

# The Fiendlike Queen: Recuperating Lady Macbeth in Contemporary Adaptations of *Macbeth*

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## Abstract

Many adaptations and appropriations in recent decades have attempted to recast the "fiend-like queen" Lady Macbeth in a more positive light — a difficult task, given her actions in Shakespeare's play. These representations move far away from earlier texts in which "Lady Macbeth" is little more than a synonym for a murderous woman. Several recent works of popular culture seek, instead, an explanation or rationale for her participation in Duncan's murder through reference to her earlier marriage and son by that marriage (both suppressed in Shakespeare's play), to her situation as a woman in a culture of Celtic masculinity, and even to a supposed daughter, with whom she is ultimately reunited. The result is a repentant, heroic, even justified Lady Macbeth. Among the works discussed are Gordon Bottomley, *Gruach* (1919), Susan Fraser King, *Lady Macbeth: A Novel* (2008), Lisa M. Klein, *Lady Macbeth's Daughter* (2009), and A. J. Hartley and David Hewson, *Macbeth: A Novel* (2012).

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*Perhaps today's Lady Macbeth needs Women's Liberation.* — Ruby Cohn (1976)

For Terry Eagleton, "to any unprejudiced reader — which would seem to exclude Shakespeare himself, his contemporary audiences and almost all literary critics — it is surely clear that positive value in *Macbeth* lies with the three witches. The witches are the heroines of the piece, however little the play itself recognizes the fact" (Eagleton 1986, 2). Eagleton's notorious comment points to just one of many attempts in recent decades to recast the witches in a more positive light, usually as demonized projections of patriarchal anxieties. Such efforts have had considerable success. The work of feminist scholars such as Diane Purkiss, Dymphna Callaghan, Peter Stallybrass, and Helen Ostovich, among many others that could be named, has gone far to place the play's witches in contexts of patriarchal, religious, social, and political discourses.<sup>1</sup>

Lady Macbeth has proven to be a harder case to rehabilitate, at least on the stage (as seen recently in Kate Fleetwood's harrowing depiction in Rupert Goold's version). Her place in

critical history, Cristina Alfar has observed, "is one of almost peerless malevolence" (Alfar 2003, 112).<sup>2</sup> In the nineteenth century, as Georgianna Ziegler has shown, "two images of Lady Macbeth — as barbaric and passionate or domesticated and caring — figure the conflicted notions about women's roles" in the Victorian period (Ziegler 1999, 137). Ziegler shows how Mrs. Siddons's overpowering portrayal influenced the view of Lady Macbeth throughout the century. In contrast to Lady Macbeth's frequent demonization, another actress, Ellen Terry, wrote that "It seems strange to me that anyone can think of Lady Macbeth as a sort of monster, abnormally hard, abnormally cruel, or visualize her as a woman of powerful physique, with the muscles of a prize fighter! . . . I conceive Lady Macbeth as a small, slight woman of acute nervous sensibility . . . on the terms of equals [with her husband]" (quoted in Ziegler 1999, 128). No, Terry wrote in a letter to a male supporter, "she was not good, but not much worse than many women you know — me for instance" (quoted in Auerbach 1987, 258).<sup>3</sup> Madeline Leigh-Noel, writing in 1884, saw Lady Macbeth as "a lonely woman, deprived of the love of a child and often solitary, lacking the companionship of her lord" (quoted in Ziegler 1999, 135). Other writers in this period saw Lady Macbeth as not a lonely housewife, but the amoral/immoral product of some distant barbarous age; as Anna Jameson wrote, "Lady Macbeth is placed in a dark, ignorant, iron age; her powerful intellect is slightly tinged with its credulity and superstition, but she has no religious feeling to restrain the force of will" (Jameson 1901, 374); hence, she is not really connected to the Victorian concept of "woman" at all.<sup>4</sup> Such attempts to "understand" Lady Macbeth anticipate but differ from twentieth- and twenty-first century adaptations in significant ways.

In many adaptations of the past century, especially those claiming to use feminist approaches, a very different picture of the "fiend-like queen" has emerged. These representations move far away from earlier texts in which "Lady Macbeth" is little more than a synonym for an ambitious, murderous woman, or a dessicated housewife. The several post-2001 works I will examine in this paper instead seek an explanation or rationale for her participation in Duncan's murder through various strategies: by reference to her earlier marriage and son by that marriage (as found in Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scotland* but suppressed in Shakespeare's play), to her situation as a woman in a culture of Celtic masculinity, and even to a supposed daughter with whom Lady Macbeth is ultimately reunited. The result is a repentant, heroic, even innocent — and above all, a maternal — Lady Macbeth.

My argument will be that these recent recuperations of Lady Macbeth, while "feminist" in intention if not outcome, participate in a larger cultural movement of adaptation that seeks to normalize the dramatic text as a whole. To borrow the phrase if not the exact concept from Foucault

in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1979), I see these attempts to fill in gaps, resolve plot-lines, expand on characters' "inner lives," and provide "coherent" psychological "motives" as part of a normalizing process designed to produce "docile [dramatic] bodies" susceptible to logic and obedient to linear plots and post-modern psychoanalytic analysis.

