.17–18).

As Visser argues, because pollution belongs to "what is called a "shame culture" even though it is a different mechanism from that of shame," Lady Macbeth's pollutedness and shame engender similar consequences to those suffered by Orestes and Clytemnestra.<sup>135</sup> Like both Orestes and Clytemnestra, Lady Macbeth manifests shame psychosomatically, by hallucinating, speaking nonsensically, and sleepwalking. She shares with Clytemnestra the stains of blood and the slow dissembling of her mental faculties. In the classical texts available to Shakespeare, these are the punishments doled out by the Furies, who are deeply associated with madness. Euripides' *Orestes* describes the titular character as obsessively identifying the root of his corruption, hallucinating goddesses with snakes for hair (*Or.*, 255–70), having succumbed to a wasting sickness caused by his mother's blood and the Furies (*Or.*, 35), for which true sleep is the only cure (*Or.*, 211). *Iphigenia in Tauris* depicts a similarly obsessive, manic Orestes on the edge of sanity, howling like a dog, and lashing out at visions of Clytemnestra carried in the arms of a Fury (*I.*, 285–290).

Shakespeare echoes these depictions in Lady Macbeth, conveying a similar sense of scope, devastation, and tragedy. Her madness is "presented as a sharp break with earlier

---

<sup>135</sup> Visser, "Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens," 201

appearances in which she has mostly been in control of herself and events,” and is characterized by a violent self-abnegation:<sup>136</sup>

Out, damned spot! out, I say!--One: two: why,  
then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky!--Fie, my  
lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we  
fear who knows it, when none can call our power to  
account?--Yet who would have thought the old man  
to have had so much blood in him. . . .  
The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?--  
What, will these hands ne'er be clean?--No more o'  
that, my lord, no more o' that: you mar all with  
this starting. (5.1.25–31)

Lady Macbeth's compulsive and senseless attempts to purify herself, which mirror Orestes' own obsessions, are layered with nursery rhymes, tautologies, and references to earlier motivations. She is, in a sense, re-living her arc within the play, perseverating on her regret, on her husband's apparent fear, on the amount of blood Malcom lost, even on Macduff's wife, slaughtered with her children. Alienated from herself, trapped in emotional extremity, and desperate to wash the sight and smell of blood off her hands, Lady Macbeth is contaminated and delusional.<sup>137</sup> The Furies—so associated with the devastation of mental faculties in both classical and early modern literature—have irreversibly scented her, identifying the trail of blood that marks her contamination.

However, where Orestes can clean and absolve himself, thereby evading the final consequences of the Furies' pursuit, she cannot. This too can be traced to the omnipresent

---

<sup>136</sup> Neely, *Distracted Subjects*, 56.

<sup>137</sup> Neely, *Distracted Subjects*, 57. See also Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which attributes sleep-walking to a diseased mind: “A most frequent and ordinary cause of Melancholy . . . this thunder and lightning of perturbation [of mind], which causeth such violent and speedy alterations in this our Microcosme . . . For as the Body works upon the minde, by his bad humours, troubling the Spirits, sending grosse fumes into the Braine; and so per consequens disturbing the Soule, and all the faculties of it, . . . with feare, sorrow, &c. which are ordinary symptoms of this Disease: so on the other side, the minde most effectually workes upon the Body, producing by his passions and perturbations, miraculous alterations; as Melancholy, despaire, cruell diseases, and sometimes death it selfe” (Burton 1.2.2.7; 1:246-247)

background of mythical precedent, which ensures that Shakespeare's depiction of Lady Macbeth's madness contains within it a complex negotiation of gender. Orestes' masculinity is never called into question; rather, it is affirmed by a court of law that legitimizes patrilineage and patriarchal structures in general. His identity poses no toxic threat to society. Lady Macbeth's identity, on the other hand, lies at the crux of typically masculine and typically feminine traits. Even as she repeatedly affirms her masculine superiority and disdain for womanly fears, she constantly affirms her maternal orientation and her femininity.<sup>138</sup>

