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Murder as Birth in *Macbeth*

Gloria Olchowy

In recent decades, many critics of *Macbeth* have considered the ambiguities produced by the play and by the history that informs the play.¹ Their analyses of the questionable legitimacy of the patrilineal system, the inconsistency of the characters, the pattern of repetition and the pervasive violence in the play and its historical sources contest the recuperative construction of *Macbeth* as a coherent narrative that depicts the triumph of good over evil and pays tribute to James I's lineage and theories of political patriarchy.

The most insightful investigations of motherhood in *Macbeth* have been carried out by psychoanalytic feminists, who assert that the repudiation of mothers clearly signifies in the formation of male subjectivity and patriarchy.² Janet Adelman, the most influential of the psychoanalytic critics, examines the malevolent maternity of the witches and Lady Macbeth and the ambiguous view of masculinity in relation to male fantasies about maternal power, and argues that the ending of the play enacts an escape from the female and the achievement of an all-male order.³ Deborah Willis complicates this interpretation by contending that not just the mother's but the father's world in *Macbeth* 'proves to be [a] site for malevolent nurture' since the patriarchal order customarily fosters rivalry among its sons.⁴

1 Harry Berger, 'Text Against Performance in Shakespeare: The Example of *Macbeth*', in *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Norman: Pilgrim, 1982), 49-79; Alan Sinfield, 'Macbeth: History, Ideology and Intellectuals', *Critical Quarterly* 28 (1986), 63-77; and David Scott Kastan, *Shakespeare After Theory* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 165-82.

2 Janet Adelman, "'Born of Woman": Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*', in *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 90-121; Madelon Gohlke, "'I wooed thee with my sword': Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms", in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 150-70; and Coppelia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1981), 151-92.

3 Adelman, 'Born of Woman', 90-121.

4 *Malevolent Nurture: Witch-Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 209-237.

I further illuminate the treatment of power and gender by reading the play historically – that is, by exploring the play in relation to the competing forms of motherhood available in the early modern period. In doing so, I demonstrate that the play not only alludes to the anxieties produced by both Elizabeth I's and James I's appropriations of these forms, but also suggests that James' approach is more prone to instability and violence.

Scholars have extensively examined Elizabeth I's employment of enigmatic self-representations to establish her political power and palliate the tensions generated by her status as a woman ruler, her resistance to marriage and her failure to produce an heir.⁵ However, the many self-images that she disseminated – whether that of the Virgin Mother, a wet-nurse, a son, or of Christ himself – also need to be understood in terms of a version of motherhood I call 'incarnational'.⁶ A legacy of the medieval era, incarnational motherhood had enabled women to repudiate marriage, highlight the importance of their generative power without mandating that they propagate children, construct eroticized images that involved the reversal or subsumption of gender and, in general, wield considerable religious, social, and economic clout. How?

It accorded an enormously important stature to the Virgin Mother. It took into account that Christ had no human father and physically was made only of his mother. It associated Christ's side wound with a womb and made his suffering analogous to giving birth. It affiliated Christ's side wound with Mary's breast as well, which assimilated his bleeding and her lactating and construed both his blood and her milk as Eucharistic food. The medical theories of the time, which all connected menstruation to lactation – that is, saw blood as feeding the child first in the womb and then, transmuted to milk, at the breast – contributed to the maternalizing of

5 See Carole Levin, 'Power, Politics, and Sexuality: Images of Elizabeth I', in *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert and Maryanne C. Horowitz (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1989), 95–110; Susan Frye, *Elizabeth I: The Competition for Representation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); and Lena Cowen Orlin, 'The Fictional Families of Elizabeth I', in *Political Rhetoric, Power, and Renaissance Women*, ed. Carole Levin and Patricia A. Sullivan (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 84–110.

