

2018 SAA Seminar: *Macbeth*: New Directions 1  
Part I: Historical, Textual, and Thematic Approaches  
Leader: Deborah Willis, University of California, Riverside, deborah.willis@ucr.edu

**Charlotte Artese, Agnes Scott College**

**The Army as Forest in Folk Tradition and in *Macbeth***

The episode in which Malcolm tells his soldiers to disguise themselves with tree branches as they march on Macbeth's castle, thereby fulfilling the apparition's prophecy that Macbeth will only be defeated when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, appears not only in the Macbeth legend, but also in folk tradition in Britain, Europe, and the Middle East. The Motif-Index of Folk Narrative, a standard reference work, catalogues the motif as "K1872.1: *Army appears like forest. Surprises enemy. Each soldier carries branches. (Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane.)*" Women play a central role in these "army as forest" legends and folktales. In Welsh, German, Arabic, and Serbian stories, a woman in a besieged stronghold sees through the attacking army's ruse of covering themselves with branches and sounds the alert. In an Irish legend, druids foretell the advance of a forest, but a woman understands the danger. The heroine of a French legend devises the strategy of disguising her army with foliage and is victorious. If Shakespeare and his audience knew these kinds of folktales and legends, which almost certainly circulated orally, then Lady Macbeth's absence from the siege of Dunsinane becomes more pointed. Framing the Birnam Wood scenes with Lady Macbeth's madness and death is Shakespeare's addition to the Macbeth legend as found in Holinshed and other Scottish histories. Lady Macbeth's incapacitation and death during her husband's last stand becomes even more conspicuous if the audience sees the parallel between her and the heroines of army-as-forest stories, in which a woman's insight is often critical to her people's fate.

**Jonathan Baldo, Eastman School of Music**

**Getting Even in an Odd World: Playing the Numbers in *Macbeth***

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* strives for various kinds of evenness in the face of repeated manifestations of the odd. It dramatizes a straining to get even not just in the way of getting revenge, settling accounts, and repaying debts, but in the additional senses of achieving balance, uniformity, or equality; smoothing out or leveling a rough way; becoming extricated from difficulties; and making the crooked or curved route straight and direct. Malcolm's closing gesture in *Macbeth*, his attempt to "make us even with you" (5.8.62), to settle his debts to his nobles by creating the first Scottish earls, is simply the last in a series of attempts at evening. It is spoken by a ruler who, by contrast with Macbeth, promises to be even-handed and even-tempered. The obstacles to "getting even" in Shakespeare's Scotland, however, are legion. The play, seeking even or level ground, and Macbeth, pursuing stability in his new reign, repeatedly tilt toward the odd, especially in their trafficking with the supernatural. The contention between Macbeth and Malcolm may be understood in terms of the children's game of morra, or evens and odds.

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**William C. Carroll, Boston University**

**“Strange Intelligence”: Transformations of Witchcraft in Macbeth Discourse**

This paper will analyze how the Macbeth narrative first appeared without any hint of witchcraft, gradually acquired witches and their prophecies through the imaginations of early Scottish chroniclers, and then – after Shakespeare’s masterful representation of the “wayward sisters” in *Macbeth* – how the witches began to multiply in number, sing, and become semi-comic figures in Restoration adaptations (including a parody of them as early as 1674). More recent adaptations of the Macbeth narrative in popular fiction have frequently transformed them into either simple country women or emblems of mystical Gaelic traditions. Whatever their nature, the witches are always connected to prophecy and dream.

**Susan Dunn-Hensley, Wheaton College**

**Unsexed Bodies, Climatic Instability, and Queenship in *Macbeth***

The belief that witches could influence the weather proved central to witch trials from approximately the fourteenth century onward. Many believed that witches could disrupt the natural world – changing weather, blighting crops, and bringing illness to livestock as well as humans. These disruptions proved particularly serious for an agrarian society that relied on normal weather patterns for its very survival. Although early modern thinkers such as Reginald Scot challenged the idea that humans could influence weather, many people did believe in that possibility, and across Europe thousands were charged and convicted of a crime that is inconceivable to the twenty-first century mind. Witches were not the only threat to the natural world, however. To many in the early modern world, the lines between the natural and the supernatural proved very thin, and any person who stood outside of patriarchal order could be made to bear the responsibility for disruptions to the natural order.