### Lady Macbeth's Literary Heritage

In the Lambs' *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807), to take a typical and highly influential nineteenth-century example (written by Charles, not Mary), Lady Macbeth is simply "a bad, ambitious woman" (Lamb 1909, 137), "a woman not easily shaken from her evil purpose" (139), though — somewhat oddly — her "manners were in the highest degree affable and royal," and she could play "the hostess with a gracefulness and attention which conciliated every one present" (142) at the banquet; she dies "unable to bear the remorse of guilt, and public hate" (145) — though where the "public hate" appears in the play, other than in Malcolm's final description of her, is unclear. Rejecting "the commonplace idea of Lady Macbeth, though endowed with the rarest powers, the loftiest energies, and the profoundest affections, [as] nothing but a fierce, cruel woman, brandishing a couple of daggers, and inciting her husband to butcher a poor old king" (Jameson 1901, 356), Anna Jameson (1832) went on not to defend or rationalize Lady Macbeth's actions, but to explicate the character's dramatic power: "She is a terrible impersonation of evil passions and mighty powers, never so far removed from our own nature as to be cast beyond the pale of our sympathies; for the woman herself remains a woman to the last — still linked with her sex and with humanity" (361).<sup>5</sup>

Mary Cowden Clarke (1853), however, imagined a more complex woman. Her essay is perhaps the earliest, and certainly the most famous instance of the now prevalent strategy of providing "explanation" and filling in perceived lacunae in the play's narrative. Clarke's Lady Macbeth is partly the product of inheritance, as her own mother had "pride of blood, the daring aspiration of her nature . . . [and] ambition," while also scorning "such qualities as she discovered in her husband" (Clarke 1887, 99). In Clarke's prequel, the infant Lady Macbeth appeared to her father as "this tender blossom, this human bud awaiting with yet half-closed petals its future development" (102). Yet her mother remained aloof, and so "the babe sucked bitterness, perverted feeling, unholy regret, and vain aspiration, with every milky draught imbibed" (104). Soon, the contaminating effects of the mother began to manifest themselves, as the infant Lady Macbeth's hand "clenched angrily, and struck and buffeted at the golden rays [of the sun] they could not seize," though soon enough she catches a silvery moth, and "the next instant, the little fingers were unclosed; to one of them stuck the mangled insect, crushed even by so slight a touch" (107). Years later, she will destroy a bird's nest — a martlet, not yet temple-haunting (126) — sending

all the young to their death without a further thought. The path from crushing moths and killing birds to regicide seems inevitable. Early on, "the indulgence of her will, the right of command, the custom of seeing herself obeyed in all things, became habitual to her . . . She could scarcely speak, ere her voice assumed the tone of authority" (109). When she becomes a woman, Gruoch<sup>6</sup> does not hesitate to use her "surpassing beauty . . . [evidenced] by the brilliancy of her complexion, by the lustre of her golden hair, and above all, by the magic of a commanding presence" (139) to wield influence over others, including, of course, Macbeth: "their mutual looks and discourse grow more and more animated, and reveal more and more how each is struck and enchanted with the other" (140). Their marriage soon bears a fruit neither the play nor the historical record ever imagines, a son "Cormac" (164), who dies in infancy — at which point, more or less, Shakespeare's play begins. Clarke's account offers a far greater understanding, if not exactly sympathy, of the character, describing an evolutionary process — malevolent maternal influence, bad milk, and an overly-indulgent father, in addition to some evil seed — where Lamb simply saw a bad woman. Clarke's introduction of the themes of milk, the maternal, and Lady Macbeth's child would be taken up in vastly more detail by later adapters.

Gordon Bottomley's play *Gruach* (1918; pub. 1921) is one of the earliest texts to offer a relatively sympathetic, even proto-feminist view of Lady Macbeth. The play takes place the night before the wedding between Gruach and Conan, Thane of Fortingall. The setting is the small castle owned by Morag, Conan's mother, where they all live; the place, we are told more than once, is a "threatening prison" (Bottomley 1921, 33), Gruach a restless but subjugated prisoner whose wedding gown is "as heavy as fetters" (16). That night, the King's messenger, Macbeth, arrives, and he and Gruach instantly connect so powerfully that she will leave with him that same night; she plans their escape, telling him that she will go first and that he should "step then upon my footprints" (56). For Bottomley, Gruach must escape her confinement to Conan, and the claustrophobic life he represents, if she is to survive. Her escape represents a commitment to nothing less than life itself:

This is my hour of fate, this is the time  
 When I must break the blind restricted seed  
 That I am now, move with the winds of life  
 And yield my mental issue to them again,  
 Or in this present burial rot and change. (45)

In a note left to Morag, Gruach simply says "I would live, so I leave you" (55). Like a romantic maiden of the previous century, she says to herself, "O, let me dream anew, and in a dream / Of uttered scorn sting vivid life to spring / Back to my sinking heart" (55).

