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Macbeth

1. **Headwounds**

Macbeth is a play about war's aftermath – guilt, hallucinations, insomnia at that stage where the theatre of war becomes a drama of trauma, and the blades with keenest edges are the “dagger of the mind” (2.1.38), the “daggers in men's smiles” (2.3.137), and “the air-drawn dagger” (3.4.63). Shakespeare's play dwells on the savagery of war, the ghastliness of the battlefield, and the twists of fate that can turn fatal wounds into strange spectacles of survival:

The times has been

That, when the brains were out, the man would die,

And there an end. (3.4.80-82)

Macbeth's words ring true, but in Shakespeare's day battlefield surgery was an advancing field and deep wounds could heal.¹ Consider Philip Sidney's cousin Henry Harington, the subject of a memorable passage in Henry Sidney's Irish *Memoir*. Irish “rebel” Rory Oge O'More took Harington hostage in November 1577, to Sir Henry's great distress, “for I loved him and do love him as a son of my own”. O'More “in sundry parts of his head so wounded him as I myself in his dressing did see his brains moving; yet my good soldiers brought him away, and a great way, upon their halberds and pikes, to a good place in that country, where he was relieved, and afterwards (I thank God) recovered”.²

Rory was a slippery customer, his frequent escapes “attributed to ‘Sorcerie or Enchaunement’”.³ John Derricke called him “Rorie Roge”.⁴ John Harrington recollected that Rory, besieged by Sidney and a hundred soldiers, “gat through them all without hurt, where a mouse almost could not haue got betweene them: and I haue heard it affirmed in Ireland, that it was with meere witchcraft”.⁵ This is a tale twice told, the second time with some skepticism. In a letter written in 1599, Harrington, referring to his men being spooked by the Irish, recalls his cousin’s plight twenty years earlier. Whereas his English pursuers believed O’More eluded them “by dint of witchery, and had by magic compell’ed them not to touch him”, Harrington, turning it around, believed the soldiers’ belief in witchcraft allowed Rory to evade them: “I verily think the idle faith which possesses the Irishry, concerning magic and witchcraft, seized our men and lost the victory”.⁶ Ireland’s borderlands and backwoods were bound up with witches, faeries and the supernatural.⁷ Scotland, too, had a reputation for spells. It was claimed that James Ruthven, third earl of Gowrie, had a magic charm about him when he was killed while James VI was under his battlements, “a little close parchment bag, full of Magicall characters, and words of inchantment”, which, once removed, “his wound wherof he died, bled not, but incontinent after the taking of them away, the blood gushed out in great abundance, to the great admiration of al the beholders”.⁸

Rory’s luck ran out on 30 June 1578. Trapped and hacked to death, his head – bought for a hundred pounds by Henry Sidney – was mounted on Dublin Castle.⁹ Rory’s promised end is twice told by Derricke, first as authorial announcement, inviting readers to envisage Rory’s head “*mounted vppon a poule [...] on the highest toppe of the Castell of Dublin*”, then as poetic conceit, as Rory delivers his own posthumous pole speech:

My hed from the bodie, parted in twaine:

Is set on the Castell, a signe to remaine.¹⁰

Such a great rebel's fate as a twice-told tale is key to Shakespeare's Scottish play and its Irish subtext, as first Macdonwald and then Macbeth are subject to a traitor's death.

Shakespeare's Banquo, unlike Henry Harington, does not survive his headwound, and puts in an appearance at the castle. Banquo dies a double death, his throat cut (3.4.17), and, just to be sure, left "safe in a ditch/ With twenty trenchèd gashes on his head" (3.4.27-8). Once dead, you are beyond surgery, but not beyond mutilation, nor beyond affecting the living in profound ways, either through your offsprings' thirst for vengeance or through the impact of your demise on others, including your killer, as witness Banquo's reappearance with "twenty mortal murders" on his crown (3.4.83).

Ireland proved a testing ground for military and medical activities and it also proved fertile terrain for playwrights: "Now for our Irish wars,/ We must supplant those rough, rug-headed kerns" (2.1.155-6). Shakespeare's Richard II fails in the attempt, and in a later play set in an earlier period the "skipping kerns" (1.2.30) are at large. In *Macbeth* the Irish wars rumble on, with "kerns and galloglasses" (1.2.13) fighting for Macdonwald and "wretched kerns" (5.7.18) battling for Macbeth. The play's allusion to tanistry and subsequent conversion of native nobility to earls, its hiding place for Donalbain – "To Ireland, I" (2.3.135) – like the Irish foot soldiers ("kern") that frame the play, dismissed as mercenaries, are key to its context. John Kerrigan suggests "*Macbeth* helped pave the way for British colonialism in