In other words, Lady Macbeth is permanently marked by the fact that she performs a novel form of gender expression that is not purely masculine or feminine, although she plays with both extremes. Her erstwhile affiliation with feminine archetypes of rage and violence - the Furies, Medusa, Medea, and Clytemnestra - is pitted against her apparent similarity with Orestes. She occupies the masculine Greek-heroic role, suffering the consequences of her actions in the same manner as Orestes. Some have argued that Orestes is an "anomalous" male in that, instead of departing, he returns home at puberty.<sup>139</sup> However, through his patronage by Apollo and his diametric positioning against the feminine principle (symbolized by the Furies and Clytemnestra alike), Orestes becomes an archetype of, if not masculinity, then patriarchy. Lady Macbeth's desperate attempts to purify herself, to escape her metaphorical Furies, also serve to elide her with Orestes and his ultimately masculine heroics. She then verbally substantiates her own masculinity through a continual denigration of Macbeth's failure to be brave and thus masculine;

---

<sup>138</sup> Other early modern texts imply that Lady Macbeth's surrender to her hallucinations and nightmares render her more feminine. Goffe's *Orestes* casts an illuminating light on the question of nightmares. In Goffe's imagination, which we can presume to be somewhat influenced by Shakespeare's writings, Orestes says of his nightmares, "But I turne woman now, O I raue out" (1.5.48). Here, nightmares are understood as a feminine and feminizing sickness.

<sup>139</sup> Froma Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*," in *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 110

her bravery, referenced here in mocking comparison, suggests that she's "so much more the man" than her husband will ever be, and more of a soldier (1.7.51).

By positioning herself above her husband in masculinity and navigating a role more similar to Orestes', she moves away from a categorical feminine, maternal role. Even as Lady Macbeth shares Clytemnestra's afflictions, she verbally distances herself from the other regicide. She steps away from Medea and Medusa. She even seems to step away from the Furies; she is no longer the pursuer, the inciter, or the punisher. She, like Orestes, is the pursued bearer of pollution.

Despite Lady Macbeth's performative proximity to Orestes and masculinity, her powerful affiliation with maternity and archetypes of the rageful feminine, as well as the literal stains of blood that mark her, complicate the effects of pollution upon her. Indeed, the mythical background behind *Macbeth* means that Lady Macbeth's preoccupation with the bloodstains, her awareness of her own polluted-ness has additional connotations. As a woman pursued by the Furies, clearly suffering from the ramifications of pollution as a result of bloodshed—including nightmares, which are in the early modern period attributed to the Furies and compared to Orestes' experiences—Lady Macbeth serves as an inversion of Orestes.

Although she did not physically perpetrate the killing that caused the pollution, she catalyzed the violence. Without Lady Macbeth, there is no murder, no usurpation of the throne or violence. Without her, there is nothing. As Froma Zeitlin argues is the case for the *Oresteia*, "Every issue, every action stems from the female, so that she serves as the catalyst of events even as she is the main object of inquiry."<sup>140</sup> Thus, Lady Macbeth (as opposed to her husband) is polluted, marked by the spilling of blood. She is at once the victim and the Fury; at once Orestes

---

<sup>140</sup> Froma Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny," 88

and Clytemnestra. Her role as an agent of destabilization (through her ability to both claim masculinity by inciting violence and intercede in patrilineage as an empowered maternal figure) makes her, like the Furies before her, fundamentally incompatible with the patriarchy in which she lives.<sup>141</sup>

But Lady Macbeth's contamination is not merely in her imagined bloodiness (menstrual or otherwise), although that is the literal evidence thereof. Her contagion is located her appropriated masculine behavior and active to destabilization of society. Her madness is symptomatic of this pollution and of her liability; like the double-edged, "pathological Mother, she only breeds diseases and "unnatural troubles," negatively inviting paternalistic governance."<sup>142</sup> Thus, Lady Macbeth's pollution is rooted in her unsexing, in the behavior and category elisions that make her impossible to sex by traditional early modern, or even contemporary, standards. More ambiguously overlapping than polarized, the masculine and feminine—the soldier and the demonized, "hysterical" mother—are metonymically linked, and the transformation of Lady Macbeth further merges the two categories.<sup>143</sup> In this way, Shakespeare marks her as a polluting or corrupting factor; she herself is a pollutant, a potent visible threat that has already undermined patriarchal integrity. And, since in both classical Athens and early modern England, miasma, pollution, and sickness could leap from one person to contaminate the whole, she is incalculably dangerous.<sup>144</sup> Her ability to freely navigate and reconstruct the gender binary, breaking down the rigidity thereof, makes her a possible contagion that, if spread, would destabilize the hegemonies that sustain the patriarchy as a whole.

