

## MUTILATED BODIES: MAIMING ENERGIES IN *MACBETH*

Daniela Maria Marțole

### Abstract

*This paper focuses upon the representation of the body, as a constitutive of the self in the play "Macbeth" by W. Shakespeare. Considering some critical perspectives upon the play, the paper insists upon the dissected/mutilated body exterior as the object of knowledge and the main means towards the discovery and understanding of the body interior, which is a network of energies generally neglected in the early modern culture. The often conflictual critical interpretations are both the result of the textual ambiguity and of the critical subjectivity motivated/mutilated by a certain propensity that is historically and socially conditioned.*

**Keywords:** *body, representation, play, exterior, mutilated.*

Recent decades have witnessed an increasing concern with the body as a constitutive of the self. The decline of the spiritual certainties that shaped the life of an individual has been concurrent with an attention shift towards the body as a depository of human value. At the level of critical discourse in general, and for Shakespeare criticism in particular, as a reaction to the oversanitising linguistic model, the body became the focal point of the critical lens, in what Keir Elam came to name the *corporeal turn*, "which has shifted attention from the word to the flesh, from the semantic to the somatic; or rather insisted on the *priority* of the somatic over the semantic"<sup>1</sup>. The primary concern of this paper is *Macbeth's dissected/mutilated bodies* which is a small piece of a much larger structure of the critical corps assemblage. According to Sawday, Renaissance developed a 'culture of dissection' mainly "devoted to the gathering of information and the dissemination of knowledge of the 'mystery' of the human body"<sup>2</sup>. The primary concern was the discovery and understanding of the *body interior*, the network of energies generally neglected by the researchers and artists of the early modern culture.

*Macbeth* displays mutilating textual energies that seem to have transgressed both the page and the stage. In "Shakespeare's Ghost Writers. Literature as Uncanny Causality", Marjorie Garber answers the question of the play's strange destructive power: „the answer is not hard to locate, for the play is itself continually, even obsessively concerned with taboo, with things that should not be heard, and things that should not be seen, boundaries and should not be crossed - and are. One of the principal themes in *Macbeth* is the forbidden, the interdicted, that which a man may not safely see, or do"<sup>3</sup>. Witnesses to this stand, the partition stories that surround the stage history of the play, such as the prompter, dying in his prompt box, still clutching at the script, the leading actress falling fifteen feet in the

orchestra pit, the rainstorm destroying the theater tent at the very beginning of the theatrical season or Lawrence Olivier narrowly escaping death when a heavy weight demolished a chair in which he had just been sitting<sup>4</sup>. Apart from being convenient marketing coincidences, such stories can be read as the triumph of the word over the flesh. The act of seeing is the unauthorised unravelling of the taboo, and its being spoken out loud in front of an audience (the act of doing) results in the annihilation of „the unrepentant physicality of the performer’s being and doing on stage”<sup>5</sup>.

In the spirit of *Macbeth*’s ambivalent energies, the vulnerability of the performer’s body transtextually reduplicates the play’s insistence upon the frailty of people’s/the characters’ *body exterior* by the overuse of the image of *bodies dissected*. Piling bodies in, for instance, the bleeding captain’s description of the battlefield might not have been distressing for the sensitivity of Shakespeare’s contemporary audience. The plague epidemics that devastated London in the second half of the 16th century and that delayed king James coronation in 1603 must have altered people’s perception and turned death into a common, daily spectacle. As Arthur Kinney notes: „day and night during such times, the playgoers who first saw *Macbeth* would have seen lurching through the streets charnel wagons crammed with the body of the dead heaped upon one another, bellmen ringing their bells and crying, ‚Cast out your dead’...”<sup>6</sup>. Commodification of death in the past decades certainly had the same effect on modern readers/audience but at the same time generated an opposing discourse reinterrogating the human body. A subsequently emerging question would be whether there is a *body interior* in the play, or we just speak of countless carcasses that inform the main character’s unquenched thirst for power. There are some instances where *soul* seems to be the incorporeal essence but Shakespeare does not have, in *Macbeth*, a coherent treatment of the *body-soul* dichotomy. The play abounds in Christian allusions to the immortality/damnation of the soul after death. Macbeth begins the meeting with Banquo’s murderers with a retrospective contemplation of the benefits of Duncan’s murder: „For Banquo’s issue have I fil’d my mind,/For them, the gracious Duncan have I murther’d,/Put rancours in the vessel of my peace/Only for them, and mine eternal jewel/Given to the common Enemy of man,/ To make them Kings...” (III.1. 66-71). The metaphor of body as vessel is common in patristic literature; the following examples are from King James’s Bible: „I am forgotten as a dead man out of mind: I am like a broken *vessel*” (Psalms 31:12); „Nebuchadrezzar the King of Babylon hath devoured me, he hath crushed me, he hath made me an empty *vessel*” (Jeremiah 51:34)<sup>7</sup>. The *eternal jewel* is clearly a metaphor for the soul and Macbeth laments the futility of the deed that is the cause of his doom. Act three, and the meeting with Banquo’s murderers, ends with Macbeth’s