But in addition to Gruach's quest for life at any price, Bottomley also reaches back into the chronicles to invoke her royal blood—a move, as we shall see, now common in contemporary adaptations. As Morag says,

Her father was of dead King Kenneth's breed,  
And though her line is dispossessed, she is yet  
Royal in some men's minds, heiress of peril  
But also of great chance. (11)

The unwitting Conan, coming down to an empty room on his wedding day, admits that "I would not wed her if she had no land" (66). Gruach herself puts Macbeth straight: "I am of a more ancient house of kings / Than you" (47).

### Liberating Lady Macbeth

Ruby Cohn's plea for Lady Macbeth's "liberation" has not gone unanswered.<sup>7</sup> Several recent representations of Lady Macbeth leverage her royal blood as part of an explanation, indeed justification, for the actions we know she takes in Shakespeare's play. In Susan Fraser King's *Lady Macbeth* (2008), though it is primarily a prequel to the play, Gruadh begins the novel writing from her fortified castle, six months after the death of Macbeth, sending her defiance to Malcolm. Her lineage is everything — "I am granddaughter to a king and daughter to a prince, a wife twice over, a queen as well" (King 2008, 2) — and in King's account this explains Gruadh's first marriage at thirteen, her pride, and her later actions; her second marriage, to Macbeth, came about because the victor in a combat often married the widow of his victim. King's more historically-informed story — complete with a detailed genealogical chart at the beginning — rests with little ambiguity on the early modern succession politics that Shakespeare had so thoroughly mystified in his play, where there is no hint of Lady Macbeth's royal past.<sup>8</sup> Here, by contrast, is a conversation between Gruadh and her father, Bodhe:

Bodhe narrowed his eyes. "Old Malcolm [i.e., Malcolm II, not the Malcolm Canmore of the play] wants to keep the kingship in his bloodline. Duncan will name his own son as his tanist, and so it goes. We dispute that."

I nodded. "Straight descent is not the Celtic way."<sup>9</sup>

"Exactly. Our branch, not theirs, must rightfully supply the next king of Scots." (King 2008, 60)

Gruadh will join forces with Macbeth, in part, because she has been denied her lineal rights. After Duncan's murder, Macbeth tells her "Your ancient bloodline holds the key in this. . . . Because of your blood, you will not be called consort, but full queen, and crowned as such" (273). Pushing sympathy even further, King also makes Duncan responsible for the murder of Gruadh's father. By providing Gruadh motives for murdering Duncan, then, King rationalizes her character, transforming her actions into a rough form of restored justice.

Moreover, King (like Klein, below) will retrieve from the historical record Lady Macbeth's only surviving child, from her first marriage to Gilcomgan: her son Lulach.<sup>10</sup> The historical reality of this male heir, in a royal line, has been thoroughly erased by Shakespeare, where the only trace remains, perhaps, in Lady Macbeth's infamous "I have given suck and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.54-55). Gruadh therefore fights not only for her own right, and for her lineage back in time, but also for her son's future, while Duncan — not the helpless, feminized bleeding body of Shakespeare's play — becomes a killer, and his son Malcolm no better. Indeed, King, like some other adapters, will transform the murder of Duncan into a patriotic act, intended to free Scotland both from his treachery, and from his weakness and inability to deal with Danish invasions and other subversions on the margins of his kingdom.

In line with this conception of a "patriot" Macbeth, Gruadh is also newly imagined as a medieval eco-friendly preserver of traditional Scots folkways. It's not just that "Straight descent is not the Celtic way," as Gruadh agrees with her father, but only in the North, where they rule, do the traditions of the "Celtic way" survive, beneath a veneer of Christianity. Here there is respect for the land, a kindly and protective (if paternalistic) concern for the local populace, not to mention hints of magic and mystical powers. Gruadh herself has "the Sight," the Celtic ability to see (darkly) into the future. Duncan, by contrast, is an outlier, unable to conquer without foreign assistance and insensitive to the old ways. "So long as we stay Celts," Gruadh says, "and do not become Roman, or English, or Viking instead. I fear that the Scottish Celts will lose the old wildness, the old ways, for there is much that is good and beautiful in that" (King 2008, 191). Gruadh links herself as well to the Celts' "long, proud history of warrior women" (62), and takes up the sword more than once.