---

<sup>141</sup> Zeitlin, "The Dynamics of Misogyny," 90.

<sup>142</sup> Levin, "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," 38.

<sup>143</sup> Levin, "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," 48.

<sup>144</sup> Visser, "Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens," 9.

Further, because Lady Macbeth poses this danger to patriarchal structures—by willfully destabilizing society and negotiating a space for herself outside of the patriarchal binary wherein she maintains a range of empowered traits that might enable her to disrupt masculinity and patrilineage—she is denied patronage. She is afforded no aid from the patriarchy; there is no Apollo, swooping down from on high to defend her in a court of law. She is indefensible and irredeemable because there is no alternative system to which she can resort in order to defend herself. Orestes, on the other hand, receives both patronage and absolution in a court of law that simultaneously affirms the dominance and righteousness of the patriarchy.<sup>145</sup> Lady Macbeth has no patronage, only the promises made by three witches to a man, her husband, whose identity fully subsumes her own; she has no nominal identification other than his name and her gender. Where he can dispossess the blood on his hands, she cannot, in part because, as a woman, she is always producing or tainted by unclean blood.<sup>146</sup> In other words, it is Orestes' patronage by patriarchy that enables his freedom whereas Lady Macbeth, as an intrinsically feminine (or anti-patriarchal) force, is the agent of escalation and the provocateur whose responses “invariably exceed the provocation offered by the male [i.e. Macbeth] and creates a still more violent disequilibrium that brings society to a standstill.”<sup>147</sup>

Thus, unlike Orestes who, acquitted in court and purified by divine intervention, is able to wash the spots off his hand, Lady Macbeth cannot cleanse herself. The context of her time and the contagiousness of her pollution ensure that her rage, manipulations of politics, participation in slaughter, and intervention into the structure of patriarchy are (literally) dead-ended. In

---

<sup>145</sup> Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 88

<sup>146</sup> Sara Read, *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England*, *Genders and Sexualities in History* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013), 293.

<sup>147</sup> Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 94.

*Macbeth*, as in classical Athens, “something had to be done as a result of the pollution: the bearer of it had to be got rid of or reinstated by altering his monstrous condition.”<sup>148</sup> Accordingly, her death, potentially at her own hands, is hegemonically mandated; the purification and stabilization of the state, patriarchy, and patrilineage require it.

Her death not only removes the possibility that her poisonous maternity could further contaminate the nation and its male leaders, but also confirms the discontinuity of both Macbeth’s line and her overpowered influence upon it. Malcolm’s final words, in which he addresses the potential for political stability, emphasizes this shift from catachrestic female influence to exclusively male power. Further, Macduff’s critical role in the birth of this new government suggests the total exclusion of non-male identities, including motherhood and witchcraft, in the new ideological structure.<sup>149</sup> The witches’ prophecy that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth, “which identifies Macduff (born of cesarean section and thus not technically born of a woman) as the only one powerful enough to defeat Macbeth, undermines the fearsome power of maternity (4.1.96–97). Because Macduff “was from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripped,” he is not at risk for contamination via savage matriarchal designs or nourishment at the breast of a woman whose milk is potentially poisonous and whose power can be wielded to destabilize patriarchy or patrilineage (5.8.15–16). Macduff’s violent (and therefore masculine) birth protects him from being polluted by feminine corruption; he is safe from maternal intervention, such as Lady Macbeth’s interference into Macbeth’s ambitions.

This caesarean birth represents “a conquest over the maternal body which otherwise threatens to consume the precious offspring. In doing so, it likewise comes to represent the

---

<sup>148</sup> Visser, “Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens,” 9.

