

# Macduff's Amorphous Identity: Equivocation and Uncertainty as Defining Markers in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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## Abstract

This essay investigates the fundamental use of ambiguity in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Most scholarship has delved into the complexities of the protagonist and other related issues, but the character of Macduff and his role has escaped much critical attention; such an oversight, as argued in this essay, can lead to a significant misinterpretation of the drama. Macduff, once he kills Macbeth, is often viewed as the individual who restores order. This essay challenges such an assertion by considering Macduff's admission that he was "untimely ripped," an act intimately associated with both witches and midwives. Midwives in Pre and Early Modern society would have been present during a traumatic birth such as Macduff's, and the outcome of the troubled birth would seal their reputations as either miracle workers or witches. Because Shakespeare does not disclose the specific outcome of Macduff's mother, an Elizabethan audience would inhabit a world of uncertainty regarding Macduff's origins and his function. Audiences are forced to wonder if Macbeth's death is perpetrated by an individual whom saints touched or, conversely, an individual whom witchcraft tainted.

**Key words:** ambiguity, misinterpretation, death, witches and midwives.

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## Resumen

En este ensayo se investiga el uso fundamental de la ambigüedad en *Macbeth* de William Shakespeare. La mayoría de los estudios ha hurgado en las complejidades del protagonista y otros temas relacionados, pero el personaje de Macduff y su rol se han escapado de gran parte de la atención de la crítica; tal omisión, como se discute en este ensayo, puede llevar a malinterpretar significativamente esta obra. Luego de matar a Macbeth, Macduff es visto a menudo como el que restablece el orden. Este ensayo desafía tal declaración considerando el reconocimiento del propio Macduff de haber sido "prematamente desgarrado", un acto estrechamente asociado con brujas o parteras. Las parteras, antes de la sociedad moderna y a principios de ésta, habrían estado presentes durante un traumático nacimiento como el de Macduff, y el resultado de este nacimiento problemático sellaría su reputación como trabajadoras milagrosas o como brujas. Debido a que Shakespeare no revela el final preciso de la madre de Macduff, una audiencia isabelina habitaría un mundo de incertidumbre respecto de los orígenes y función de Macduff. Las audiencias están forzadas a preguntarse si la muerte de Macbeth es perpetrada por un individuo tocado por los santos o, al contrario, por un individuo contaminado por la brujería.

**Palabras clave:** ambigüedad, mala interpretación, muerte, brujas y parteras.

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*Macbeth* is, not to invest too much in understatement, a play about ambiguity. The tragedy begins with the most questionable of characters – the witches.<sup>33</sup> Their very identities as “weird sisters” (I, iii, 32) inspire Banquo to comment on their gender, the most fundamental of identity markers:

What are these  
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th'  
earth,  
And yet are on't? Live you? Or are  
you aught  
That man may question? You seem to  
understand me,  
By each at once her choppy finger  
laying  
Upon her skinny lips. You should be  
women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to  
interpret  
That you are so.

I, iii, 41 - 47

Banquo notes the “wither'd” and “wild” nature of the weird sisters, and he remarks upon their contradictory nature, for they “should be women, / And yet . . . beards

<sup>33</sup> Deborah Willis presents a compelling argument regarding the intimate connection between maternity and witches in *Malevolent Nurture*. Considering Willis's argument (witches were closely associated with a maligned maternity in the early modern period, and this thesis is borne out in both history and psychology), one might be inclined to ask who is ostensibly lacking a mother and who is ostensibly lacking a son in *Macbeth*. The titillating overt response could be the witches (again in light of Willis's conception of witchcraft) are without a child, and Macduff is without a mother, a fact that is alluded to several times in the second part of the drama. By no means is a lucid connection between Macduff and the witches ascertained at any point in the play; however, Shakespeare, an artistic master of ambiguity, still allows for the possibility of such an association (or possibly even a familial relationship between Macduff and the witches). The questions, then, of Macduff's past and the connection of his past to his future is broached ever so slightly with the presence of the witches in the first scene and their subsequent role in the drama. Macduff and the witches are inextricably linked from the beginning scene to the concluding lines of *Macbeth*.

forbid” him “to interpret” them as such. Even the “choppy finger” and the “skinny lips” suggest that one cannot conclusively determine that these beings are fully alive and animated in a human sense. At best, these witches appear to inhabit only the marginal realms of both the physical and social world, yet their presence is critical throughout the play.<sup>34</sup> If Banquo cannot ascertain a fundamental facet of their existence – that is, gender – with a reasonable degree of certainty, then one is perhaps tempted to view much of the world of *Macbeth* as a generally encompassing sphere of confusion and jumbled images in part because of the ambiguous role Shakespeare specifically constructs for these creatures who initiate the play and then materialize routinely as if to remind the audience that their purpose and existence is never far from the other more mundane and political actions that transpire.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Deborah Willis, in her work *Malevolent Nurture* (1995), makes a very important observation: witches of literature in early modern England were often hybrids in that the authors like Shakespeare drew heavily from literature but also relied on observations or accounts of witches in their respective contemporary societies. See chapter five from her book – pages 159 - 163 is especially helpful in explaining the intricacies of the fictional witch and her characterization.

<sup>35</sup> Janet Adelman, in her “Born of Woman' Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*” considers the disturbing sexual identity of the witches: “In the figures of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the witches, the play gives us images of a masculinity and a femininity that are terribly disturbed; this disturbance seems to me both the cause and the consequence of the murder of Duncan” (93). Adelman continues her discussion with a consideration of King Duncan's androgynous qualities, but the androgynous character of the witches merits critical attention as well, for this characterization in part could fasten the witches to a historic reality involving midwives. History suggests – as I will argue in this paper -- that midwives, especially during traumatic births like Caesarean sections were sometimes accused of witchcraft; indeed, the *Malleus Maleficarum* devotes whole tracts to the midwife and her suspicious natures. When Shakespeare was composing *Macbeth*, the role of midwife was being aggressively questioned. No longer did Elizabethan and Jacobean society solely accept the female midwife, and a conflation of sorts between men and women in the field was under way. This amalgamation of genders in the field of midwifery (which eventually gives rise to the “man-midwife” in the late seventeenth century) could be represented in the androgynous quality of Shakespeare's witches. Such a historical movement and literary representation add credence to the connection that is forged between

Who are they? What are they? How powerful are they? The witches are a bastion of queries. What is their ostensible role? What is their genuine function? How much deception occurs through their presence? These questions, and many more, haunt readers throughout the play; they even mercilessly torment concerned scholars in quiet moments when substance and clarity have arguably been earned. From act one to act five, the drama is awash in this opaque world that Shakespeare masterfully weaves. One is sometimes tempted to wonder if any element of the play at all escapes the looming impression of uncertainty.