These mitigations — revenge, lineal right, patriotism, cultural preservation — offer to explain the later Lady Macbeth of the play, but no historical-textual invention has been as powerful, or as prevalent, as the sympathy-inducing accounts of Lady Macbeth's often-multiple miscarriages. In King's novel, Gruadh gives birth to Lulach (the posthumous son of Gilcomgan) just after her forced

marriage to Macbeth. After a long period of coldness, Gruadh comes to admire and desire Macbeth ("I long to invite him to my bed," [King 2008, 148]), and soon is pregnant; however, "One night I went to bed with indigestion and an aching back, and by the next day no longer carried a child." Her reaction is to be "Cold as stone . . . bearing the devastation in silence" (182), but miscarriage after miscarriage follows ("my tiny hatchling slipped out of me on a slide of blood," 212), and she is no longer cold but heartbroken ("My heart still ached for a child," 217). Indeed, her maternal instincts become even stronger in protection of Lulach, who after the death of Macbeth (ambushed by a treacherous Malcolm) is crowned King of Scots,<sup>11</sup> marries, and has a daughter. King ends her novel with Gruadh most definitely alive, concerned about Lulach's fate, secure in Elgin for the time being, and defiantly rejecting suggestions from Malcolm that she marry him: "I am done with sorrow and intend to seek a little peace and magic. For now" (330).<sup>12</sup>

Lisa Klein's novel *Lady Macbeth's Daughter* (2009) takes the maternal theme even deeper into fantasy. Although also claiming to offer a narrative based on some part of the "historical" record, Klein nevertheless invents, as her title indicates, a daughter. Grelach gives birth to Albia at the beginning of the novel; the child, though, is deformed, with a "crippled leg" (Klein 2009, 1), and is taken by her servant Geillis to raise as her own. Grelach is led to believe the child is dead, since Macbeth had ordered that the "spawn of evil" be taken to the heath and left "for the wolves" (8). The motif of the abandoned child, lame but healed by the good country folk, is pursued through the expected revelations at the end. Albia — who also picks up the sword, following the ways of strong Celtic women warriors, and who also has the Sight (99) — is horrified when she eventually learns her parentage years later, rejects all that her father Macbeth has done, and only at the last minute forgives Grelach. Along the way, Klein invokes a phenomenal number of clichéd tropes from the romance/adventure genres of *The Hunger Games*, *Twilight*, and Disney's *Brave* (including the red hair). Some of Klein's inventions go far beyond even the highly implausible, such as Albia's love for Fleance (who, according to the chronicles, had long since fled the attempt on his life when his father Banquo was killed, and was already in Wales, busily impregnating the Welsh princess with an illegitimate child).<sup>13</sup>

Klein's novel focuses primarily on Albia, but it also gives a fairly full, and expiatory, version of Grelach, through roughly alternating chapters of first-person narration. Grelach too suffers multiple miscarriages ("Like a wounded animal, I cry out as I feel the child slip from my womb . . . a baby boy, perfectly formed but still and silent as Death" [Klein 2009, 20-21]). Even worse, she doesn't love Luoch (i.e., Lulach), who entered the world when the midwife "pulled from me a black-haired boy covered in wax and blood" (3), nor does Macbeth consider Luoch his heir; Grelach also cannot

love Macbeth, though she joins forces with him through the usual pride in her lineage: "How dare Duncan — whose grandfather shut my kin out of the succession — now try to extend his rule to the next generation! The injustice of it brings my blood to the boiling point" (50). Like Gruadh in King's novel, Grelach does not die a suicide but survives Macbeth's death, is spirited away by one of her ladies, and is then brought to a difficult but (could it be otherwise?) tearful reconciliation with her daughter (Grelach has only recently learned that her daughter survived). As she asks forgiveness, "tears begin to course down [Grelach's] cheeks" (240), and the novel ends when Albia silently takes her mother's hand: "I see myself taking both her wounded hands in my own. The creases around her eyes and mouth, like so many rivers inked on Scotland's map, seem to relax, softening her expression. I glimpse my mother when she was my age. With my fingertips, I stroke the skin of her hands until the bloody spots begin to fade, then disappear" (242). The key sentence permitting this reunion, and the culmination of the entire mother-daughter narrative, is Grelach's assertion of maternal love, loss, and necessity: "'All that I did,' she says, letting the tears roll down her cheeks unstopped, 'was born from my despair . . . at losing you, Albia'" (241).

Hartley and Hewson's *Macbeth: A Novel*, not a prequel like King's and Klein's, more or less follows the play's plot. The maternal theme is struck with Skena giving birth,<sup>14</sup> six years earlier, to "a boy, the only child they'd ever had, the only one they ever would, a sickly babe who barely opened his eyes in his short life"; afterwards, "Skena's womb was judged torn and fruitless" (Hartley and Hewson 2012, 53). Hence, there is no string of miscarriages, and no Lulach. Still, Skena blames Duncan's forcing them to move to Inverness for the miscarriage (68), and vows, "Since Duncan's cruelty stole from me my child, I will be nothing but a vessel of hatred for him" (81). Duncan is further demonized by his boundless lechery: he not only makes a pass at Skena, but is seen, in some detail, forcing a kitchen girl to fellate him: "The older he gets," one guard says, "the younger he likes them" (115-16). So this Duncan *really* deserves to be murdered. Hartley and Hewson even have Lady Macbeth herself finish off Duncan, who, as in standard horror movies, isn't *quite* dead when she enters the room to place the daggers: "Duncan's long, bony fingers rose and clawed at her throat . . . the daggers in her hand found life, stabbed at him, his neck and face, his scrawny arm . . . at last, she tore his talons free and fell back, staggering, crying, panting" (135). This account goes as far as absolving Skena — herself now the actual regicide — as one can imagine, from pedophile Duncan's vampire-like resurrection to the personifications and passive verbs ("the daggers . . . found life, stabbed at him") that displace her agency.