<sup>149</sup> Adelman, “Born of A Woman,” 110.

preservation of the patrilineage itself.”<sup>150</sup> In reasserting patrilineage and curtailing the maternal figure, Shakespeare offers an antidote to the anxieties embodied in Lady Macbeth’s violent, noxious motherhood, the final solution for which lies in imagining “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.”<sup>151</sup> Any form of femininity that would grant a woman power, such as maternity, is disallowed. The dangers associated with Lady Macbeth’s androgynous and gender-disordered identity, her masculine vitriol and bravery contextualized in the body of a mother, are thus ruthlessly excised in order to reimagine “autonomous male identity.”<sup>152</sup> Shakespeare restores patrilineage and political stability through patriarchy by identifying the consequences Lady Macbeth’s mercurial performance of gender, her so-called unsexing, as the site of ideological unrest, and then destroying it.

In the concluding speech, Malcom deems the thanes of Scotland “earls,” suggesting a political evolution towards civilization through Anglicization (5.8.64). This movement towards a feudal (and English) system of naming nobility is inextricable from a movement towards patriarchy. This is particularly relevant given the 1603 coronation of the Scottish King James I prior to the play’s production, such that *Macbeth* marked (and perhaps celebrated) the restoration of a patriarchal order after almost half a century of female monarchy. This shift mirrors a similar one within the *Oresteia*, suggesting that, as Susanne Wofford has argued, “*Macbeth* and the *Oresteia* both can be understood as origin stories, etiologies of important civic or national institutions: in the case of the *Oresteia*, the Areopagus [the tradition of legal courts] . . . in the

---

<sup>150</sup> Chamberlain, “Fantasizing Infanticide,” 85.

<sup>151</sup> Adelman, “Born of A Woman,” 116.

<sup>152</sup> Adelman, “Born of a Woman,” 106

case of *Macbeth*, the feudal structure of inherited earls.”<sup>153</sup> In both cases, such ‘progress’ in the civic realm is predicated on the erasure/neutering of violent female figures. In the *Oresteia*, the Furies had to be overridden by an agent of the patriarchy, defanged and turned into comparatively toothless deities of protection. In *Macbeth*, the founding of a more civilized, patrilineal feudal system depends on the annihilation of another Fury, the Lady, and of her husband, whose actions she nurtured into being.

Indeed, the newly kinged Malcolm explicitly attributes Scotland’s potential stability and peace to the deaths of Lord and Lady Macbeth, and to the removal of the “cruel ministers / Of this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen, / Who, as ‘tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life” (5.8.69–72). In one fell swoop, Shakespeare issues a final condemnatory blow Lady Macbeth, both as an individual and as an archetype. First, by repeating verbatim the term “cruel ministers,” echoing and evoking Lady Macbeth’s desire to trade her milk for gall and become a violently unsexed figure of maternal terror, Shakespeare insinuates that Lady Macbeth is at the root of the destabilizing events of the play. Second, Shakespeare ensures that Lady Macbeth’s offstage death is unverifiably rumored to be an un-heroic suicide.<sup>154</sup> This rhetorical move, according to Macdonald and Murphy, may have provoked audience horror and alienation.<sup>155</sup>

Though the manner of Lady Macbeth’s death is left somewhat ambiguous, the fact of it is not; in this way, Shakespeare is able to communicate that the cycle of vengeance and rage—perpetuated by a violent, mythically inflected, and unsexed woman—has been categorically

---

<sup>153</sup> Susanne L. Wofford, “Origin Stories of Fear and Tyranny: Blood and Dismemberment in *Macbeth* (with a Glance at the *Oresteia*),” *Comparative Drama* 51, no. 4 (2017): 506.

<sup>154</sup> John Syme, *Life’s Preservative Against Self-Killing or An Useful Treatise Concerning Life and Self-Murder* (London: R. Dawlman and L. Fawne, 1637), 2-3.