6 I provide extensive evidence for my formulation of incarnational motherhood in 'Bearing Men: A Cultural History of Motherhood from the Cycle Plays to Shakespeare' (Ph. D. diss. University of British Columbia, 2000). My formulation is indebted to the work of Caroline Walker Bynum, especially *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987). See also Elizabeth Alvida Petroff, *Body and Soul: Essays on Medieval Women and Mysticism* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 217–19; Clarissa W. Atkinson, *The Oldest Vocation: Christian Motherhood in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), 119–24, 162–63; Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi: The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 26–28; and Susan Dickman, 'Margery Kempe and the Continental Tradition of the Pious Woman', in *The Medieval Mystical Tradition in England*, ed. Marion Glasscoe (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1984), 150–68.

Christ's bleeding and feeding. Incarnational motherhood also linked the functions of the stomach and the womb. Christ's body through the digestive process was thought to nourish Eucharistic recipients just as the mother's body through the gestative process did so for the fetus, and priests and lay recipients with Christ's body within theirs were perceived as pregnant with him and able to give birth to their own salvation.

The gender ambiguity integral to incarnational motherhood allowed holy men in the late medieval period to describe themselves as mothers. It encouraged the holy women of the time to cultivate an *imitatio Christi* preoccupied with physicality and maternity. These women refused to eat even ordinary food as a means of recapitulating the agony of Christ in their own suffering and of preparing their bodies to receive the Eucharist. They construed their hunger as both the desire to unite with the body of Christ and the pain of death or of bodies separating in childbirth. They saw their consumption of the Eucharist as both the consummation of their desire for union and the birth of salvation. The women also fed the sick or the poor either with the food that the women would not allow themselves to consume, or with the milk or oil that the women's own suffering bodies produced. Overall, the incarnational form of motherhood enabled the women to render the misogynist association of woman with physicality as valuable rather than detestable, to cultivate a sexuality oriented toward an ambiguously-gendered, divine being rather than a heterosexual, human one and to formulate notions of family founded not on marriage but on charitable works and of a generative capacity focused on the food part of the food-body relation – that is, on the kind of 're-production' that could be achieved by feeding bodies rather than by breeding them.⁷ These women exerted influence so considerable that they set the model for lay piety⁸ and inspired the universal Feast of Corpus Christi for the Church.⁹ This festival itself prompted the rise and development of the Corpus Christi cycles that served as a mechanism over a period of two hundred years to disseminate the many facets of the incarnational version of the maternal.¹⁰

Important to point out is that incarnational motherhood was deeply informed by another, much longer-standing version of motherhood I refer to as 'calculative' motherhood,¹¹ which was also inherited by the early modern period and which was

7 My discussion here is derived from the works provided in note 6.

8 Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 13, 20–21, 120, 226–37, 239, and Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation*, 164, 186. For discussion of the late medieval women's movement, see Bynum, *Holy Feast*, passim; Petroff, *Body and Soul*, 3–24, 51–79, 129–30; and Dickman, 'Margery Kempe', 152–57, 166.

9 Dickman, 'Margery Kempe', 152; Bynum, *Holy Feast*, 55, 77; and Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, 169–74.

10 See 'Bearing Men', 50–74.

11 For an in-depth exploration of calculative motherhood, see 'Bearing Men', 75–141. See also Stephen Wilson, 'The Myth of Motherhood A Myth: The Historical View of European Child-Rearing', *Social History* May 1984: 186–87; Susan Cahn, *Industry of Devotion: The Transformation of Women's Work in England, 1500–1660* (New York: Columbia University

practiced by the working women who made up the majority of women. Calculative mothers typically were responsible for the physical care of others and the preparation of food in their households. They also used the food generated by their bodies in both medicinal and nutritional ways, by incorporating their breast milk in restorative potions and by nursing their own children and the children of high-status women who rarely nursed their own offspring. Their wet-nursing additionally fostered an understanding of motherhood as a mobile designation that could be conferred on the basis of the womb or the breast or both, since the blood within, as well as the milk without, a woman's body served to nourish and 're-produce', even if the blood and milk were not from the same woman.