Indeed, one of the initial overpowering images that Shakespeare presents to his audience in *Macbeth* is innately ambiguous: the audience hears of a soldier whose identity is concealed by blood, and Donalbain channels the audience's concern in such a way that theater patrons dwell on the issue of identity because of his blunt query "What bloody man is that?" (I, ii, 1). The soldier is identified as a sergeant who can report on the plight of the revolt – a revolt that deeply involves the Thane of Cawdor, a man on whom King Duncan "built / An absolute trust" (I, iv, 13 - 14). Those who would be friends in *Macbeth* are not, and overt appearances are often rife with a speciousness unparalleled in other plays. Chameleon-like traitors seem to lurk in all places, and Shakespeare time and time again exposes the audience to a world that finds a modus operandi in ambiguity in these faux alliances and friendships.<sup>36</sup> Sometimes, as Paul Cantor points out in "Macbeth and the Gospelling of Scotland," even the battles are unclear and may actually be waged between pagan and Christian influences rather than

between King Duncan and Cawdor's more clearly defined rebel forces.<sup>37</sup> Identities are frequently cloaked throughout the drama in borrowed robes, and even the fate of the initial rebellion in Act One is unclear, for the aforementioned sergeant tells us, "Doubtful it [the outcome of the battle] stood, / As two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art" (I, ii, 7 - 9). Eventually, of course, Shakespeare apprises the audience of Cawdor's fate, but this only further clouds one's ability to understand who is a friend and who is a foe to King Duncan, for Macbeth borrows the information to create an impetus for maligned action. Ambiguity and equivocation introduce the play and are so routinely woven into the tapestry of the drama that one is forced to question the validity of most images that present themselves. Shakespeare's use of the ambiguous intensifies the reader's thirst for clarity and definitive statements, and the conclusion of the play seduces us in this sense, but the final moments of the play are,

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<sup>37</sup> Cantor's argument is an interesting one as it applies to the ideas considered in this paper. Cantor argues that Macbeth grapples with a new Christian ethos in a pagan world. In the midst of his struggle with his desire to retain the Crown and simultaneously honor Christianity, Macbeth turns to the witches for comfort and guidance – this act leads to an abandonment of thought as Macbeth blindly follows the prophecies the witches provide. Cantor suggests, "Thus the Weird Sisters, who seem to offer new power to Macbeth, in fact take away whatever power he originally possessed and turn him into a creature of their own ends. He thinks that providence is serving him, but in reality he ends up serving providence, or at least whatever order the witches represent. Macbeth's loss of freedom is reflected in the diminishing proportion of thought to deed that characterizes his behavior in the course of the play" (334). Cantor later suggests (340-344) that Macbeth prefers a world of chaos to a world of bounded desires, so the ambitious thane succumbs to the pagan influences represented in the witches. The play concludes, according to Cantor, in a world that embodies a nascent acceptance of Christianity. This may not be an unequivocal situation if, as I argue here, Macduff and his role is affiliated, even possibly motivated, by the witches. If Macduff and all he represents can be associated with the witches and their concept of providence, then Cantor's "gospelling" of Scotland cannot be accepted without healthy skepticism; indeed, such an understanding of Act Five might portend an extended battle and bloodshed between the Christian and Pagan influences in society. Where Cantor sees a modicum of clarity and finality in Shakespeare's conclusion, I see further questions and disruption.

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Shakespeare's witches and the image of the midwife. Also, Gabriele Bernhard Jackson, in her article "Topical Ideology: Witches, Amazons, and Shakespeare's Joan of Arc" (*Shakespeare and Gender: A History*, 1995), discusses the transgressions made by witches in the realm of gender; unfortunately, the essay is mired in jargon, and many of the ideas (which may have merit) are condemned to obscurity.

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps scholars must be especially vigilant about any alignment made with any of these characters no matter how tempting the relationship might be. Shakespeare is clear about the ubiquity of deception and the ruins that can be found in its wake.

as I will discuss in detail in this essay, intimately linked to the witches and their impenetrable mystique.

As I mentioned earlier, Shakespeare begins *Macbeth* with ambiguity and equivocation. As a result, readers naturally seek to solve the mystery of the play – the audience seeks a clarion connection to the work, especially as the drama approaches its denouement, yet just as Iago’s motives remain in an elusive state, so too does Shakespeare appear to sequester his audience in a world that will only provide them with what they will: this is an illusion and only an illusion at many levels, and it is masterfully executed. As I intend to prove in this essay, the bard remains true to his ambiguous nature as it is expressed throughout *Macbeth* and reveals nothing for his theater patrons except a reflection of their own desperate illusions. Audiences (early modern and post modern alike) fall prey to their own basest of natures as Plato and Francis Bacon might define them – deception through the senses.

Before Shakespeare introduces this first cascading sequence of ambiguous events and images which characterize the tumultuous battle, the bard confronts his audience with profoundly significant creatures that are critical to our understanding of the dynamic forces which are set into motion: the witches. The witches are central to the play because they appear at key moments throughout the drama, and they technically act as an oddly unifying element in the midst of chaos; even at the inchoate stages of the play, the witches already plot their next appearance by stating in the first line, “When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?” (I, i, 1 - 2). Like much of the play with its illusive identities and ambiguous images, we do not know who these “weird sisters” are; indeed, we do not even know whether they are women, and we may even entertain doubts about their status as living beings,<sup>38</sup> yet we are assured that these creatures will return and play a role in the drama. While Shakespeare almost drowns his audience in

polysemous images, events, and language, some comfort can, ironically, be rescued in the form of the witches because their presence is a ubiquitous and somewhat reliable one.

But what is the nature of that presence? Are they good, or are they evil?<sup>39</sup> Are they powerful, or are they the marginalized seeking some voice in society?<sup>40</sup> In short, one can speculate about their functions and general natures, but these speculations will be limited arguments. The weird women’s domain on Shakespeare’s stage is the domain of the unknown, and the bard carefully shrouds these creatures in ambiguity and obscurity. The text, of course,