<sup>155</sup> Michael MacDonal and Terence R. Murphy, *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*. Oxford Studies in Social History (Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1990), 1, 139

interrupted. As Adelman writes, initially depicted as disturbingly powerful, the women of *Macbeth*

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.<sup>156</sup>

Yet, despite the near-total erasure of female presence and power from the stage, the finality of Lady Macbeth's death, the unequivocal removal of her presence from the stage, brings her closer to the ancient archetypes of feminine rage and power that she repeatedly evokes. As with Medusa, the Furies and Clytemnestra, "the only solution envisioned by the myth is the retaliatory defeat of this self-willed female principle whose potency is still a living and malignant force."<sup>157</sup> Yet, that her death is functionally a suicide also offers her a final moment of power. Suffocated, tortured by the reemergence and solidification of an ideological system that fundamentally excludes her and deliberately disallows and condemns her participation or negotiation of identity (gender, maternal, or political), Lady Macbeth opts out.

### **CONCLUSION: The Lady in Memoriam**

Angry, powerful women get attention. This much seems to be a general axiom in the Western canon, from the tragic plays of fourth century BCE Athens to the #MeToo movement of today. Lady Macbeth is no exception, and when we see rage or power in Lady Macbeth, it is in some way coded for Greek mythic figures and their afterlives. In crafting Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare engages with mythology, translating and transforming figures of rage and vengeance in a manner that proposes — and then harshly rejects — a restructuring of gendered behavior.

---

<sup>156</sup> Adelman, "Born of a Woman," 121.

<sup>157</sup> Zeitlin, *Playing the Other*, 94.

Shakespeare initially uses feminine archetypes of rage—namely, Clytemnestra, the Furies, Medusa, and Medea—to characterize Lady Macbeth, sketching her as an iteration of women or female figures who must eventually be subdued, neutered in the name of patriarchy. Indeed, these figures—these women who invoke supernatural beings, nurse rage and infants, attempt to separate themselves from womanhood, struggle to negotiate associations with femininity, poison, and motherhood—are explicitly echoed in Lady Macbeth. Their words and motivations surface in the emphatic vitriol of Lady Macbeth’s speech and mannerisms, silently and inexorably influencing her actions, her convictions, and her death. An analysis of her language reveals clear textual and ideological links to Clytemnestra and the Furies, particularly in reference to blood, milk, bile, and maternity. Yet, as the play goes on, Shakespeare increasingly refers to Orestes, transforming Lady Macbeth into an impossible Greek tragic hero: identical but for her inability to be sanctified.

Lady Macbeth’s abrupt and offstage suicide signals not only the end of Macbeth’s bloody reign, but also a final death knell for that alternative way of existing as a gendered being. Due in part to her profound connection to the female regicides and vengeance goddesses of Greek myth, Lady Macbeth’s transformation into Orestes is stunted, prevented from coming to fruition; these two archetypes stand in opposition to one another. She cannot “be so much more the man.” Instead, Lady Macbeth is erased (or rather, erases herself in what might be read as a last grasp of autonomy) because mythically gendered archetypes of rage, vengeance, and violence interact with what is deemed natural for a woman - both contextually and intertextually.

A bloody figure of both maternity and masculinity, denied recourse or an effective linguistic system with which to defend herself, Lady Macbeth might be read as a sort of self-inflicted matricide - an appropriately Oresteian conclusion to her arc. Having conceived, birthed,

and nursed the violence within the action of the play, her death is fundamentally the death of a mother. In this way, Lady Macbeth's wrath turns inward, and she becomes victim to the consequences thereof.