Worse for Skena, the kitchen boy Ewan, who has become a surrogate child to her, dies when he accidentally drinks the poison procured for Duncan's guards, and Skena tearfully washes his body



in preparation for burial (Hartley and Hewson 2012, 146-52). As if to rub it in, Banquo brazenly attempts to blackmail Macbeth into naming Fleance as his heir — "Take him as your own" (179) — hence providing justification for his own murder. At the end, urged on by the witches, who have reappeared to her when she flees Dunsinane, Skena slits her wrists: "after the brief, exquisite agony, [she] lay back in the scented heather, wondering at the beauty of the stars and sky," free at last (281).

David Greig's brilliant 2010 play, *Dunsinane* (2010), offers the most provocative and challenging recent account of Gruach I have encountered, though it also employs many of the same rationalizing and humanizing tropes found in the works described above. The play is a sequel, beginning when Macbeth has been killed and the victorious English general Siward and his troops encounter Gruach (rumors of her suicide had been spread by a fanatic, malicious Malcolm, who is as far from the Lambs' "young and lawful king" who "should have succeeded" Duncan as can be imagined). Greig's starting point was the question: "What happens after the dictator falls?" *Macbeth* is a play about the toppling of a dictator; we would see in it a mirror of Ceausescu or Gaddafi, with Lady Macbeth as the manipulating figure," with clear allusions to the Western invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan (Brown 2011). The play follows a devastating tragic arc, as the rational, "enlightened" Siward becomes ever more confused by Scotland and the Scots, and as a result ever more brutal in his methods; the Scots — Gruach in particular — remain a complete mystery to the invaders.

For Greig, Gruach "has the weapon of her intellect and the weapon of her sexuality. Too many depictions of Lady Macbeth portray her as a depraved woman, and her sexuality is tied up with a lust for power. I was much more interested in the idea that this is a woman who has a number of very powerful aims, *which are rational*. She believes that her clan, her faction, should be in charge, and it is her right to be queen. To achieve this she will use all means at her disposal, including her sexuality" (Brown 2011, my emphasis). Greig's Gruach becomes the focal point of Scottish opposition to the occupying troops; indeed, she becomes emblematic of Scotland itself. At one point, she seduces Siward and later, for cynical reasons, agrees to marry Malcolm (only to escape his imprisonment before the ceremony and flee to the countryside). Her resistance is rendered patriotic to the highest degree, inextricably linked to her royal identity. Her character "emerged very suddenly with a single line," Greig has said (Brown 2011): in response to Siward's question, "What is your place here?" Gruach replies, "My place here is Queen" (Greig 2010, 27). For much of the play, she asserts Lulach's right to the throne even as she hides him in the countryside. In one passage of incantatory rhetoric, she responds to Siward's request that she "renounce" her son's "claim" to the throne:

My son doesn't *claim*.  
 My son *is* the King.  
 It's not a matter about which he has a choice.  
 My son is my son.  
 My son is the son of his father.  
 My son's father is dead.  
 My son is the King. (34)

Siward can only respond by asking "What would you do — if you were me?". The answer is simple and devastating: "If I were you I would not be here" (34).

After many episodes of increasing savagery, through which the English occupiers hoped to win the hearts and minds of the people,<sup>15</sup> Siward kills a "Scottish Boy" who may or may not have been Lulach, only to have Malcolm tell him that the Moray do not accept that the dead boy is Lulach, and worse, that "it's more likely that by killing this boy you have given him eternal life" (Grieg 2010, 125). In the final scene of the play, Siward then takes the boy's body to Gruach, thinking she will give up her resistance, only to be shown a baby said to have been fathered by Lulach: "This child is now the King" (134), Gruach informs Siward, and she describes to him a lineage of birth and resistance that, in effect, will stretch to the crack of doom. The play ends with Siward not harming the baby, and walking out, without destination, to disappear into the snow: "And then there is only white" (138). Gruach not only survives, but somehow endures, a heroic, mystical figure of beauty, resistance, and agency.<sup>16</sup>