In this paper, I will consider the ways in which Shakespeare depicts the interactions between the human world and the natural world in *Macbeth*. In the play, witches disrupt nature through their magic, and humans such as Macbeth disrupt it through the overturning of right rule. In this paper, however, I am most interested in considering how female bodies operate as agents of disruption. The threat posed by Lady Macbeth and the witches goes beyond a mere will to rule and includes a blurring of sex/gender roles and the threat of contamination coming from the evil, sexualized female body. By looking at the real weather anomalies of a period that some scientists call the Little Ice Age, I hope to answer the following questions. To what degree does the presence of actual climatic instability in early modern England add a sense of urgency to the concerns that the play presents? And what might placing *Macbeth* in conversation with Ben Jonson’s *The Masque of Queens* (commissioned by Queen Anna of Denmark) suggest about early modern fears about the connection between weather disruptions and subversive, usurping women?

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**Penelope H. Geng, Macalester College**

**Lady Macbeth's Remorse and the Theatricality of Criminal Justice**

A comparison of the sleepwalking scene to early modern justicing manuals reveals the innovative nature of Shakespeare's poetics of remorse. Instead of following the standard writing on remorse, Shakespeare convinces us of the authenticity of Lady Macbeth's emotions by having her confess her crimes in a state of "fast sleep." At no point does Lady Macbeth use the expected language of contrition and the word "conscience" never appears in the play. Instead, the force of Lady Macbeth's conscience is impressed upon the audience through both her anguished language and the *mise en scène*: the interplay of witnesses (the Doctor and Gentlewoman), her nightgown (resembling the white "sheets" worn by penitents), and her taper (a traditional symbol of the accusing conscience). If the scene offers a portrait of genuine remorse, what does it suggest about the kinds of remorse found in everyday legal contexts? Therein lies the broader interrogatory power of the scene. The scene articulates a critique of the law's ceremonialism. The law demands a performance of remorse by the criminal subject for the moral community without ever acknowledging its own coercive role in producing such a spectacle or the possibility that the public performance of an inward feeling could render it less than true. Within the larger context of Protestant polemical attacks on Catholic sacraments (that they are form without matter, words without feeling, mere spectacle) Shakespeare's analysis of law's customs—customs that reveal the law to be quite addicted to rituals of penance and reconciliation—is at the very least provocative, if not dangerously seditious.

**Lianne Habinek, Bard College**

**The Written Troubles of the Brain**

We are now aware that the seat of memory is the brain, and our current understanding of the functions and specific localizations of memory's component parts derives from decades of study involving lesions — a method that has its roots in the broader history of neuroscience. But in the absence of modern imaging technology these roots are necessarily steeped in violence and trauma to the brain. There is, in Shakespeare's tragedies, a tendency to treat the brain as a fallible object, vulnerable to damage, and operating in such a way as to bridge the literal and the metaphorical. This paper explores the ways in which *Macbeth*, in particular, engages with violence to the brain and subsequently to memory and morality.

**James Hirsh, Georgia State University**

***Macbeth* and the Late Renaissance Dramatic Convention of Self-Addressed Speech**

In *Macbeth* Shakespeare frequently and brilliantly exploited the late Renaissance dramatic convention of self-addressed speech. The most conspicuous evidence that soliloquies represented speeches by characters rather than interior monologues is that, whenever eavesdroppers are present, they overhear a soliloquy. That kind of circumstance occurs with astonishing frequency in Shakespeare's plays. Examples in *Macbeth* occur in 2.2 and 5.1. Plentiful, unambiguous, conspicuous, varied, and one-sided evidence demonstrates that soliloquies in late Renaissance

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drama represented self-address as a matter of convention rather than audience address. Apostrophes in the sense of passages addressed to imaginary listeners constitute one of the many kinds of evidence. It would be incongruous to address an imaginary audience in a speech directed at actual listeners. Dozens of apostrophes occur in soliloquies in *Macbeth*. Lady Macbeth's first soliloquy of 16 lines consists entirely of an apostrophe to Macbeth. If a soliloquy had knowingly been addressed by a character to playgoers, the character's motive in speaking would have been to inform, entertain, persuade, dismay, or otherwise influence a large gathering of strangers. A soliloquy in a Shakespeare play instead depicts *how a character interacts with herself*. In her first soliloquy Lady Macbeth is not depicted as a sociable character engaged in the helpful public service of bringing playgoers up to speed. Instead, she is depicted as an intensely antisocial character whose mind is wholly and passionately fixated on her relationship with her imaginary listener. If Shakespeare had wanted playgoers to regard a particular soliloquy as an audience address by the speaker, he easily could have done so unambiguously, but at no point in *Macbeth* does any character unambiguously acknowledge the presence of playgoers.