Calculative mothers also exercised significant control over their sexuality and fertility and clout in their families and communities. They regulated their fertility through the consumption of carefully prepared herbal concoctions and through prolonged, sometimes non-exclusive breastfeeding.¹² They saw the generation of offspring as only one of many obligations and carefully coordinated their reproductive and productive labor as a result. Their productive activities were also both essential and substantial, leading most scholars to conclude that the medieval period marks the high point of women's employment.¹³

Though vilified by the reformers and though a paradoxical ideological resource for Elizabeth in view of her Protestantism, the legacy of incarnational motherhood and of the calculative form of motherhood that informed it clearly helped Elizabeth to formulate representations of herself that facilitated the management of her anomalous position as a female monarch and the generation of support among her people, most of whom were likely religious hybrids themselves.

However, though Elizabeth's stratagems helped her to negotiate her position as a woman ruler and a single woman, they also generated anxiety because they did not ultimately satisfy the need for a child to succeed her. Carole Levin contends that the vicious rumors about Elizabeth's pregnancies, illegitimate children and infanticidal

Press, 1987), passim; John M. Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), passim; and Gunnar Heinsohn and Otto Steiger, 'The Elimination of Medieval Birth Control and the Witch Trials of Modern Times', *International Journal of Women's Studies* May/June 1982: 194, 195, 199–200, 204.

¹² Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*; Dorothy McLaren, 'Marital Fertility and Lactation, 1520–1720', *Women in English Society*, ed. Mary Prior (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 22–53; and Heinsohn and Steiger, 'Elimination of Medieval Birth Control', 193–214.

¹³ See Alice Clark, *Working Life of Women in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Amy Louise Erickson (London and New York: 1992); Rodney H. Hilton, 'Women Traders in Medieval England', *Women's Studies* 11 (1984): 139–55; Mary Prior, 'Women and the Urban Economy: Oxford 1500–1800', *Women in English Society: 1550–1800*, ed. Mary Prior (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), 93–117; Merry E. Wiesner, *Working Women in Renaissance Germany* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Lyndal Roper, *The Holy Household: Women and Morals in Reformation Augsburg* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1989), esp. 1–55; and Susan Cahn, *Industry of Devotion*.

practices register 'the antagonism toward a queen who refused to provide for her people's future'.¹⁴ Further, the adaptation of the incarnational legacy with its conflation of birth and murder for a hereditary system of secular power, in a situation where the monarch had borne no heir and where the apprehension about who would succeed the monarch was intensifying, would tend to make that system more susceptible to an effort to attain the monarch's authority by means of force – especially since history gave abundant testimony for the acquisition of such authority by violence.¹⁵ And, indeed, an attempt to seize Elizabeth's power was made by the Earl of Essex, a rebellion that Levin asserts may be fruitfully understood 'as a touchstone for the problems and fears' generated over the course of Elizabeth's reign.¹⁶

James I, unlike Elizabeth, did not find the power associated with mothers in the inherited ideologies amenable to his patriarchal view of monarchical rule. More suited to his masculinist formulations was the preeminence of husbands and fathers in the 'new motherhood'¹⁷ being promulgated by the humanists and reformers.¹⁸ This motherhood, oedipal in its orientation, clearly separated the spiritual from the physical and the masculine from the feminine. It severed the maternal from God's body, from charitable works and remunerative employment and from the knowledge and means with which to prevent or end pregnancy. It restricted the maternal to the work of bearing and rearing children, as many as possible, within marriage and the

¹⁴ Levin, 'Power, Politics, and Sexuality', 103–105.

¹⁵ See Kastan's discussion of the acquisition of power and violent action (*Shakespeare After Theory*, 169–72).

¹⁶ Frye, *Elizabeth I*, 150.

¹⁷ This term is from Erasmus. See 'The New Mother', in *The Colloquies of Erasmus*, ed. Craig R. Thompson (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 267–85.