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<sup>39</sup> See Ronald Homes’s thoughtful book *Witchcraft in British History* (1974) to gain an understanding of the complicated circumstances that surrounded a witch’s identity. Not all witches were interpreted as wholly evil, nor were all witches interpreted as wholly good. Sundry gradations of witches were present from even the earliest moments of British history, but these differences were more pronounced and defined in the Early Modern period, an era when society as well as scholars and theologians reacted to each type of witch with different fears and expectations. This well researched book specifically discusses the differences between “white witches,” who use “veneficium,” and those witches who use “maleficium.” Holmes identifies three different types of witches – the folk-witch, the political-witch, and the heretic-witch (15, 36, 37). The first category of witch, the folk-witch, includes the white witch, who was skilled in herbal remedies and had access to a limited education that was communicated outside of any formal space. I think a particularly interesting consideration Holmes entertains is the intimate connection between fertility rites of the ancient pagans in Britain and witchcraft. St. Augustine (A.D. 354-430) was especially concerned about this influence and wrote about it in *De Civitate Dei*: “It is a widespread belief that sylphs and fauns, commonly called incubi, have frequently molested women, sought and obtained coitus with them.” (quoted in Holmes, page 34). Early British history, then, bears out a connection between weird women and fertility rites, a connection that remains present in the Early Modern midwife. Also, see chapter one, “(Un)Neighborly Nurture,” in Deborah Willis’s *Malevolent Nurture* for a discussion about the polarized roles healers and witches could occupy. On one hand, the “gossip” was a female neighbor who often had specialized knowledge in the form of midwifery (10). She was seen as a good mother who practiced white magic. On the other hand, the witch was perceived as a “gossip” who had been perverted and used witchcraft to harm those around her – this included miscarriages and other unfortunate events that could transpire during pregnancy and childbirth.

<sup>40</sup> See Deborah Willis’s *Malevolent Nurture* in its entirety for a healthy consideration of the cunning women in early modern society.

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<sup>38</sup> Please reference the argument made on page two of this paper.

teases us with glimpses of their motives, but these clues serve only as morsels to whet our appetites. Are they omnipotent, omniscient, or merely menacing?<sup>41</sup> Again, much like the question of gender, we never approach an unequivocal understanding of their identities or their powers. Casual readers and scholars alike are confined to their world of the occult that showers Shakespeare's audience with a multitude of questions but proffers very few answers, and these questions haunt many different elements of the play. They are also critical to understanding the subtext Shakespeare creates.

Their physical image, however, is seared in the minds of the audience through a sequence of appearances (I.i, I.iii, II.i, III.v, IV.i), and they are mentioned in numerous other scenes. Shakespeare almost makes a point about returning to the witches in every act; even in scene five of Act Five, the one act which does not afford us a specific physical glimpse of the witches, Macbeth ponders the fulfillment of the Apparition's prophecy – a prophecy overseen by the witches and materialized under their close supervision. This argument for omnipresence of possibly malevolent female influences is in direct contradiction to the conclusion Janet Adelman draws in her article "Born of Woman' Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*":

The play that begins by unleashing the terrible threat of destructive maternal power and demonstrates the helplessness of its central male figure before that power thus ends by consolidating male power, in effect solving the problem of masculinity by eliminating the female. In the psychological fantasies that I am tracing, the play portrays the failure of the androgynous parent to protect his son, that son's consequent fall into the dominion of the bad mothers, and the final victory of a masculine order in which mothers no longer threaten

<sup>41</sup> See Deborah Willis's *Malevolent Nurture* to understand more fully the complexity of identifying the witch and the witch's powers. Chapter one is especially helpful when considering the some of the powers these creatures wielded. Also, Ewen C. L'Estrange's *Witchcraft and Demonianism : A Concise Account Derived from Sworn Depositions and Confessions Obtained in the Courts of England and Wales* (1933) offers excellent insight into some of the powers presumably held by witches.

because they no longer exist. (Alderman, 111)

While Alderman's assertion that Shakespeare solves "the problem of masculinity by eliminating the female" may be plausible on a wholly physical realm, I resist Alderman's final conclusion that "mothers no longer threaten because they no longer exist." A possible interpretation I offer here opposes the absolute abrogation of a feminine presence and malevolent nature. At the very least, I think the possibility exists that the witches are exercising influence at the conclusion of the play through their agent Macduff;<sup>42</sup> additionally, the play never discloses the fate of the witches. What is certain is the general presence of the witches throughout the drama, and the interpretation I offer here considers the possibility of a continued influence (as would be consistent with their characters throughout the drama), albeit not a direct or overt influence. The witches and the Apparition are not openly dispatched, and such equivocation and implied absence on Shakespeare's part necessitates an analysis of what we do know – who they are and how they function before their supposed ethereal evaporation.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>42</sup> See Deborah Willis's *Malevolent Nurture* (52-58). Witches were considered bad mothers, and their offspring assumed the shapes of a variety of imps. Additionally, the concept of the "bad breast" is associated with the idea of imps. Witches, then, were known to have agents of all sorts who would do the bidding of these bad mothers. Obviously Macduff is not an imp in the traditionally defined role, but his relationship to the witches and his actions could easily be understood in terms of imps and their relations to witches.

<sup>43</sup> Remember, these are beings who magically seem to appear and disappear into thin air. Macbeth comments that "Into the air; and what seem'd corporal melted, / As breath into the wind. Would they had stay'd" (I, iii, 81-82). Roman Polanski's famous rendition of *Macbeth* has the necromancers materializing out of fog and smoke in a manner that heightens this otherworldly quality. Presumably Shakespeare's actors would have used a series of trapdoors located in the stage for entrances and exits, but to my knowledge, there are no surviving directions regarding the introduction of their presence. This is an important detail, for the use of a trapdoor would serve as an intimate connection to supernatural world. Russ McDonald, in *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* (2001) explains the significance of such use of physical space in the Early Modern theater patron's mind: "The size of the stage at the Fortune was about 43 feet wide and 27 feet deep, larger than the Rose's

While much of the drama may be elusive, we can say with confidence that the witches are inextricably linked not only to Macbeth, but also to Macduff. Shakespeare's protagonist serves as an integral component of the play, for Macbeth seeks the witches' counsel, and he is carefully guided by the weird sisters to what Shakespeare terms "apparitions," who then offer the wayward and illegitimate potentate the following prophecy:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute;  
laugh to scorn  
The power of man, for none of  
woman born  
Shall harm Macbeth.  
IV, i, 96-98

The witches are present at the very moment of this Delphic prophecy, which ultimately encourages Macbeth to venture down a road of destruction. Beyond merely being present, the witches offer guidance and assistance during this stressful event, and they serve as helpers for the apparition. The scene mirrors an unholy birth with the witches serving as helpmates, much like the midwives of old served as a comforting female presence in