In "liberating" Lady Macbeth, these adapters employ various strategies — demonizing Duncan, Malcolm, and even Banquo, making the Macbeths patriots, preserving the old Celtic ways, and so on. These adaptations for the most part also deny Lady Macbeth the option of suicide — certainly nothing could be further from the mind of Greig's Gruach or King's Gruadh (nor from some of the historical records, which have her surviving Macbeth's death; Holinshed is silent on the question). These appropriations openly declare what might be called a "realist" vision of what the play *should* have been but failed to be, whether through Shakespeare's dereliction or the vagaries of the early modern publication process. Noah Lukeman, for example, felt compelled to give the world *The Tragedy of Macbeth, Part II: The Seed of Banquo* (2008) because, he concluded, "*Macbeth* is unfinished" (Lukeman 2008, v): the witches' prophecy about Banquo's seed becoming kings remains unfulfilled, Lady Macbeth's "child" is "omitted from the play" (vi), and the "princely" Donalbain remains in Ireland at the end. "Was Shakespeare thrice careless?" Lukeman asks (v), in as fine an example of bardolatry as one could wish, if not for his other question: "would the

greatest of English dramatists, who was careful with every syllable, actually neglect to resolve an entire subplot, indeed, the very driving action of his play?"<sup>17</sup> No, the answer comes, it could only be that he was "preparing for a *Macbeth, Part II*" (v), which Lukeman has kindly delivered. Even the more serious and scholarly Hartley and Hewson declare that "we decided to like the Macbeths, not to excuse their actions, but to try to explain them, to afford them an inner life that went beyond whatever the play could tell us, and then to watch them make a series of bad choices that escalate till they are dragging tragedy at their heels" (Hartley and Hewson 2012, 319), so their novelization proceeds, as so many adaptations do, in "filling out what is passed over" in the play (311).

### Recuperating Lady Macbeth

Many adaptations attempt to recuperate, rationalize, and understand Lady Macbeth by turning to the "historical" record to recover Lady Macbeth's royal lineage; it is worth repeating that there is not a whisper of this lineage in Shakespeare's play or Holinshed's, Buchanan's, or Leslie's accounts of Macbeth.<sup>18</sup> The scholarly case for retrieving Lady Macbeth's historical lineage has been made by Olga Valbuena, who notes that historicist critics (such as Norbrook) have thoroughly investigated the conflict of succession issues in the play but "have not addressed the historical Lady Macbeth's dynastic claims and revenge motive lurking at the margins of historical and dramatic master texts or the public transcript" (Valbuena 2003, 81). Sid Ray, quoting this passage, says with self-satisfaction that this lineage provides a "motive" for Lady Macbeth's actions, giving Lady Macbeth's actions "a political rather than personal resonance" (Ray 2008, 119), as if this is an improvement on the play.<sup>19</sup> When such critics describe Lady Macbeth's lost lineage as one of the lacunae in the play, the implication is that Shakespeare has suppressed this information, but as we have seen, he had no access to it in the first place, whereas the succession questions (mystified in the play) were openly treated in Holinshed, Buchanan, and other probable sources. The retrieval of this information (often in very partial form, and often incorrect) amounts to a sentimental rescue mission based on a conflation of a literary character with (some) elements of a historical figure.<sup>20</sup>

Ironically, this historical turn even more firmly inscribes Lady Macbeth in patriarchal discourse than Shakespeare's play does, as her "royal" lineage stems entirely (if necessarily) from her male predecessors. Greig's phrasing of Gruach's defiance — "My son is the son of his father. / My son's father is dead. / My son is the King" — reproduces the early modern period's parthenogenetic fantasies in which the female has no role in reproduction and lineage. The resurrection of Lady Macbeth's royal lineage, moreover, deflects her motivation to, in part, a restoration of past (masculine-derived) right rather than the play's looking-forward desire ("Thy

letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant" [1.5.54-6]). The "royal lineage" narrative, finally, ultimately deprives Lady Macbeth of the agency — for good or bad — that the play actually grants her.<sup>21</sup>

Finally, in addition to her royal lineage, virtually every recent adaptation has invoked, often on an elaborate scale, Lady Macbeth's maternity (or lack of it) as to a greater or lesser extent determining her actions and identity: her miscarriages multiply like Falstaff's assailants, or her son Lulach must be saved, or a daughter invented.<sup>22</sup> This focus on Lady Macbeth's maternity<sup>23</sup> also emphatically reinscribes her in patriarchal discourse, since the activities of her womb constitute her primary identity, and that womb is dysfunctional, capable only of miscarriages and deformity when not simply barren.<sup>24</sup> This move, too, devalues or deflates the agency Shakespeare grants her in the play; it is a horrific power, and it crumbles into nothingness, but it belongs to *her*. The result of these womb failures, as Adeline Chevrier-Bosseau points out, is that Lady Macbeth "becomes some kind of socially acceptable hysteric — not a degenerate woman, perverted by her unnatural lust for power, but a natural descendant of Eve, born to suffer, a 'normal' member of the weaker sex, an enduring mother, suffering because of the cruelty of men and heroically taking revenge in the name of her lost children" (Chevrier-Bosseau 2013).<sup>25</sup>

Similar normalizing strategies have frequently been employed on other Shakespeare plays (above all *Hamlet*).<sup>26</sup> Such moves routinely iron out the wrinkles of eccentricity, the irregularities characteristic of dramatic hybridity. Anyone is free to appropriate the Scottish play to their own purposes, of course, but many of the efforts described here not only inadvertently deny agency to Lady Macbeth and imagine her in feminine stereotypes, but also more generally attempt to normalize and domesticate the play's wildness, its strangeness, its ellipses, refusals, and erasures. But what's done cannot be undone.