In other words, Lady Macbeth's story subverts the theme. Connected through gender to the supernatural inciters of Macbeth's ambitions and textually identified as the causal agent of violence, Lady Macbeth is both the active and passive agent in a cycle of violence and unrest attributed to women who subvert gender roles politically and behaviorally. Aggressively reimagining the rigid boundaries of gender performance, Lady Macbeth first sabotages an extant patriarchal political structure, then is authorially prevented from continuing to influence and contaminate that structure. As a result, she at once suffers the wrath of the Furies and embodies a Fury, eventually and inevitably killing herself. She is, simultaneously, the invoker and the recipient; at once the bearer of wrath and victim of its consequences; the infected and the infector. The transgressive force of Lady Macbeth's unconfined and destabilizing gender performance—linked so powerfully to concepts of masculinity, maternalism, and classical archetypes of rage—necessitates her doom. So provocatively resistant to prescriptive structures in life, in death she joins an ancient canon of rageful women confined, neutered, and silenced.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adelman, Janet. "Born of woman: Fantasies of maternal power in Macbeth." in *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*. Edited by Shirley Nelson Garner, and Madelon Sprengnether. 105–134. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Adelman, Janet. *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Asp, Carolyn. "'Be Bloody, Bold and Resolute': Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in *Macbeth*." *Studies in Philology* 78, no. 2 (1981): 153–69.
- Aughterson, Kate. *Renaissance Woman: A Sourcebook: Constructions of Femininity in England*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Baldwin, T.W. *William Shakspeare's Small Latine and Lesse Greeke*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1944.
- Boyd, Catherine Bradshaw. "The Isolation of Antigone and Lady Macbeth." *The Classical Journal* 47, no. 5 (1952): 174–203.
- Bradley, A.C. *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*. New Penguin Shakespeare Library. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991.
- Braden, Gordon. "Classical Greek Tragedy and Shakespeare," *Classical Receptions Journal* 9, no. 1 (2017): 103–119
- Brugis, Thomas. *The Marrow of Physicke: Or, A Learned Discourse of the Several Parts of Mans Body*. London: Peter Parker, 1640.
- Brugis, Thomas. *Vade Mecum: Or, A Companion For A Chyrurgion*. London: Thomas Williams, 1652.
- Bullough, Geoffery. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. New York: Columbia University Press: 1963.
- Burnett, Mark Thornton. "The 'fiend-like Queen': Rewriting Lady Macbeth." *Parergon* 11, no. 1 (1993): 1–19.
- Burton, Robert. *The Anatomy of Melancholy*. Edited by Thomas C. Faulkner, Nicolas K. Kiessling, and Rhonda L. Blair. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.
- Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex."* New York, NY: Routledge, 2011.

- Callaghan, Dympna. "Wicked Women in Macbeth: A Study of Power, Ideology, and the Production of Motherhood." In *Reconsidering the Renaissance*, edited by Mario Di Cesare. Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 1992.
- Chamberlain, Stephanie. "Fantasizing Infanticide: Lady Macbeth and the Murdering Mother in Early Modern England." *College Literature* 32, no. 3 (2005): 72–91.
- Chamberlayne, Thomas. *The Compleat Midwife's Practice Enlarged, In the most weighty and high concernments of the Birth of Man*. London: Richard Bentley, 1657.
- Catenaccio, Claire. "Dream as Image and Action in Aeschylus' Oresteia." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 51 (2011): 202–231.
- Chapman, George and Alardyce Nicoll. *Chapman's Homer*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998.
- Crawford, Patricia. "Attitudes to Menstruation in Seventeenth-Century England," *Past & Present*, no. 91 (1981): 47–73.
- Culpeper, Nicholas. *A Directory for Midwives: Or, A Guide for Women, in their Conception, Bearing; And Suckling their Children*. London: Peter Cole, 1662.
- Curley, Dan. *Tragedy in Ovid: Theater, Metatheater, and the Transformation of a Genre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013.
- Davison, Francis. *Poetical Rhapsodies*. London: George Bell and Sons, 1611.
- Demetriou, Tania & Pollard, Tanya. "Homer and Greek Tragedy in Early Modern England's Theatres: An Introduction." *Classical Receptions Journal*, 9: 1 (2017): 1–35.
- Dodd, Charles. *Dodd's Church History of England From the Commencement of the Sixteenth Century to the Revolution In 1688*. Edited by Mark Aloysius Tierney. London: Charles Dolman, 1841.
- Dolan, Frances E. *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550–1700*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.
- Ewbank, Inga Stina. "The Fiend-Like Queen: A Note on *Macbeth* and Seneca's *Medea*." *Shakespeare Survey*, 19 (1966): 82–94.
- Ewbank, Inga Stina. "'Striking too short at Greeks': The Transmission of Agamemnon to the English Renaissance Stage." In *Agamemnon in Performance 458 BC to AD 2004: 458 BC to AD 2004*, edited by Fiona Macintosh and Pantelis Michelakis, 37–42. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Finucci, Valeria, and Brownlee, Kevin. *Generation and Degeneration: Tropes of Reproduction*