¹⁸ Betty S. Travitsky provides an annotated bibliography of humanist, Protestant and Puritan tracts which provide abundant evidence for the formulation of the new motherhood ('The New Mother of the English Renaissance', 63–89). I develop my own position on this version of motherhood in 'Bearing Men' by considering many of these primary texts and many secondary works, especially Patricia Crawford, 'The Construction and Experience of Maternity in Seventeenth-Century England', in *Women as Mothers in Pre-Industrial England: Essays in Memory of Dorothy McLaren*, ed. Valerie Fildes (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 3–38; Valerie Wayne, 'Introduction', in *The Flower of Friendship: A Renaissance Dialogue Contesting Marriage* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1992), 1–93; Carol Thomas Neely, 'Constructing Female Sexuality in the Renaissance: Stratford, London, Windsor, Vienna', in *Sexuality and Politics in Renaissance Drama*, ed. Carole Levin and Karen Robertson (Lewiston, NY: Queenston, Ontario; and Lampeter, Dyfed, Wales: Edwin Mellen, 1991), 1–26; Allison P. Coudert, 'The Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women: The Case of the Witchcraze', in *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert and Maryanne C. Horowitz (Kirksville, Missouri: Sixteenth Century Journal, 1989), 61–90; Merry E. Wiesner, 'Luther and Women: The Death of Two Marys', in *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy*, ed. Jim Obelkevich, Lyndal Roper and Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1987), 295–308; Cahn, *Industry of Devotion*, passim; Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation*, 194–235; and Roper, *Holy Household*, passim.

patriarchal household. Proponents of the new motherhood also promoted maternal nursing and inveighed against wet-nursing, which I construe to be less about the well-being of children than the need to consolidate the blood mother and the milk mother – or the breeding and feeding forms of reproduction – in one woman, since such a ‘two-in-one’ version of the maternal makes it easier to enclose motherhood in the home. Overall, the new motherhood diminished women spiritually, physically and economically, which reinforced the ideologies of marriage and family advocating the subordination of the wife to the husband and of the mother to the father.

Not only the enlarged scope and leverage of the paternal at the expense of the maternal but also the analogy between the patriarchal household and the patriarchal state in the new ideology of motherhood proved useful to James¹⁹ – at least initially, that is, since he, before long, as Constance Jordan observes, began ‘to elide the uxorial dimension of the citizenry entirely and to focus on its infantile character exclusively’²⁰ and to construe his royal authority no longer in both marital and paternal, but solely paternal, terms. I want to assert that James’ elision of the uxorial and, therefore, maternal dimension and his increasingly rigorous paternal conception of state power, extends the ideology of the new motherhood to such a degree that the mother is not merely diminished but eliminated altogether. As Stephen Orgel asserts, ‘James conceives [of] himself as the head of a single-parent family’²¹ and, as Jonathan Goldberg contends, ‘procreation becomes an extension of male prerogative and male power’.²² Significant as well is that the elimination of the maternal in James’ ‘of man’ and ‘of man born’ formulation in effect inverts the ‘of woman’ and ‘of woman born’ construction of Christ at the heart of the incarnational legacy.

James’ formulation, while a means of definitively locating royal power in the father’s body, of accentuating patrilineal descent and, thus, of strengthening James’ patriarchal conception of authority and while merely an imaginary formulation (James, after all, was married), still was conducive to instability. One part of the problem was again due to the allusion to the incarnational inheritance with its conflation of birth and murder by a secular power that was already informed by the well-established

19 Jonathan Goldberg, ‘Fatherly Authority: The Politics of Stuart Family Images’, in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3; Constance Jordan, ‘The Household and the State: Transformations in the Representation of an Analogy from Aristotle to James I’, *A Journal of Literary History*, Sept. 1993: 307–326; and Orlin, ‘Fictional Families’, 91.

20 Jordan, ‘The Household and the State’, 315. For additional exploration of James I’s familial formulations of power, see Stephen Orgel, ‘Prospero’s Wife’, in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 59; Goldberg, ‘Fatherly Authority’, 3–32; and Orlin, ‘Fictional Families’, 91.

21 Orgel, ‘Prospero’s Wife’, 59.

22 Goldberg, ‘Fatherly Authority’, 16.

historical precedent of the acquisition of power through force. Another part was due to the fact that James’ deployment of the inheritance for a hereditary system of secular authority produced a contradiction – the simultaneous exclusion of women from, and need of women for, political influence. This contradiction intensified the potential danger associated with the incarnational legacy’s conflation of birth and murder since the exclusion of woman from the political arena made the political system more vulnerable to the ‘murder’ form of succession.