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platform . . . Two columns on the stage itself supported a roof that partly covered the playing area; this canopy, known as the *heavens*, was adorned with paintings of the sun, moon, and stars visible from below. The *heavens* corresponded to the *hell* beneath the stage. A trapdoor in the stage gave access to the area beneath the stage so that in plays like Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, Faustus could be taken into hell." (116). In *The Shakespearean Stage* (1992), Andrew Gurr argues that illustrations (most especially the de Witt drawing) suggest a series of curtains were used to conceal "the cellarge" or hell. Entrances and exits, on the other hand, that were more conventional – that is stage left and stage right – would be interpreted as an extension of the natural world unless clearly noted in some other manner. The association Shakespeare explicitly makes between the witches and their ethereal nature is important, for it implies that their physical absence is in no way a guarantee that they no longer exist. With physical beings, a physical absence equates to discontinued influence because terrestrial beings are limited to the natural world and do not drift between planes of existence. Such a limited existence cannot be imposed upon the witches. Their presence and influence may not be predicated on their corporeal beings, for they seem to appear and disappear out of thin air, a quality that heightens their mystique; thus, with these specific creatures, their physical absence when the play concludes is in no way conclusive evidence that they no longer exist or even that they no longer exert some sort of social influence.

the midst of childbirth,<sup>44</sup> and the activity gives rise to an ominous revelation which is itself grounded in the concept of birth.<sup>45</sup> This is a powerful image, and, as I will presently consider in detail, a Jacobean audience would likely have strong reactions to the supervisory role played by the weird sisters.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> "Mothers and their midwives in seventeenth-century London" (1993) by Doreen Evenden is especially helpful in understanding the necessary role of the midwife in early modern England. Evenden's consideration of the salary scale that was applied to midwives is provocative if not disturbing. For detailed summaries of reported incomes and duties, please see "Mothers and Midwives" (79-106) in Doreen Evenden's *The Midwives of Seventeenth-Century London* (2000). Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski's *Not of Woman Born* (1990) also provides a thoughtful analysis of the early modern midwife. The duties and roles of midwives are also considered in David Harley's "Provincial midwives in England: Lancashire and Cheshire, 1660-1760" (1993), Merry E. Wiesner's "The midwives of south Germany and the public/private dichotomy" (1993), and "The politick midwife: models of midwifery in the work of Elizabeth Cellier" (1993). Wiesner's essay is concerned solely with German midwives; however, this essay considers the powerful pressures exerted upon the establishment by male surgeons and barbers. The midwives of England were most certainly not immune from male encroachment, and this shift in gender roles was most noticeably seen in the rise of the "man midwife."

<sup>45</sup> Thomas Rogers Forbes, in *The Midwife and the Witch* (1966), discusses the pittance accorded to midwives in Early Modern England. He states that, "The profession of midwife was in general a lowly one during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and part of the seventeenth centuries" (112). Forbes, in his meticulous research, further notes the privations of the midwife: "Records of fees for British midwives before 1700 are rather scanty. The fees varied greatly. In 1558 6s.8d. was paid to a midwife who traveled from Somersetshire to London for a confinement; 12d. went to a rural midwife in 1610." (quoted in Forbes (113) who cites the information in Aveling, 1872; Garrison, 1929; Harland, 1856). Throughout chapter eight, "The Midwife and the Witch," Forbes carefully documents the powerful connection between midwives and witches; furthermore, he attributes this relationship to a number of factors – poverty and marginalization being among them (113). Deborah Willis's *Malevolent Nurture* (1995) greatly expands upon the implications of this relationship for women and society at large in Early Modern England.

<sup>46</sup> A relationship between magic and childbirth was clearly established in Early Modern England. See Thomas Rogers Forbes's *The Midwife and the Witch* (1966). Chapters three ("Pregnancy and Fertility Tests"), four ("The Prediction of Sex"), and five ("Chalcedony and Childbirth") are especially important work that explain the oftentimes bizarre and random forms of magic used during pregnancy, labor, and birth. The surreal use of magic and potions (with a particular interest in pregnant women's urine and its innate properties) mirror the other-worldly atmosphere

Many crises unfold throughout *Macbeth*, and the play yields itself to tragedy at almost every turn, but the revelation of the apparition is an instance where Macbeth's hubris seems to be fueled and channeled by the weird sisters, and he is overpowered and even motivated by their "help." In short, Macbeth is both profoundly and adversely affected by their presence at this delicate juncture. Shakespeare's allusion to birth in the solicited prophecies and, equally important, its surrounding images are seminal elements to our understanding the underpinnings of Macduff, the witches, and the entire text. From a historical perspective, midwives were in a position (as lowly as it might have been socially perceived and valued<sup>47</sup>) to oversee birth, and they were assigned the role of modern day obstetricians – it was a place where empowerment for

women could occur through a type of professionalization.<sup>48</sup> In her chapter entitled "The Marginalization of Women in Obstetrics," Renate Blumenfield-Kosinski traces women's loss of dominance in the realm of the birth chamber, and, more precisely, the marginalization of midwives: "As the evidence shows, midwives were systematically excluded from the Caesarean operation starting about the beginning of the fifteenth century" (Blumenfield-Kosinski 91), but the birth chamber was still, "considered the exclusive domain of women, at least up to the eighteenth century" (Blumenfield-Kosinski 91). Midwives in the early modern period were seen as something of a threat to men who battled for dominance over the world of medicine<sup>49</sup> – a battle that typically manifested itself in the skirmishes between the barbers and the surgeons, but both sects were often united in their mutual determination to curtail the role of women in medicine. These concerted attacks on midwives, in fact, were of such ferocity that Blumenfield-Kosinski notes

On the one hand, they [medieval midwives and female practitioners] were the victims of the professionalization of medicine, which consisted largely in exclusionary measures directed at women and empiric healers. On the other, midwives and female practitioners were among the prime targets of the witch-hunts. (Blumenfield-Kosinski 92).

These midwives were in possession of highly specialized knowledge just as the witches of *Macbeth* seem to be in possession of highly specialized and archaic knowledge.

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Shakespeare creates with the witches and the apparitions. Chapter Six, "Word Charms and the SATOR Mystery," explains how female midwives would chant over (often distressed) women in the throes of labor. One chant in particular is recorded as such: "From a man, a man; from a virgin, a virgin; the lion of the tribe of Judah conquers; Mary bore Christ; Elizabeth, although sterile, John the Baptist. I adjure thee, infant, by Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, whether male or female, that thou issue forth from thy mother's beody. Be thou empty, be thou empty!" (Zingerle, Oswald von. 1891. *Segen und Heilmittel aus einer Wolfsthurner Handschrift des XV. Jahrhunderts. Z. Volkskunde, 1.*) These words, found in a fifteenth century manuscript in an Austrian Castle, were to be recorded on a card and then secured to a pregnant woman's belly before she gave birth (82). Presumably, they were then spoken during the ordeal of labor. This is an example of the spoken charms that were used by "gossips" all over Europe, and I think these oral charms create an ambiance that closely mirrors the witches and their charms in Act IV, scene i of *Macbeth*.