### Notes

1. See Stallybrass 1982; Callaghan 1992; Callaghan et al 1994; Purkiss 1999; and Ostovich 2009.
2. See Alfar's (2003) useful survey of critical arguments contesting the origins and nature of Lady Macbeth's "evil."
3. As Auerbach points out, Terry's resistance to Mrs. Siddons's portrait of Lady Macbeth as a virago exposed a conceptual crux: "If Lady Macbeth was not a monster, she exposed a side of woman's nature that most men and many women did not want to know about" (1987, 252). On Victorian conceptions of Shakespeare and Lady Macbeth, see (among others) Gilbert and Gubar 1979 and Poole 2004. McDonald 2005 provides lucid summaries of each actress's career (Mrs. Siddons,

- pp. 36-48; Terry, pp. 94-100). Thompson and Roberts 1997 provide a fascinating compendium of women writing on Shakespeare, 1660-1900.
4. Smith 2010 surveys how "Lady Macbeth entered American politics and eventually the White House" (1), matching actresses' landmark performances with their current First Lady; her analysis does not include the more recent texts analyzed in this essay.
  5. Terry had written in her notes that Lady Macbeth "is full of womanliness . . . capable of affection — she loves her husband — Ergo — she is a woman — and she knows it, and is half the time afraid while urging Macbeth not to be afraid as she loves a man. Women love men" (quoted in Auerbach 1987, 255).
  6. Lady Macbeth's name is variously spelled Gruoch, Gruach, Gruadth, Grelach, etc. in the adaptations I discuss. I will use the spelling given in each version, reserving "Lady Macbeth" for Shakespeare's character. The name appears in a contemporary document as "*Gruoch filia Bodhe*" — Gruoch daughter of Bodhe (Aitchison 1999, 48). She is not named in Boece or Holinshed (Shakespeare's main source for the play).
  7. Cohn's chapter on the play surveys adaptations of the play from Davenant through the early 1970s, with useful accounts of Welles, Brecht, Ionesco, and Marowitz in particular (Cohn 1976, 60-105).
  8. On the historiography of the Macbeth story, see Farrow 1994 and Aitchison 1999; on succession theory in the period, see Nenner 1995; on Shakespeare's knowledge of Holinshed and Buchanan on these issues, see Norbrook 1987.
  9. On tanistry in the play, see Stevenson 1927 and Rolls 2002.
  10. He "received the crown, as lawful inheritor" and ruled for a brief time after Macbeth's death, until Macduff "slew him" on behalf of Malcolm Canmore (Holinshed 1808, 5.278).
  11. Macbeth promises Gruadh that "if we never make a son between us, I will name Lulach my heir" (King 2008, 244).
  12. The historical Malcolm had in fact married first Ingibiorg (probably the daughter of Thorfinn), helping to make peace with the Norsemen. He then married Margaret, the granddaughter of Edward Ironsides; their daughter married Henry I of England, with significant consequences for the succession in England (Holinshed 1808, 5.279).
  13. Holinshed 1808 (5.272) continues: the furious father "conceived such hatefull displeasure towards Fleance, that he finallie slue him, & held his daughter in most vile estate of seruitude, for that she had consented to be on this wise defloured by a stranger." The illegitimate child, Walter, eventually returned to Scotland to become chief steward (hence the name Stewart, or Stuart), founder of the line that led to James I. So Fleance was not only absent in the chronicles,

but dead. On the use of Fleance as avenging figure in contemporary film, opera, and drama, see Carroll 2013.

14. "We liked the sound of it," rather than Gruoch, the authors say in an afterword (Hartley and Hewson 2012, 319).
15. The play echoes American actions in Vietnam, as well; in one instance, Siward orders a village destroyed, its people burned, because they would not say if Lulach was present.
16. Macbeth himself barely figures in the play and is never seen. We learn only that he did not die bravely fighting, but "was running when we caught him. A spear in his back." Macduff then cuts the throat of the wounded tyrant — "It was a pleasure" — and cut off his head (Greig 2010, 25).
17. Lukeman, to be fair, is in good company. Bertolt Brecht, for one, also saw the omission of Fleance at the end as an aesthetic failure; his exasperated comments can stand for many similar remarks. Observing that all the other prophecies are fulfilled in the play, Brecht noted that "If aesthetics has played a role in the writing" of the play, then the spectator is left in the lurch when "the expectation already awakened . . . to see Banquo's son mounting the throne" is denied: "When Banquo is murdered, he escapes, and Macbeth complains bitterly that he now really must worry because of Fleance. He seems to be just as convinced by the fulfillment of the prophecy as the spectator. But then Fleance, whose escape is made a big deal, never again returns. One can only suppose that the author has forgotten him or that the actor who played Fleance was not good enough to make a bow at the end" (Brecht 1963, 103; my translation).
18. Nor is there any hint of royal lineage in Holinshed's account of Donwald's ambitious wife, as they join in murdering King Duff; this wife is widely considered to be Shakespeare's inspiration for Lady Macbeth. Holinshed's account of Lady Macbeth consists of a single sentence: the prophecy of the three weird sisters encouraged Macbeth and "speciallie his wife lay sore upon him to attempt the thing, as she that was verie ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to beare the name of a queene" (Holinshed 1808, 5.269).
19. Ray's essay first describes Gruoch's lineage, missing in the play, as a way to analyze several films which either do not do justice to Lady Macbeth or exploit the actress playing her (Orson Welles, Polanski), or "deepen the character by suggesting that Lady Macbeth has a history worth revealing" (the 2006 Australian film of *Macbeth* and *Heights* [2005]; Ray 2009). The history that is revealed in these films, however, has nothing to do with her lineage, but primarily her maternity.
20. Even if Shakespeare had had access to this historical material, the question that Anna Jameson asked in 1832 still remains valid: "what is all this [chronicle history] to the purpose? The sternly magnificent creation of the poet stands before us independent of all these aids of fancy: she