Thus, whereas Elizabeth’s actual failure to produce an heir had put her regime at risk, James’ fantastical repudiation of women in his masculinist formulation of birth-based power served to destabilize his. And, I contend, it is precisely the dangerous limitations of Elizabeth’s adaptations of the inherited versions of motherhood and of James’ extension of the new motherhood that *Macbeth* explores and critiques.

That the quasi-elective version of patriarchy at the beginning of *Macbeth* is informed by a contradictory treatment of women is made clear by the association of sexuality with violence and of brutality with delivery and by the depiction of what Adelman calls the ‘fantasy of self-birth’ in the descriptions of the contests between men on the battlefield.²³ However, what makes this version of the patriarchal system less dangerous than a patrilineal one is that it allows royal power to be attained not just through a filial relationship to the king but through worthy service of the king which, while still conducive to the construction of murder as an alternative means of ‘being born’ into the succession, tends to limit such a construction to the violent works performed for the monarch on the battlefield.

Duncan’s institution of the patrilineal version of patriarchy marks a shift from a patriarchal system that determines royal power on the basis of both birth and prowess to a patriarchal system that determines such power on the basis of birth alone and, in doing so, connects public power more closely to the propagation of offspring. This connection makes the contradiction at the heart of a patriarchal hereditary system – the simultaneous need for and exclusion of women – more dangerous, since it both intensifies the politicization of the capacities typically associated with women and makes the repudiation of women necessary even in the domestic realm. It means the conflation of murder and birth is ‘brought home’, making it more probable that ‘killing for the king’ as a way of becoming king will be converted to ‘killing of the king’.²⁴

Indeed, it is such a conversion that may be traced in *Macbeth*. The affiliations of murder with procreation and of sexuality with violence, no longer restricted to the battlefield after Duncan’s alteration of the patriarchal system, permeate the speeches and deeds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the domestic sphere.

Lady Macbeth calls on spirits to alter her menstrual blood and breast milk so she may transform her capacity to nurture a child into the capacity to murder a king and thus satisfy her husband’s desire to acquire power. The heated exchange that she

23 ‘Born of Woman’, 106–107.

24 These apt phrases are Kastan’s (*Shakespeare After Theory*, 167).

and Macbeth have after Macbeth refuses to murder the king, as many critics point out,²⁵ is also suffused with sexual innuendos and allusions to birth. She then finally counters his stiff resistance with a particularly shocking image of the destruction of a baby:

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 (1.7.54–59).²⁶

This image connects reproductive and destructive capacities and a slain baby with the prospect of a slaughtered king. In addition, as Adelman observes, Lady Macbeth's gendering of the infant as male 'exactly at the moment of vulnerability, mak[es] her attack specifically on a male child', which not only encourages Macbeth '[to] imagine himself as an infant vulnerable to [his wife as a mother]', thus enabling Lady Macbeth to exert greater influence over him, but also helps to align the infant with the sleeping king when Lady Macbeth, after providing the details of the murder plan, asks Macbeth, 'What cannot you and I perform upon/Th'unguarded Duncan?' (1.7.70–71).²⁷ The association of first Macbeth and then Duncan with a male child also suggests that Macbeth, a mother's son, may become a father's son – more particularly, the king's son – and, further, that a reversal of the political 'son' and political 'father' configuration is possible since the murder of the king may be understood as a means of becoming both the father-king's son and the father-king himself. Moreover, when Lady Macbeth shortly after informs Macbeth about her intent to intoxicate Duncan's chamberlains so she and he may murder the 'unguarded Duncan' and Macbeth ecstatically proclaims, 'Bring forth men-children only!/For thy undaunted mettle should compose/Nothing but males' (1.7.73–75), Lady Macbeth, who has helped her husband to construe the murder of the king as a means of giving birth to a new version of himself, herself acquires a new identity: a male-mother to 'men-children'.