<sup>47</sup> Thomas Rogers Forbes, in *The Midwife and the Witch*, characterizes the midwife as "poverty stricken" (113). Even by the early to mid 1700's, midwives according to Doreen Evenden (*The Midwives of Seventeenth-Century London*; 2000) typically received compensation not in excess of one pound (see chapter three, but page 93 is especially helpful). Some exceptions are found, and Evenden notes one in excess of four pounds, but, generally paltry fees were more often tendered to midwives than not. Some wild fluctuations occur in the fees that are levied. David Harley, in his essay "Provincial midwives in England: Lancashire and Cheshire, 1660-1760" (*The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe*; edited by Hilary Marland; 1993; Routledge) notes that there were accounts of man-midwives who charged only a couple of guineas when other midwives received as much as three pounds for their services.

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<sup>48</sup> This limited opportunity to express a voice and exercise power of any kind was by no means exalted as virtuous in Early Modern England. Thomas Rogers Forbes (1966) explains in *The Midwife and the Witch* that midwives were, by and large, relegated to marginalized positions of poverty in society; nevertheless, the midwife could gain some traction in society as a perceived witch who had access to knowledge beyond the natural world (see chapter eight). These women were not dismissed wholesale and were often regarded with suspicion.

<sup>49</sup> This threat would be compounded by the close connection to witchcraft many of these women enjoyed or sometimes more accurately endured. Such a connection is documented by Thomas Rogers Forbes (1966) in *The Midwife and the Witch*.

Another powerful parallel can be drawn regarding the status of the witch. In many cases, the midwives of the early modern period were accused of being witches in part because they served supervisory roles during childbirth, a highly stressful and traumatic event. Historically, the midwives were ousted from their profession through official avenues, but the presence of an unyielding inveterate animus often resulted in witch hunts and other sanctions. The weird sisters of *Macbeth* are already identified as witches, so there is a possibility – indeed, maybe even a probability – that these women would be associated with midwives if Blumenfield-Kosinski is correct and midwives “were among the prime targets of the witch-hunts.”<sup>50</sup> The identity of the midwife and the witch, then, was often fused for a variety of reasons, and this is a very important consideration when reading *Macbeth*.<sup>51</sup>

The question of the midwife and the role of the midwife, while under extreme scrutiny, was by no means settled when Shakespeare wrote his plays.<sup>52</sup> Blumenfield-Kosinski notes that “Unlike in Germany, in France ordinances regulating midwifery (and thus the “controlled midwife”) did not appear until 1560” (Blumenfield-Kosinski 104). The entire field of medicine, both on the continent and in England, was on shifting ground. Sometimes women as midwives retained their traditional roles and were the sole

supervisors of the birthing process – this included Caesarian sections. At other times, however, their role in obstetrics was severely marginalized and curtailed. The birthing scene in Shakespeare’s time was a variegated landscape, and no universal observation can be made – Blumenfield-Kosinski struggles with this historical reality. In broad terms, the role of the midwife was under scrutiny, and the authority of the midwife was in the process of being diminished.

As a result of this scrutiny, midwives were often embraced as “prime targets” in the witch-hunts, and Blumenfield-Kosinski expounds upon this:

Women were the principal targets of the witch-hunters. Of more than a hundred thousand people executed during the witch-hunts, 85 percent were women. One type of woman proved particularly vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft: that of the old “hag,” especially if she was a midwife. How did this stereotype of the witch develop? Theological, ideological, and sociological factors all contributed to the creation of a concept of “the witch.” (Blumenfield-Kosinski 105).

Not only were midwives, then, people of interest in witch-hunts, but so was “the old ‘hag,’ especially if she was a midwife.” This convergence of images and roles is especially interesting considering Shakespeare’s use of the weird sisters – including the purely visual images that could be evoked on stage depending on individual productions -- and Banquo’s astonishment at their decrepit appearance. More evidence, then, is suggested to forge a connection between Shakespeare’s witches and midwives.<sup>53</sup>

We may not be certain about the powers wielded by the witches in *Macbeth*,

<sup>50</sup> A host of additional associations between midwives and witches is introduced by Thomas Rogers Forbes (1966) throughout his work *The Midwife and the Witch*.

<sup>51</sup> Ronald Holmes expounds upon this insight in *Witchcraft in British History* (1974): “The ‘white witch,’ who acted as herbalist and midwife and performed a useful service to the community within her limited powers was another of his [James Sprenger, Professor of Theology and author of *Malleus Meleficarum*] victims. ‘No one does more harm to the Catholic Faith than midwives,’ he wrote, and another group of women became subject to persecution.” (49).

<sup>52</sup> Indeed, King Henry VIII, in 1511, introduced legislation referred to as the “Medical Statute” which was, in all likelihood, a response to his first child’s death that occurred in that same year. The “Medical Statute” deplored and condemned mountebanks of all sorts, and the king was especially concerned with discerning the “uncunning from the cunning” (Holmes 59-60). Midwives were located, professionally and theologically, in the epicenter of this debate and would be for decades to come. In the midst of this turmoil comes Shakespeare and his witches in *Macbeth*.

<sup>53</sup> The connection between midwives and witches is by no means undisputed. See Geoffrey Scarre, *Witchcraft and Magic in 16th and 17th Century Europe* (1987) and G.R. Quaipe’s *Godly Zeal and Furious Rage: The Witch in Early Modern Europe* (1987). Still, Kosinski offers support for the opposing argument, and many scholars (Ehrenreich, Willis, and Kosinski) recognize a somewhat higher percentage of midwives who are accused of witchcraft than the general population of women. Additionally, the *Malleus Malifacarum* singles out midwives as women of interest during the witchcraft trials.



but their physical description and textual identification as “witch” would lead a Jacobean audience to, at the very least, tangentially associate these women with midwives.<sup>54</sup> This is an important image because we take solace in Macduff’s conclusive victory over the vanquished Macbeth in Act Five, and his triumph – the triumph of order and virtue over chaos and unchecked ambition – must remain free from the taint of corruption if we are to revel in