is Lady Macbeth; as such she lives, she reigns, and is immortal in the world to imagination. What earthly title could add to her grandeur? What human record or attestation strengthen our impression of her reality?" (Jameson 1901, 354).

21. Greig's version is the exception: based on conversations with a historian of the period, he developed his *Gruach* from a "speculation" that she "was the real power in the land . . . Macbeth was just the muscle employed by her to hold on to the throne" (Brown 2011).
22. Rebecca Reisert's young adult novel *The Third Witch* is unusual in that it adopts all of the mitigating strategies: thus, Lady Macbeth is heard telling Macbeth "*Your* blood is as royal as his [Duncan's]. *My* blood is more royal. My poor, dead babe whose little body molders in the ground — even the blood of my babe — gnawed by worms and other crawling things of the darkness is more royal than our greedy king's" (Reisert 2001, 115); yet the novel does not really attempt to mitigate Lady Macbeth's behavior. The narrative of Caroline Cooney's young adult novel, *Enter Three Witches: A Story of Macbeth* (2007) follows the action of the play from the point of view (primarily) of Lady Mary, daughter of the Thane of Cawdor. Cooney also resists the maternal theme, for while this Lady Macbeth was "always in a state of wanting" (Cooney 2007, 37), yet "Lady Macbeth was not motherly and would not offer comfort [to Mary]" (74), and no hitherto unknown child appears in the novel (though Fleance once again returns in triumph, and marries Lady Mary).
23. The focus on her maternity or lack of it has of course been prominent in critical studies since Bradley, memorably parodied in L. C. Knights's famous essay, "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" (originally published in 1933; Knights 1946). For an informative contemporary account of the question, with special attention to Shakespeare's "radical revision of the descriptions of [lactation by] ancient Scotswomen he found in his historical source," see Rackin 2005 (120-36).
24. Defying this tradition, the Polish production in the Globe Theatre's "Globe to Globe" festival in 2012 featured a heavily pregnant Lady Macbeth. In a striking historical irony, Mrs. Siddons was quite visibly pregnant while acting the part in 1794, but criticized only in personal terms, with no connection to the character per se: Mrs. Piozzi wrote that "She is big with Child, & I fear will for that reason scarce be well received: for people have a notion She is covetous, and this unnecessary Exertion to gain Money will confirm it" (quoted in McDonald 2005, 15). By contrast, Anna Jameson's vivid and passionate defense of Lady Macbeth as a woman — "the woman herself remains a woman to the last — still linked with her sex and with humanity" (Jameson 1901, 361) — proceeded without ever mentioning or imagining the character as (ever) pregnant.

25. Mary McCarthy offered a similar reading in her famous essay "General Macbeth": "the very prospect of murder quickens an hysterical excitement in her, like the discovery of some object in a shop . . . the unimpeded exercise of her will is the voluptuous end she seeks," so that "her wifely concern" is merely "mechanical" (McCarthy 1962, 234).
26. The second subtitle of Ann Thompson's essay — "Why So Many Prequels and Sequels?" — indicates her interest in *Hamlet* adaptations, yet her answer disappoints: "he [Hamlet] is an itch we simply cannot stop scratching" (Thompson 2013, 29).

### Permissions

Figure 1. Richard Westall, *Lady Macbeth Sleepwalking*. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Figure 2. Gordon Bottomley, *Gruach and Britain's Daughter*. [https://openlibrary.org/books/OL23282974M/Gruach\\_and\\_Britain%27s\\_daughter](https://openlibrary.org/books/OL23282974M/Gruach_and_Britain%27s_daughter).

Figure 3. Susan King, *Lady Macbeth*. <http://www.susanfraserking.com/books.htm>.

Figure 4. *Lady Macbeth's Daughter* by Lisa Klein, published by Penguin, \$16.95.

Figure 5. A. J. Hartley and David Hewson, *Macbeth: A Novel*. Photo courtesy of Andrew Hartley.

Figure 6. Siobhan Redmond as Lady Macbeth in David Greig, *Dunsinane*. Photograph by Richard Campbell.



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