**Jesse M. Lander, University of Ottawa**

**“The Taste of Fears”: Disgust and Witchcraft in *Macbeth***

I plan to examine the potent combination of fear and disgust in *Macbeth*. In particular, I will argue that the play's combination of fear and disgust produces a specific sort of horror that is associated with the supernatural. In making my argument, I will draw on recent work in the history of the emotions as well as affect theory. My analysis will focus on the cauldron scene and the recipe for the potion prepared by the weird sisters. An inversion of domesticity, the cauldron scene has been variously interpreted. Janet Adelman detects a shift “toward the comic in the presentation of the witches: the specificity and predictability of the ingredients in their dire recipe pass over toward grotesque comedy even while they create a (partly pleasurable) shiver of horror” (136). William Ian Miller also emphasizes the comedy of the scene: “The witches’ brew, a grossly comic indulgence in the horror of disgust and the uncanny, mixes up a recipe of the disgusting that needs little translation to trigger the sentiments in us that it was meant to trigger back then.” I am less confident about the element of comedy in the episode, and I am not certain that the sentiments experienced by an early modern audience are precisely the same as those experienced by a present-day theater-goer. Adelman’s “(partly pleasurable) shiver of horror” operates differently in a world that takes witchcraft seriously.

**Rachel Prusko, University of Alberta**

**“What, in our house?” *Macbeth*’s Strange Interiors**

In its repeated staging of private, guarded spaces, *Macbeth* evinces a clear concern with interiority. Many scenes, and notably those featuring the porter, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, Banquo's ghostly appearance at the banquet, and Macbeth's final fortification at Dunsinane, carefully distinguish interior from exterior space. Macbeth himself is usually inside and often alone, even, as Paul Hammond has pointed out, when there are others on stage with him: withdrawing into his own thoughts, Macbeth “occupies a form of stage space to which the other characters do not have access, for it is shaped by his own imagination” (*The Strangeness of*

*Tragedy*, 126). Such “parenthetical spaces,” as Hammond calls them, invite scrutiny of the characters who inhabit them. Drawing on studies of both inwardness and strangeness in early modern drama, this essay will consider the relationship between the play’s movement into hidden space and the subjectivity of the Macbeths. In this play of unheard and false confessions, equivocatory, non-signifying language, madness, and witchcraft, the penetration of inner space seems not to reveal inner selves; indeed, as the play opens to readers its hidden recesses, it only further obscures our understanding of the characters within them. Even in its deepest interiors, *Macbeth* is persistently strange.

**John D. Staines, John Jay College, CUNY**

**“Look how our partner’s rapt”: *Macbeth* and Male Fantasies of Rape**

Janet Adelman’s dissection of male fears of maternal power remains among the most important readings of *Macbeth*’s masculine violence. Using Melissa Sanchez’s recent work on love as “both the most private and voluntary and most alien and invasive of emotions,” this paper will look at another aspect of the male fantasies that underlie the terror of this play, the fears of, and desires for, being seized violently, without will. Although rape seems to be one of the few crimes Macbeth does not commit, we can see that fear come close to the surface when Lady Macduff quotes what so many of Ovid’s rape victims ask, “Whither should I fly?” (4.2.73), before being chased off stage by men who violate the domestic space with murder and perhaps other unnamable crimes. It is Malcolm who indicts himself for fantasies of rape, “my desire / All continent impediments would o’erbear / That did oppose my will” (4.2.63-65), which Macduff, while admitting that such lust “is a tyranny,” tries to rationalize away with the thought, “We have willing dames enough” (66, 73). His blithe dismissal of women’s consent is soon followed, of course, by the news that his “castle is surpris’d” and all “savagely slaughtered” (204-05), the bereft husband and father left to imagine the horrors that might have happened. What is even more striking is that the witches and Lady Macbeth embody the male fantasy of the female rapist, with Macbeth repeatedly described as “rapt”—seized by their words, losing his masculine will—or, though them, raped so that he is forced (paradoxically, and perhaps delusionally) into committing acts of violence. Rapt, from the Latin *raptus*, seized, violated, raped, is the nightmare image of the play, which opens and closes with male bodies violated and has as its equivocating plot device a mother’s womb ripped open. Macbeth (as Bryan Lowrence suggests) experiences these violations as political ecstasy, a feeling of lost agency and alienation even as he reaches the heights of authority. This rapturous experience, moreover, is shaped by the gender politics that structures the patriarchal monarchy: power is to be seized, power is violation, power is rape. Rape, as Sanchez reminds us, allows Early Modern writers to explore power and the problems of tyranny, which makes that fantasy central to this tragedy’s anxieties about free will and tyranny. *Macbeth*’s rape fantasies imagine men as both tyrants and victims, all-powerful and all-too-vulnerable to violation. These are dangerous and destructive fantasies. As US society is finally confronting the violations committed by men against women under their authority, this investigation into the terrors of the male imagination in *Macbeth* will open up some timely questions.