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<sup>54</sup> Thomas Rogers Forbes’ *The Midwife and the Witch* (1966; Yale University Press) makes a very compelling argument that midwives were affiliated with witchcraft. He explains that, “Ignorant, unskilled, poverty-stricken, and avoided as she often was, it is small wonder that the midwife could be tempted, in spite of the teachings of the Church, to indulge in superstitious practices or even in witchcraft” (113). For a full exegesis of his argument regarding the midwife’s association with the witch, see chapter eight, pages 112-132. This argument is by no means without its critics. Recent critics have brought attention to the organization and professionalization of midwives and their practices. Senior midwives were used to oversee apprentices, and licensing was a common practice (see Doreen Evenden’s *The Midwives of Seventeenth-Century London*; 2000; Cambridge University Press and *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe* edited by Hilary Marland; Routledge; 1993). Helen King’s entry, “The politick midwife: models of midwifery in the work of Elizabeth Cellier” in *The Art of Midwifery: Early Modern Midwives in Europe* is especially interesting because Elizabeth Cellier is so articulate and forceful. Clearly she is a highly educated midwife; nevertheless, Forbes presents a preponderance of evidence that creates, at the very least, some relationship between midwives and witches. He considers a number of cases regarding witches who were known midwives (117), elements of literature that conflated the role of midwife and witch (123-125 – and these accounts include such renowned authors as Thomas Middleton, John Bale, and William Shakespeare), historical depositions that indicted midwives for the practice of witchcraft (126-127), and a consideration of how midwives were addressed in the *Malleus Maleficarum*. Ultimately, Forbes concludes that, “All the evidence considered, what can we conclude? It is well established that witchcraft was widely practiced in Europe, and we can be sure that some midwives were tempted to enjoy its forbidden delights. Undoubtedly there were opportunities for them to use witchcraft professionally. They were often accused of practicing the black arts, sometimes unjustly but sometimes, it appears, quite correctly. What proportion of the midwives was involved in witchcraft cannot be determined. The records, even when factual, are chiefly accounts of wrongdoing” (132). Considering all of the evidence Forbes provides, I believe some sort of connection between midwives and witches was present in early modern society, and this affiliation would have been present in the culture in which Shakespeare performed and wrote.

the unequivocal subjugation of the maligned forces found in *Macbeth*. Simply put, if good is to conquer and vanquish evil, Macduff must be clearly aligned with the forces of good; otherwise, the tincture of his soul will color our perception of a virtuous conclusion. Upon consideration of the intricacies Shakespeare embeds in the text, this euphoria about Macduff’s audacious act of beheading Macbeth may be a bit premature.

In scene nine of Act Five, Macduff approaches Malcolm with Macbeth’s head, and, in the final moments of the play, allows the audience as well as the nobles present on stage to rejoice in the security of a stabilized society.

Hail, King! For so thou art.  
Behold where stands  
Th’ usurper’s cursed head: the  
time is free.  
I see thee compass’d with thy  
kingdom’s pearl,  
That speak my salutation in  
their minds;  
Whose voices I desire aloud  
with mine:  
Hail, King of Scotland!  
(V, ix, 19-25)

Macduff appears to serve as a force that drives society away from Macbeth’s chaos and his ersatz alliance with the witches. He is to be the untainted hero who will extricate Scottish society from the hell that has enveloped it. The first words Macduff utters in the presence of Malcolm are an unabashed “Hail, King!,” and they resonate with a sigh of relief; however, just as Macbeth was greeted with a hail from the witches in Act One, here in Act Five Macduff greets Malcolm with a hail that identifies him as king, and audiences might perhaps be a bit too eager to embrace Malcolm as the legitimate king. To some extent, a desire to embrace a clear denouement is spurred on by the ineffable carnage witnessed throughout the drama. Violence infects every corner of Scotland, and Shakespeare’s response is a resolved Macduff, who presents “Th’ usurper’s cursed head” in an effort to solidify, in unequivocal terms, the victory against an era of tyranny; at this moment, Macduff assures us that, “the time is free,” and Scotland can begin a desperately needed era of healing and

reconciliation. Macduff further asserts the newfound presence of social stability when he explains, "I see thee compass'd with thy kingdom's pearl, / That speak my salutation in their minds; / Whose voices I desire aloud with mine: Hail, King of Scotland!" All people of virtue and worth, according to Macduff, are now rallying behind Malcolm with a unified apothegm "Hail, King of Scotland!" Everybody clamors for social stability and unity in this dramatic and frenetic moment: Macduff, Malcolm, the nobles, (arguably) the audience (both early modern and post modern alike), and (arguably) even King James.<sup>55</sup> The expression of relief from Macduff, Malcolm, and the nobles is almost palpable at the end of the drama. The Jacobean audience would have viewed the play shortly after Elizabeth's death, a time of national anxiety – this anxiety would have been especially intense at the time considering the uncertainty surrounding the succession of the monarchy.<sup>56</sup> Again, a Jacobean audience would, in all probability, deeply yearn for some outward sense of social stabilization in part because of the factors mentioned above, but also because the past twenty years had fed a number of anxieties (the epidemics involving the plague, the seemingly invincible Spanish Armada of 1588, religious turmoil and reconstruction, and occasional famines to name only a few of the more prominent and persistent threats).<sup>57</sup> Civil unrest, in the

form of the English Civil War, was not temporally distant from the performances of Macbeth, and social stability is a quality many Jacobean audiences would have appreciated – even thirsted for.<sup>58</sup> King James, too, would have been likely to embrace the conclusion of the play because, as Frank Kermode expounds, ". . . the Show of Kings confirms the words of King James himself, who expressed the hope that he and his descendants would 'rule over [Britain] to the end of the world'" (Kermode 1308). Even today's audiences might be inclined to embrace Shakespeare's overt ending because, after such disruption and displacement, post modern audiences arguably grovel for some sense of comfort and security.<sup>59</sup> A public free fall where the state succumbs to chaotic impulses is, generally, a situation most spectators desire to eschew, but this observation can be applied most especially to England's Early Modern audience when one considers the immediate historical context.

But it is Shakespeare's ending to *Macbeth*, grounded in stability and certainty, which the bard's audience is so eager to embrace – that everyone is so eager to embrace – that may not be what it originally appears to be. In Shakespeare's tradition of Macbethian equivocation, the ending of this play tempts readers with something they desperately desire, but then doubts begin to haunt the final moments. Those doubts have not dissipated; indeed, the consideration afforded in this paper may amplify such doubts.

These doubts are subtle; furthermore, they always seem to point their mangled and decrepit fingers at the witches. The most disturbing of these gossamer doubts may be the prophecy yielded to Banquo:

1 Witch: Hail!

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history that was imbued with stability and heroism. This impulse can be found in *Macbeth* at this moment as well.<sup>58</sup> R.H. Parry's *The English Civil War and After 1642-1658* (1970) provides a strong set of essays that contextualizes, from the vantage point of history, the impending Civil War and its discontents.

<sup>59</sup> This may even be more pronounced after the September 11 attacks and the galvanization that has subsequently occurred. Wars, natural disasters, and weakening social institutions could easily affect the need for certainty and stability in the play.

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<sup>55</sup> Charles Boyce points out that "since the play influenced a work published in early 1607, we know it must have been performed as early as 1606" (393) – the early days of King James's rule. As one of Shakespeare's first plays in this new monarchy, *Macbeth* overtly offers a promise of social stability under King James's rule. In his introduction to the play, Frank Kermode establishes King James's fervent interest in Banquo and his descending line of kings (1308); furthermore, Kermode offers evidence that King James was heavily invested in the question of the witch and clearly believed in witchcraft as was evident in his *Daemonologie*, which was published in 1599.