Even after Macbeth is invested with royal power, he continues to be preoccupied with paternity and to use violence in domestic arenas to ensure his success(ion). Obsessed with the prospect of the 'unlineal hand[s]' of 'Banquo's issue' wrenching away his 'fruitless crown' and 'barren sceptre' (3.1.59–62), Macbeth plans the murders of Banquo and his son. Angry at Macduff for fleeing the country to rally forces to overthrow him, Macbeth orchestrates the slaughter of all those that 'trace [Macduff] in his line' (4.1.153). These killings are perverse attempts to secure his own royal 'birth' and paternal power.

²⁵ See, in particular, Adelman, 'Born of Woman', 101.

²⁶ All references to *Macbeth* come from Kenneth Muir, *Macbeth* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

²⁷ Adelman, 'Born of Woman', 101.

The shift from determining royal power on the basis of both male birth and male works to determining it on the basis of male birth alone in *Macbeth* not only intensifies the politicization of the domestic arena, contributes to the Macbeths' construction of murder as birth, and alludes to the systemic instability produced by both Elizabeth's lack of an heir and James' rigorously patrilineal conception of power. It also alters the treatment of the masculine/paternal and the feminine/maternal in a way that indicates a movement from versions of the maternal that are associated more with incarnational and calculative mothers and Elizabeth I, to versions of the maternal that are affiliated more with new mothers and James I and suggests that, while both are deeply problematic in the context of a hereditary system of secular power, the latter are clearly more fearsome.

For example, the suffusion of the maternal and the erotic, the mutuality of desire and the interplay of femininity and masculinity in the Macbeths' pre-murder encounter are reminiscent of the incarnational mothers' highly sensual and complexly gendered relationships with the incarnational Christ. And when Macbeth intermingles violence and procreation and gives birth to an alternative version of himself through murder, he indeed bears an eerie resemblance to the Eucharistic recipients who saw themselves as effecting their salvific birth through a murder. Macbeth's nature itself, 'too full o'th' milk of human kindness' (1.5.17), conjures up the image of the incarnational Christ, whose wound blood was conflated with his mother's breast milk and womb blood and, more generally, with the food-body of the mother.

The ability to affect the generative process and the avid engagement in public matters of Lady Macbeth and the 'Weird Sisters' (1.3.32) associate them, too, with the inherited versions of motherhood since the practitioners of these forms of the maternal exerted substantial control over their own bodies' sexuality and fertility and their families and communities. That Lady Macbeth and the 'Weird Women' (3.1.2) should be aligned with each other as well as demonized in the play should come as no surprise considering the reformers had specifically altered the Catholic notion of the witch so as to heighten intolerance of not just birth control, but the two versions of motherhood to which such control was linked.²⁸ Infertile and/or birth-

²⁸ Historians have discerned a relationship between the escalation of the witch-hunts and the growing resistance to birth control beginning in the late medieval period. See Heinsohn and Steiger, 'Elimination of Medieval Birth Control', 193–214; Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, chaps. 4–6; Coudert, 'Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women', 63–64, 80, 86, 87; Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation*, 231–34; and Sigrid Brauner, 'Martin Luther on Witchcraft: A True Reformer?', *The Politics of Gender in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jean R. Brink, Allison P. Coudert and Maryanne C. Horowitz (Kirksville, Missouri: *Sixteenth Century Journal*, 1989), 29–31. My understanding of the reformers' construction of the witch and its relationship to the versions of motherhood associated with birth control is indebted to these scholars as well as to Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, passim, and Diane Purkiss, 'Women's Stories of Witchcraft in Early Modern England: The House, the Body, the Child', *Gender and History* Nov. 1995: 408–32.

controlling women were construed as a threat to patriarchal structures, whether religious, state, or familial. So, too, were 'masterly' wives like Lady Macbeth and 'masterless' women like the witches. Such women also tended to be charged with crimes specifically affiliated with their sexuality and reproductive capacity, such as abortion and infanticide. Witches in early modern culture were additionally depicted as having masculine characteristics that seemed to recall the power mothers exercised over young children, the intercessory force of Mary, the mother of God, and the rule of Elizabeth, of Elizabeth's sister, Mary, and of Elizabeth's other 'sister,' Mary Queen of Scots (Willis, esp. 83-158).²⁹