prospective contemplation of his friend's forthcoming, potentially rewarding death: „...Banquo, thy soul's flight,/If it finds heaven, must find it out to-night"(III.1.140-141). There are other instances in the play where Shakespeare is closer to Aristotel's materialist idea that the soul, form of the body, cannot be separated from the body and as a consequence must perish with it. When Macduff is told about the death of his family he comments: „Not for their own demerits, but for mine/Fell slaughter on their souls..."(IV.3.229-230).

Closely related to the metaphor of the body as a vessel is Donald Freeman's stimulating cognitive reading of *Macbeth*, drawn upon Lakoff's metaphor of the body as container: „a CONTAINER schema, on a standard cognitive science account, consist[s] of a boundary distinguishing an *interior* from an *exterior*. The CONTAINER schema defines the most basic distinction between IN and OUT"<sup>8</sup>. The characters' essential quality is basically given by the fluid that their container bodies accommodate: „Macbeth's [milk of] human kindness is an abstraction, a character trait." and a radical transformation would only be possible by replacing the contents of the recipient with another fluid. Thus the IN and OUT distinction turns into a more restrictive drainage-replenishment model. The most important contained is ‚nourishment'/'anti-nourishment'(as Freeman calls it), either in the form of milk/gall (Macbeth, Lady Macbeth) or in the form of the divine 'king-becoming'graces that Duncan possesses, Malcolm claims not to in order to test Macduff's loyalty (IV.3.91) and Macbeth fails to contain as he has „supped full with horrors"(V.5.13). Freeman argues that Lady Macbeth is aware that her container body accommodates the same fluid as her husband's and therefore her plea towards the "Spirits that tend on mortal thoughts" to unsex her is only justified as she is as susceptible to give in to such influences that prevent the accomplishment of the plan as Macbeth is: "She would close all the orifices of her body-container, in particular the orifice that, open, implicates both her gender - her kindness, her soft-heartedness, her prototypical woman's weakness - and her sexuality, the blood that she would now 'make thick'[...]the potentiality of sexual penetration, and the possibility of that penetration's natural consequence, the child that is the ultimate sign of her gender and her sexuality"<sup>9</sup>.

Beautiful as such an explanation might stand other critics consider that things are just not as clear-cut. Marjorie Garber says that "gender undecidability and anxiety about gender identification and gender roles are at the center of *Macbeth* - and of Macbeth"<sup>10</sup>. Janet Adelman speaks, for instance, of Duncan's androgyny, threatening to both male and female energies in the play, that is responsible for his violent death: "idealized for his nurturing paternity, he is nonetheless killed for his womanish softness"<sup>11</sup>. Adelman sees Duncan's murder as a violent rape, "an act of male sexual

aggression against a passive female victim"<sup>12</sup>. Following the same pattern of reduplication that Shakespeare uses and abuses in the play, the murder/rape scene is symbolically foreshadowed in the first act, by Lady Macbeth's pouring her spirits in Macbeth's ear with the "valour of her tongue" (I.5.24-25).