<sup>56</sup> Chapters nine, ten, and eleven in John Guy's *Tudor England* (1988) are especially helpful in understanding the political, theological, and cultural anxiety that troubled Queen Elizabeth's England. The deepening divisions that involved religious, political, and economic turmoil cannot be stressed enough.

<sup>57</sup> Also, consider Phyllis Rackin's *Stages of History*. Rackin persuasively argues that Shakespeare catered to the impulse of nostalgia – a golden time in England's

2 Witch: Hail!

3 Witch: Hail!

1 Witch: Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

2 Witch: Not so happy, yet much happier.

3 Witch: Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.

So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

I, iii, 62 - 67

The witches, so uncannily accurate in their prophecies, suggest that Banquo's sons, and here one is inclined to consider Fleance's role in such a prophecy, are destined to inherit the throne of Scotland. Still, when the play concludes, Malcolm is alive and prepared to accept the throne; furthermore, no indication has been made that his sibling, Donalbain, is deceased or laboring under any imminent threat. Such a cast of characters, if the witches' prophecy is to unfold, suggests the likelihood of disruption in the ranks of the royalty that might rival King Lear's daughters and, possibly, something far more sinister. King James might enjoy a fleeting moment of tranquillity knowing the lineage of Banquo is destined to receive the throne, for his legitimacy as a monarch is invested in such a prediction, but the surrounding circumstances, details, and questions are enough to upend the possibility of absolute security. The final scene of *Macbeth* offers a thin veneer of security and stability, but the fig leaf is not enough to mask the darker impulses that lurk beneath the frenetic action.

The witches and their prescience introduce uncertainty into the final moments of the drama, albeit in a tangential manner through the succession of kings that occurs and Banquo's unfulfilled prophecy. Even with such unresolved questions, though, the audience can still grasp at solace and stability when Macduff returns to the stage with Macbeth's head.<sup>60</sup> The image of the witches, however, is not so easily dismissed and ultimately taints this fortress of hope as well.

Macduff, Shakespeare's hero who represents a return to the ideals of courage

and loyalty,<sup>61</sup> is nevertheless intimately associated with the Apparition and the witches earlier in the text. Macduff freely admits that, "Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (V, viii, 15 - 16). This is an astonishing revelation because of the early modern conception of the Caesarian birth. Blumenfield-Kosinski considers the possibility that Caesarian births were often supervised by midwives – many of whom were accused of witchcraft.<sup>62</sup> The moment of the birth and the outcome of that birth had a traumatic and polarizing effect on the midwife, the mother, and the child. Arguably, the midwife had as much at stake as the mother during these perilous moments, for if the procedure did not conclude in success, she risked fines, imprisonment, and even death – all could be levied upon alleged witches (or unsuccessful midwives). On the other hand, if the extraordinarily complicated surgery was successful – that is, both the mother and the child survived -- the birth was considered nothing short of miraculous (as was the midwife and all involved). The moment of birth, of life and death, was fraught with polarized perceptions, and the stakes for all involved parties were high (Blumenfield-Kosinski 2). Blumenfield-Kosinski explains how, in the thirteenth to fifteenth centuries, the midwife . . . not only had to make a decision on whether to perform the operation, she also had to act extremely quickly: she had to make the incision, pull out the child, and baptize the infant if it looked weak. The risks involved in this operation were manifold, and not the least was the danger for the midwife of being accused of bungling or, worse, of deliberately killing the newborn. Since in most Caesareans neither the mother nor the infant survived, midwives must have welcomed

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<sup>61</sup> Perhaps this is a moment that is best explained by Phyllis Rackin's *Stages of History* and the reconstruction of a heroic masculine past. Clearly, Shakespeare casts Scotland in a very flattering light, and this certainly would be an appeal to King James, but the impulse may be more profoundly connected to Rackin's concept of a "nostalgic past." Social stability, according to Rackin, is almost an unquenchable thirst that torments early modern British audiences.

<sup>62</sup> This assertion is supported by Thomas Rogers Forbes' *The Midwife and the Witch* (1966) and Ronald Holmes's *Witchcraft in British History* (1974).

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<sup>60</sup> A number of early performances exaggerated this act by placing the head on a long pole as if to call attention that the play was resolved with finality – a finality that no one apparently seriously questioned.

witnesses, and especially professional witnesses, in order to be able to clear their record in the case of accusations. (Blumenfield-Kosinski 68).

A bungled birth – one that was associated with the death of either the mother or the child – had a very real threat attached to the midwife in the form of accusations regarding witchcraft (Blumenfield-Kosinski 92-93), and these women were openly counseled to seek witnesses who might “be able to clear their record in the case of accusations.”

One of the most esteemed contemporary sources that addressed witches, the *Malleus Maleficarum*, is replete with questions about why women are chiefly addicted to superstitions. Kosinski-Blumenfield notes of the text that, “special scorn is reserved for midwives, ‘who surpass all others in wickedness’” (Kosinski-Blumenfield 108). Of course, not all cunning women were evil, but this influential text does seem to dwell on certain carefully documented misogynistic impulses. Midwives, apparently, were clearly considered among the most problematic of the female gender. In part, this animus can be attributed to their understanding of contraception and abortion (which resulted in an identity wedded to *maleficium* or *uenificium*); additionally, their general knowledge about medical procedures served as a force to be reckoned with among the barbers and surgeons of the time (Kosinski-Blumenfield 110-113).

If midwives were already held in suspicion, and tragic circumstances did, in fact, unfold during a Caesarean birthing procedure, the pre-modern and early modern response on behalf of society would likely have been swift and barbaric. In the event of a death in the birth chamber (be it the child, the mother, or both), the midwife would be placed in the immediate position of attending to the spiritual needs of the child. Some form of baptism would be conducted to save the child’s soul. Even if such a protocol was followed, however, a death could result in a tainted birth chamber where all could be associated with the devil and witchcraft. The Church, after all, already generated a cloud of suspicion around the midwife and her function in the field of female reproductive

medicine (Kosinski-Blumenfield 110). A bungled birth further signaled a kind of alliance with malicious forces, so (especially in the case of the deaths that involved both mothers and children) investigations were commonly conducted. Kosinski-Blumenfield explains that, “Midwives were forced to make complex decisions on possible surgical delivery and baptism; any misjudgment on their part had serious consequences not only for mother and child but for the midwife’s future as well” (Kosinski-Blumenfield 102), and this almost certainly included the perilous suspicions of *maleficium*.