For early modern play-goers, then, Lady Macbeth and the Weird Women's influence in both political and procreative matters and Lady Macbeth's perverse maternity and allusion to the brutal destruction of a nursing infant may very well have brought to mind the anxieties about Elizabeth I's female dominion and lack of an heir and the on-going rumors about her clandestine pregnancies, illegitimate children and infanticidal practices. Elizabeth had, after all, depicted herself as both male and female and as a nursing mother despite her lack of children and the fact that aristocratic women at the time seldom nursed their children. She also had wielded enormous authority when it came to her subjects, including the men among them. Further, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's construction of murder as birth serves to highlight the danger that Elizabeth's adaptation of the incarnational paradigm for a hereditary system of secular power was conducive to, since it was Elizabeth's lack of an heir that made the possibility of the use of murder as an alternative means of 'being born' into the succession more likely in such a system.

Interestingly, Duncan also evokes the incarnational legacy. Lady Macbeth's construction of Duncan as an infant when he is sleeping and Macbeth's depiction of Duncan as a newly born baby and a raped woman when he is dead³⁰ bring to mind the scenes from the Corpus Christi cycles, which associate the physically vulnerable body of Christ with the bodies of women and children and which affiliate the excruciating torture endured by the naked Christ at the hands of his armor-clad male tormentors with rape. While Adelman contends that the 'images surrounding [Duncan's] death make him into an emblem not of masculine authority, but of female vulnerability', I argue that the construction of Duncan's dead body is richly resonant with the mother-man/mother's-son formulations of the incarnational inheritance, which construe wounds as wombs and which conceive the suffering accompanying the torture and slaughter of Christ as the labor pangs of birth.

Ironically, it is Duncan's introduction of the patrilineal system that creates the conditions for his own destruction and the destruction of the kind of gender

29 My discussion here is based on Riddle, *Eve's Herbs*, passim; Willis, *Malevolent Nurture*, 66, 71; Coudert, 'Myth of the Improved Status of Protestant Women', 64; Crawford, 'Construction and Experience of Maternity', 8-10, 13, 17-18, 21; Atkinson, *Oldest Vocation*, 201, 231-34; Roper, *Holy Household*, 56-131, 255-60, 264-65; and Heinsohn and Steiger, 'Elimination of Elizabethan Birth Control', 193-214.

30 Adelman, 'Born of Woman', 95.

ambiguity his character presents. The new system necessitates the invigoration of the masculine and the suppression of the feminine, which, as the play progresses, contributes to the diminution of the maternal and the increasing separation of men and women associated with the new motherhood and with James I's masculinist formulations of power.

Lady Macbeth stifles her femininity when she asks the spirits to 'unsex' her (1.5.41). Macbeth transforms his 'milky' body into the body of a royal son and royal father, becomes obsessed with fathers and sons and male succession and distances himself from his wife when he arranges the murders of Banquo and his son and Macduff's family without her. Before long, the husband and wife who once were so close appear to be 'divorced'. That we last see Lady Macbeth in the bedroom and Macbeth on the battlefield both confirms and accentuates their estrangement.

The Macduffs' relationship in the latter part of *Macbeth* points to an even more pronounced distance between a man and a woman. Macduff deserts his wife and children and travels to a different country while his wife and children are trapped in a castle, showing that his allegiance to the king's son, Malcolm, supersedes his duty to his wife and children. Macduff also quickly suppresses the sensitive part of himself after hearing of his family's slaughter and turns out to be the one 'not born of woman' (5.7.3). Such separation from the feminine is also evinced in Malcolm who insists that he is as 'yet/Unknown to woman' and that the 'taints and blames' of sexual desire are 'strangers to [his] nature' (4.3.124, 125-26). As Leonard Tennenhouse notes, Malcolm's avowal hints at 'a lack of desire to ever mingle his blood with that of a woman',³¹ a deficit that enhances his qualifications to rule the emergent 'all-male community'.³²

Thus, as the play progresses, there is less of the man in mothers and less of the feminine in men. Women's influence is diminished and, before long, two of the literal women themselves are eliminated. A new masculine order has been erected by one 'not born of woman' and one 'unknown to woman', which illustrates the dramatic restriction of the maternal associated with James I's extension of the new motherhood.