Lady Macbeth's invocation of the spirits to endow her with the defining characteristics of the other sex is the 17<sup>th</sup> century equivalent of modern plastic surgery as she seems determined to erase all the information inscribed in her body that has to do with her femininity. Time compression in the play makes this act of voluntary mutilation even more brutal. There is no period of adjustment, the alien energies cannot be fully appropriated and it is only her will that upholds her unrestrained determination. Today, as Liz Frost argues, "being able to come close to the current ideas of what is beautiful can be the basis on which a woman is valued and awarded status and success"<sup>13</sup>. For Lady Macbeth it is not beauty that grants fulfillment, but power, which she does not, and cannot, have unless she is able to find a tool to help her "screw [her husband's] courage to the sticking place". Screwing back the courage hints at a potential previous dismemberment, an episode of castration that would unreservedly expose Lady Macbeth as witch. "In psychoanalytic theory, the woman as witch is positioned as a phallic woman and as an oral sadistic mother [...]. In terms of patriarchal discourse, she is defined as abject by being antithetical to the symbolic order"<sup>14</sup>. Some critics see her as the witches' accomplice, others consider the 'weird sisters' are just misleading characters staggering on the verge of the comic, while the real demonic character is Lady Macbeth.

Her character is further vilified because of the faulty interpretation of her persuasive speech meant to convince Macbeth of the expediency of Duncan's murder, as the critics seem to ignore the conditional in her "infamous lines": "I would, while it was smiling in my face,/Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums/And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn/As you have done to this" (I.7. 56-9). For Lisa Hopkins this is "a picture of monstrous motherhood"<sup>15</sup> that emanates both ferocity and masochism and not at all a rhetorical device targeted at the husband's weakness, insecurities and unmanliness.

This view of Lady Macbeth as the root of all evil readily shared by male and female critics alike should come as no surprise, as motherhood is, at the very least, a dicey subject. As pointed out in a collection of papers edited and written by 'maternal scholars', "mothers unmask themselves when they speak truthfully and authentically about their experiences of mothering. [...]because no mother can live the idealized perfection of the mask of motherhood..."<sup>16</sup>. The strange case of Lady Macbeth is somewhat different because she only betrays her maternity to bring an irrefutable argument

against her husband's vacillation. As a wife and a mother she deserts the domestic sphere that would traditionally be ascribed to her and invades the phallogocentric order, disturbing it with 'the valour of her tongue'. Outside the text, this trespassing reflects the waves of negative criticism against Lady Macbeth and the fact that a great deal of it dwells upon her maternity only shows once again that "whenever a woman is represented as monstrous it is almost always in relation to her mothering and reproductive function"<sup>17</sup>. Inside the text it results in her confinement in the solitude of her own room/mind. Having fulfilled her part she can now play the textual scapegoat, resting silently/muted together with the other mothers in the text, the disposable Lady Macduff or the carcass womb from which Macduff was untimely ripped off.

The shortest and one of the most atypical of Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* has been a fertile ground for constant rereadings and interpretations. At times, critical energies gather and find new ways to reconfigured/maimed Shakespeare's texts/bodies. As John Drakakis puts it, "the protean values which subsequent generations of critics have discovered in the texts themselves can be demonstrated to be in large the projection of their own externally applied values"<sup>18</sup>.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Elam, 2005, p. 144.

<sup>2</sup>Sawday, 1996, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup>Garber, 2004, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup>*idem*, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup>Elam, 2005, p. 144.

<sup>6</sup>Kinney, 2006, p. 95.

<sup>7</sup>King James Bible, italics mine.

<sup>8</sup>George Lakoff, 1987, *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things*, p. 271, *apud* Freeman, 1998, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup>Freeman, 1998, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup>Garber, 2004, p. 97.

<sup>11</sup>Adelman, 1992, p. 131.

<sup>12</sup>*idem*, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup>Frost, 2001, p. 31.

<sup>14</sup>Daniel, 2006, p. 117.

<sup>15</sup>Hopkins, 2004, p. 262.

<sup>16</sup>Podnieks, 2010, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup>Daniel, 2006, p. 118.

<sup>18</sup>Drakakis, 2005, p. 25.

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