Originally, the Church embraced Caesarean sections in the twelfth century solely for the purpose of baptizing (typically deceased) fetuses (Kosinski-Blumenfield 26). The midwives who supervised the procedure harbored no ambitions beyond the spiritual salvation of the infant; indeed, the deaths of the child, and often the mother, were foregone conclusions. By the fifteenth century, however, a new breed of doctors argued that a Caesarean birth did not need to result in death, and this optimism is eventually expressed in a series of sixteenth century treatises Francois Rousset generates. To suggest midwives enjoyed this newfound success might be an overstatement. The bonhomie took place during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – periods often punctuated by an intense interest in witchcraft. With greater success came greater expectation of success – this much is documented by Rousset’s writings and Kosinski’s analysis. One might suspect that greater expectation of success resulted in greater interest and concern when the surgical procedures went awry because death was no longer a foregone conclusion. In some ways, the onus of a successful birth shifted from God’s will to the instruments of God, or the Devil as the case may be. To what extent did this greater interest translate into more fervent accusations about witches? This relationship is much more nebulous, but the early modern period was by no means reluctant about investigations involving the occult as it applied to midwives and troubled births.

On the one hand, a Caesarean section resulting in death tainted all involved and

resulted in investigations and possible charges of witchcraft. The medical practice of the midwife in question was cast into the realm of "damnation" (Kosinski-Blumenfield 2), and the child was associated with the devil while the midwife was affiliated with witches. The enduring stain from the tragedy had the potential social energy to change irrevocably the lives of all who were present in the birthing chamber.

On the other hand, a successful delivery for mother and child was hailed as miraculous, and the result typically evoked the language of "spiritual salvation" (Kosinski-Blumenfield 2) from all in the community. Kosinski notes that, "traditionally, Caesarean birth was considered a miracle foretelling a hero's great destiny" (Blumenfield-Kosinski 70), and much of this association is inspired by the accounts of Julius Caesar and his birth. The most detailed images available to scholars regarding Caesar's birth come from the illustrations in *Les Faits des Romains*, but the illustrations are not conclusive regarding the results of the procedure. All of them, of course, show a relatively healthy baby boy after the traumatic operation, but the fate of the mother cannot be clearly determined from the prints. Some of the prints show a mother who lies moribund while other illustrations provide the reader with a vibrant and even complacent maternal image. Perhaps more influential in the understanding of this first historically acknowledged Caesarean section is Caesar's own testimony when he mentions that his mother was still alive at the triumph of Gaul. Much of the textual and artistic evidence available to early modern theologians and practitioners suggest that the hero of the Caesarean birth came from a birthing chamber where both mother and child, in a wholly unlikely event, survived the procedure.<sup>63</sup>

The possible outcomes and cultural interpretation of those outcomes was a question of polarized extremes for the early

modern community. Death to any person, the more likely outcome, touched all those in the birthing chamber, and even in the event that a fetus survived and the mother perished, the death of the mother was enough to initiate a series of investigations into the midwife and her practices. The very long shadow of witchcraft would then be cast not only on the midwife, but also on the child itself, and this is a very important consideration when Macduff and his role are examined. Perhaps the infant's survival in such a case might lead to even greater suspicions and concerns regarding affiliations with witches and the Devil. God and saintly associations, on the other hand, would be typical and appropriate if the birthing chamber escaped the pestilent touch of death. In this extraordinary event, much like Caesar's circumstance, the fortuitous outcome foretold the entrance of a hero. Kosinski sums up the polarized moment well:

No other medical procedure was so directly linked to spiritual salvation or damnation . . . The Caesarean operation was seen as partaking simultaneously of the natural, the unnatural, and even the supernatural. This view of Caesarean birth determined many of its symbolic aspects; thus, in the Middle Ages, saints as well as devils were believed to have performed Caesareans. (Blumenfield-Kosinski 2)

This dramatic instance of surgery that determined life or death was imbued with fear and uncertainty for all parties. All hopes were pinned on a positive outcome, all fears on a negative outcome.

But what of Macduff? Shakespeare conclusively explains that he was "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (V, viii, 15). Of his mother, nothing is known, and there is the rub. The play that begins with ambiguity masterfully concludes with ambiguity, for no hint is intimated about whether the birthing chamber that sheltered Macduff, his mother, and the midwives was touched by death – an event that, according to Blumenfeld-Kosinski, could unleash charges of witchcraft and associations with the Devil. In the event that the Caesarean section was a success, Macduff would be received, in a traditional sense, as a kind of hero patterned on the martial prowess of

<sup>63</sup> See chapter two, "Caesarean Birth in the Artistic Imagination," in Blumenfeld-Kosinski's *Not of Woman Born: Representations of Caesarean Birth in Medieval and Renaissance Culture* (1990). In this chapter, Blumenfeld-Kosinski entertains a thorough discussion about the artistic perception of Caesarean birth.

Julius Caesar. On the other hand, if Macduff's mother perished in the operation, Macduff, as viewed by an early modern audience, would be cursed as a damned affiliate with witches and perhaps the devil himself. This is a moment of polarization – either a genuine hero confronts Macbeth at the conclusion of the play or an agent of the devil (perhaps even associated with the very witches we encounter throughout the drama) manipulates society at its highest political and social level. In the midst of this uncertainty, we can conclude that the play is subjected to one of two extremes in its concluding moments. Which extreme prevails, of course, is nebulous.

In general, audiences might be quick to adopt the former interpretation, but maybe readers should reconsider such haste, for Macbeth offers these words upon hearing about Macduff's Caesarean section:

Accursed be that tongue that tells me so,  
For it hath cow'd my better part of man!  
And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd,  
That palter with us in a double sense,  
That keep the word of promise to our ear,  
And break it to our hope. I'll not fight with thee. V, viii, 16-23

These words, among Macbeth's final utterances, recall Shakespeare's "juggling fiends" that have confused and tormented all who come in contact with the drama. They have brought nothing except a bitter "palter with us in a double sense" even in the climax of the play. Ultimately, audiences know not what to hope for in this final struggle, for the equivocation has absorbed all sense of loyalty and returned the spectators to the opening images of the play that invite a world which is invested in what seems rather than what is; like Macbeth, an audience may take action in the form of embracing what seems to be a stable dissolution of Macbeth, and in the process audiences might hope for resolution, but such emotional responses are predicated on "palter with us in a double sense" that will very likely "break it to our hope."

Macduff's mother and that fictional history remain an enigma. So too are the witches shrouded in mystery. As a result, we do not know who Macduff is. Based on the history and culture of the period, all rests

with the uncertainty of Macduff's mother's fate; thus, an early modern audience is cast into a sea of uncertainty. Like Hamlet, an audience's best course of action is inaction. Shakespeare tempts his patrons to celebrate Macduff's victory, but, in the final moments of the play, it is this temptation that they must resist lest they too eagerly embrace a world that seems but is not.

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