- in Literature and History from Antiquity to Early Modern Europe*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2001.
- Gildenhard, Ingo, and Revermann, Martin. *Beyond the Fifth Century: Interactions with Greek Tragedy from the Fourth Century BCE to the Middle Ages*. Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010.
- Gillepsie, Stuart. *Shakespeare's Books: A Dictionary of Shakespeare's Source*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2001.
- Goffe, Thomas. *The Tragedie of Orestes*. London: John Beale, 1633.
- Golding, Arthur, John Frederick Nims, and Jonathan Bate. *Ovid's Metamorphoses: the Arthur Golding translation, 1567*. Philadelphia: Paul Dry Books, 2000.
- Gowing, Laura. *Common Bodies: Women, Touch, and Power in Seventeenth-Century England*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Heavey, Katherine. *The Early Modern Medea, Medea in English Literature, 1558–1688*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.
- Johnston, Sarah Iles. *Restless Dead: Encounters Between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.
- Jouanna, Jacques. *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*. Edited by Van Der Eijk Philip. Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2012.
- Kahn, Coppélia. *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1981.
- Kimbrough, Robert. "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender." *Shakespeare Studies* 16 (1983): 175.
- Klein, Joan Larsen. "Lady Macbeth 'Infirm of Purpose.'" in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*. Edited by Lenz, Lenz, Carolyn Ruth Swift, Gayle Greene, and Carol Thomas Neely. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983: 240–55.
- Kott, Jan, and Boleslaw Taborski. "Hamlet and Orestes." *PMLA* 82, no. 5 (1967): 303–13. doi:10.2307/460759.
- La Belle, Jenijoy. "'A Strange Infirmity': Lady Macbeth's Amenorrhoea." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (1980): 381–86.
- Lazarus, Micha. "Greek Literacy in Sixteenth Century England." *Renaissance Studies* 20:3 (2015): 433–458.
- Levin, Joanna. "Lady MacBeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria." *ELH* 69, no. 1 (2002): 21–55. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.gc.cuny.edu/stable/30032010>.

- MacDonald, Michael, and Murphy, Terence R. *Sleepless Souls: Suicide in Early Modern England*. Oxford Studies in Social History. Oxford; Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Martindale, Charles and Michelle Martindale. *Shakespeare and the Uses of Antiquity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Maxwell-Stuart, P. G. "The Appearance of Aeschylus' Erinyes." *Greece & Rome* 20, no. 1 (1973): 81–84.
- McCracken, Peggy. *The Curse of Eve, The Wound of the Hero: Blood, Gender, and Medieval Literature, Middle Ages Series*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.
- McGee, Arthur R. "'Macbeth' and The Furies." In *Shakespeare Survey*, edited by Kenneth Muir, 55–67. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967.
- Merchant, Moelwyn. "His 'Fiendlike Queen'." *Shakespeare Survey*, 19 (1966): 75–81.
- Miola, Robert S. "Orestes and the Light of Day." *Comparative Drama* 51, no. 4 (2017): 588–602
- Miola, Robert S. "Representing Orestes' Revenge." *Classical Receptions Journal*, no. 9 (2017): 144–165.
- Neely, Carol Thomas. *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004.
- Neely, Carol Thomas. "'Documents in Madness': Reading Madness and Gender in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Early Modern Culture." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 42.3 (1991): 315–338.
- Nissen, Alanna. "Transgression, Pollution, Deformity, Bewitchment: Menstruation and Supernatural Threat in Late Medieval and Early Modern England, 1250 – 1750." Master's Thesis, State University of New York Empire State College, 2017.
- Paster, Gail Kern. *The Body Embarrassed*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018.
- Paster, Gail Kern. *Humoring the Body: Emotions and the Shakespearean Stage*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.
- Paul, Henry Neill. *The royal play of Macbeth; when, why, and how it was written by Shakespeare*. New York: Octagon Books, 1971.
- Pollard, Tanya. *Greek Tragic Women on Shakespearean Stages*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- Raber, Karen L. "Murderous Mothers and The Family/State Analogy in Classical and