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**James W. Stone, American University and Osher Institute, Johns Hopkins University**

**Insemination Against the Use of Nature in *Macbeth***

The Witches body forth prophecies that “unfix” Macbeth’s hair and heart “against the use of nature” (1.3.139). Against the grain of seed as heteroreproductivity, Lady Macbeth’s queer assertion to her husband “that I may pour my spirits in thine ear” (1.5.26) instances one of many fluid markers by which gender hierarchy gets transformed in the play. As for the much-discussed and insistently remarked detouring of blood and milk away from nurture and pity in the perversely unsexing direction of murder, so the lady’s spirit-ejaculating “valour of my tongue” penetrates the male’s auditory orifice and makes of the man something other than himself, “chastising . . . all that impedes thee from the golden round” (1.5.27-8) of Duncan’s crown. Lady Macbeth’s hyperbolic utterance is performative; the spirit of the metaphor is uncannily literalized. The round that encircles Macbeth’s crown consummates in political terms an unfixing of nature that is at its origin a sexual act. The jouissance that Macbeth experiences is all the more intense and attractive for being uncanny, terrifying, self-dissolving, anarchic: “And nothing is, but what is not” (1.3.144).

**Penelope Meyers Usher, New York University**

**The Violent Ethics of Banquo’s Ghost**

This paper—part of a larger project about violent metamorphoses of bodies in tragedy—will focus on the way in which Banquo’s ghost helps us to see the ways in which violence both undoes and reconstructs the body, and on the ethical stakes of this metamorphosis. After having his throat cut, receiving “twenty trenched gashes on his head,” and being left dead in a ditch (3.4.25), Banquo becomes a ghost. Caught between life and death, Banquo’s body is changed *by* violence, and changed *into* an image and embodiment *of* violence. His ghost, both bloody and invisible, both bodily and spectral, persists in order to haunt its murderer. His body, paradoxical, contradictory, speaks from the margins of life in order to bring to light the ethical stakes of the violated body, and the ethical connections forged by acts of violence between bodies of victims and perpetrators.

**John A. Warrick, North Central College**

**Macbeth and the Murder Pamphlets**

In his preface to the Arden *Macbeth* (second series) Kenneth Muir briefly considers that Shakespeare took indirect influence for the play from popular pamphlets and cheap print culture. He notes William Kemp’s reference, in Kemps Nine Daies Wonder (1600), of ‘a penny Poet whose first making was the miserable stolne story of Macdeol, or Macdobeth, or Mac-somewhat, for I am sure a Mac it was, though I neuer had them aw to see it’(p.xxxvi). Perhaps Kemp satirizes some version of the Macbeth story that appeared in the decade before Shakespeare’s endeavor, but no such pamphlet (or precursor drama) now exists. In addition to this cryptic allusion, and aside from scattered chronicle sources, we know only that a ballad of ‘Macdobeth’ was entered into the Stationers’ Register in 1596.

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This paper accepts that the story of Macbeth may have circulated in various literary forms, and that Shakespeare's tragedy reproduces some generic features of sensationalistic broadsides, ballads, and other pamphlet literatures. I will particularly examine Macbeth against the journalistic genres of murder ballads and murder broadsides for their shared treatments of criminality. Macbeth does not provide a stated moral aphorism against murder or a soliloquy resembling a 'gallows speech', but the play aligns with the conventions of murder pamphlets more than it resembles any model for theatrical tragedy otherwise available to Shakespeare. Typical accounts of Elizabethan and Jacobean murder include distinct phases of human and diabolical temptation and the logistical devising of a murder; as well, once a murder has been completed, perpetrators commonly suffer confusion and paranoia before a victim's blood cries out for vengeance, exposing the murderer and leading to eventual justice. Such accounts attribute murder to infernal seduction, and pamphlet narratives often depict devilish iconography that is strikingly similar to the implied visuality of Macbeth's 'dagger of the mind' speech(2.1). Ultimately I hope to apply the narrative and iconographic conventions of murder pamphlets to a reading of Shakespeare's Macbeth, to better understand how the play engaged with murder in the popular imagination of London's theatregoers and as determined by London's cheap print culture.