In tracing these changes in the play, however, I do not mean to suggest, as some critics do,³³ that the feminine and the maternal are thoroughly eliminated from the order and operations of the political power or that such an elimination helps to stabilize the exercise and succession of power. The apparitions and prophecies that are generated by the witches' brew are clearly unsettling to such fantasies. While

31 'The Theater of Punishment: Jacobean Tragedy and the Politics of Misogyny', in *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York and London: Methuen, 1986), 131.

32 Adelman, 'Born of Woman', 105.

33 See Adelman, 'Born of Woman', 103, 108-11, and Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely, 'Introduction', in *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carolyn Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 6.

these apparitions and prophecies indisputably allude to brute force, male attributes, male procreation and male succession, they also link all these matters to birth and point to the destabilizing and potentially subversive contradiction at the center of a patrilineal system. They remind us that violence is used both to maintain and to attain royal power, that killing of the king becomes more likely if killing for the king as a means of becoming king is abolished in a system of patriarchal rule and that not only a child's gender but a child's father or family tree determine whether that child gets to wear the crown and bear the scepter. That the image of the bloody child refers to the universal experience of birth at the same time the words of the bloody child deny it also points to the contradictory treatment of women and the danger to which such treatment is conducive. In addition, the procession of the many kings followed by their progenitor Banquo may be seen less as paying a tribute to James I's ancestry than as drawing attention to the need for women and to the real illusion of James' inversion of the incarnational paradigm, which is that men can be 'born of man'. Upon encountering this royal line of males, I, for instance, feel compelled to ask where the women are and where, with no mothers around, the sons are coming from – particularly because James I's own mother, Mary Queen of Scots, from whom he claimed his inheritance, is not included in the string of kings, and because the scene that 'succeeds' the all-male procession in the play specifically presents both a mother and a son.

This scene is disruptive to the fantasy of male parthenogenesis not just because it presents a mother, but because it evokes all three versions of motherhood and depicts the particular peril produced for the new mother by such a fantasy. The murder of a young son at home by the forces of a tyrant would most certainly for an early modern audience have recalled the Slaughter of the Innocents pageants in the recently suppressed Corpus Christi cycles, which dramatized King Herod's villainous decision to murder all boy-children in the hopes of killing Jesus and which anticipated Jesus' subsequent arrest, torture and crucifixion. These pageants also featured calculative mothers using the tools of their trades to resist the soldiers who had come to kill their children in stark contrast to Lady Macduff, a representative of the new motherhood, who, lacking work implements, flees rather than fights and dies with her boy-child rather than survives him and whose plight and vulnerability as a new mother in this scene can only be underscored with the backdrop of her husband's putting the restoration of Malcolm before the safety of his own wife and children, being the one 'not born of woman' and, thus, in a sense, bearing in himself the 'of man born' illusion of the previous scene's motherless procession.

Finally, for a patrilineal system so intent on the consolidation of masculine power and the elimination of women and maternal influence, Macbeth's seven references to the prophecy, 'none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth' in the closing scenes of the play prove equally discomfiting. These multiple references highlight Macbeth's on-going preoccupation with procreation and, despite being in the negative, remind us again and again that all men are indeed 'born of woman', that the 'woman' can never be completely eliminated in a system so dependent upon birth and bloodlines

and that the real illusion being perpetuated by the patriarchal system is that men can be 'born of man'. They also are reminiscent of the multiple allusions to Jesus' being born only of woman in the Corpus Christi cycles and hence of the once deeply valued incarnational version of motherhood.

While it is often assumed that the repudiation of the feminine/maternal in *Macbeth* – especially the elimination of the mother-man Macbeth and his male-mother-wife – secures the patriarchal order presented at the end, what my investigation of the treatment of motherhood in the play suggests is that it is the absence rather than the presence of the feminine in that masculinist order – and, by association, James', too – that is conducive to the greatest instability and most excessive violence. If the lack of a child creates a problem for the hereditary system, the lack of the woman without and within men creates a bigger conundrum since it makes the prospect of succession by bloody rather than blood means far more likely.