- Renaissance Drama.” *Comparative Literature Studies* 37, no. 3 (2000): 298–320.
- Read, Sara. *Menstruation and the Female Body in Early Modern England. Genders and Sexualities in History*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2013.
- Rosenberg, Marvin. “Lady Macbeth’s Indispensable Child.” *Educational Theatre Journal* 26, no. 1 (1974): 14–19.
- Sadler, John. *The Sicke Womans Private Looking-Glasse wherein Methodically are handled all uterine affects, or diseases arising from the wombe*. London: Anne Griffin, 1636.
- Schleiner, Louise. “Latinized Greek Drama in Shakespeare’s Writing of “Hamlet”.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (1990): 29–48.
- Shamas, Laura. *We Three: The Mythology of Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters*. New York: Lang, 2007.
- Silk, Michael. “Shakespeare and Greek Tragedy: Strange Relationship,” in *Shakespeare and the Classics*. Edited by Charles Martindale and A.B. Taylor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004.
- Stallybrass, Peter. “Macbeth and Witchcraft.” In *Focus on Macbeth*, edited by John Russell Brown, 189–209. London: Routledge, 1982.
- Southren, Carla. “Shakespeare and the Renaissance Reception of Euripides.” PhD diss., University of York, 2018.
- Stelzer, Emanuel. “Social implications of love suicide in early modern English drama.” *Critical Survey* 28, no. 1 (2016): 67–83
- Steenbergh, Kristine. “Emotion, Performance and Gender in Shakespeare’s Hamlet.” *Critical Studies* 34 (2011): 93–116.
- Stolberg, Michael. “Menstruation and Sexual Difference in Early Modern Medicine,” in *Menstruation: A Cultural History*. Edited by Andrew Shail and Gillian Howie, 85–107. New York: Palgrave, 2005.
- Stolberg, Michael. “The Monthly Malady: A History of Premenstrual Suffering.” *Medical History* 44, no. 3 (2000): 301–22.
- Studley, John. “John Studley, *Agamemnon*, 1566.” In *Elizabethan Seneca: Three Tragedies* ed. James Ker and Jessica Winston, 205–278. London: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2012.
- Tassi, Marguerite. “The ‘new Gorgon’: Eros, Terror and Violence in Macbeth.” In *Shakespeare’s*

- Erotic Mythology and Ovidian Renaissance Culture*. Edited by Agnes LaFont, 155–171. London: Routledge, 2013.
- Taylor, A. B. “Shakespeare and Golding,” *Notes and Queries*, Volume 38, no. 4 (1991): 492–499.
- Taylor, A. B. “Shakespeare, Studley, & Golding.” *The Review of English Studies*, 39, no. 156 (1988): 525.
- Thompson, Edward H. “Macbeth, King James, and the Witches,” in *Studii de limbi si literatură modernă: studii de anglistică si americanistică*. Edited by Hortensia Parlog, Luminita Frentiu, Simona Rotariu. Romania: Timisoara University Press, 1994.
- Truax, Elizabeth. “Macbeth and Hercules: The Hero Bewitched.” *Comparative Drama* 23, no. 4 (1989): 359–76.
- Visser, Margaret. “Vengeance and Pollution in Classical Athens.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 45, no. 2 (1984): 193–206.
- Wiggins, Martin. *British Drama 1533–1642: A Catalogue: V. II: 1567–1589*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Williams, Edith Whitehurst. “In Defense of Lady Macbeth.” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 24, no. 2 (1973): 221–23.
- Wofford, Susanne L. “Origin Stories of Fear and Tyranny: Blood and Dismemberment in Macbeth (with a Glance at the Oresteia).” *Comparative Drama* 51, no. 4 (Winter, 2017): 506–527.
- Zeitlin, Froma I. “The Dynamics of Misogyny: Myth and Mythmaking in the *Oresteia*.” in *Playing the Other: Gender and Society in Classical Greek Literature*. Women in Culture and Society. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996: 87–119.