Ireland”,¹¹ while Stephen Orgel recognizes one dramatic dimension as “the enforced anglicization of Scotland, which Macbeth is resisting”.¹² Although Shakespeare never wrote an Irish play, the two countries were inseparable in the time of the historical Macbeth, sharing troubled landscapes, unsafe borders and defensive walls. Ireland underpins the play’s source, with Malcolm’s reign as bloody as Macbeth’s: “Holinshed reports that Malcolm eventually died a gruesome death, his head skewered through the eye upon the spear of an English knight; after which Donalbain returned from Ireland, slew Malcolm’s eldest son, and usurped the throne”.¹³ The “Scottish play” has not been historicized alongside Shakespeare’s medieval “English” histories, yet the Irish wars that shadow the two tetralogies are the backdrop to *Macbeth* too, not just the newly ended Nine Years’ War (1594-1603), but the ongoing process of expropriation, occupation, and settlement. When Banquo asks, “How far is’t called to Forres?” we foresee the shade of Birnam Wood (1.3.40), mindful that in early modern Ireland deforestation was a strategy with twofold benefits, “to deprive the Theevs and Rogues, who used to lurk the Woods in great numbers”, and to secure “very good Pastures” and “excellent Arable and Meddow”.¹⁴

The rebranding of thanes as earls in *Macbeth* also has an Irish dimension. The struggle over titles entails more than the conversion of Scottish nobles. It invokes the colonial policy of “surrender and regrant” whereby Irish lords relinquished their native titles and assumed English ones.¹⁵ It was Hugh O’Neill’s decision to drop his adopted English title of earl of Tyrone and revert to his Irish one – “The O’Neill” – that signaled the outbreak of the Nine Years’ War in Ireland (1594-1603) that culminated in the Flight of the Earls (1607), when the Irish nobility saw that their new English titles would not protect them from new English or Scots settlers, and the Plantation of Ulster (1609) which saw large-scale settlement in a province of Ireland

hitherto regarded as incorrigibly hostile. Hugh O'Neill's succession to his father's title after Shane O'Neill's death in 1567 was a breach of custom of electing a collateral over a lineal descendant on a par with Duncan's nomination of his son.¹⁶ Shane, in keeping with the times, met a violent end: "On 2 June the Scots fell upon him, perhaps provoked by his intemperate speech, killing him by cutting his throat before hacking him to pieces [...] his head [...] sent 'pickled in a pipkin' to Sidney, who had it placed on a pole over Dublin Castle".¹⁷

As Harington's example also demonstrates, military and medical discourses were stitched together. *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's most medicalized play: "More than four hundred medical allusions have been tallied".¹⁸ Lacerated by words of war and wounding – this is a play where "Words become [...] wounds" (1.2.43) – *Macbeth* seems to speak to us today, and to invoke a world at war across time. Although rooted in the geography of Scotland, the first act mentions Golgotha (1.2.40) and Aleppo (1.3.8). Verbal violence is the common currency of the play. Macbeth declares: "Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day" (3.2.46). Lady Macbeth would have "dashed the brains out" of the child she suckled to prove her resolve (1.7.58), a recurrent trope in atrocity literature, and an echo of her husband's earlier invocation of "Pity, like a naked newborn babe/ Striding the blast" (1.7.21-2).¹⁹ The play's peculiar language speaks to the time. One succession tract spoke of "hurly burly and rumor".²⁰ The air was thick with phrases ripe for plucking. When Macbeth cries "Sleep no more!/ Macbeth does murder sleep" (2.2.38-9) he echoes an Elizabethan sermon that asked: "What meanest thou ô sleeper? arise, sleep no more, and I will waken you no more".²¹ Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking in 5.1, her "slumbery agitation" (5.1.10), is part of a sequence of late-night strolls, another aftereffect of trauma. Duncan's death makes Macduff want to wake the dead: "As from your graves rise up and walk like sprites"

(2.3.74). Playing on walking and waking, Lennox notes that “Banquo walked too late” (3.6.5), concluding that “men must not walk too late” (3.6.7). And news of his wife’s death triggers Macbeth’s “walking shadow” (5.5.24). This is a disturbing play full of alarms, bells and trumpets, “drum and colours”, warnings and wake-up calls.

Macbeth is also a drama steeped in blood and the mental stain it leaves. There is more than one way to lose your head in battle, or in war’s wake. Lady Macbeth tells her husband to “smear/ The sleepy grooms with blood” (5.2-3), and when he refuses, she resolves to do it herself. Indeed, she dismisses painted devils even as she uses face-paint to shift the blame for Duncan’s murder:

The sleeping and the dead

Are but as pictures; ’tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,
I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
For it must seem their guilt. (2.2.56-60)

Foreshadowing his wife’s handwashing scene in 5.1, Macbeth catches himself red-handed in the aftermath of Duncan’s death and recoils from his own handiwork:

What hands are here? Ha, they pluck out mine eyes!
Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (2.2.62-6)

This passage may be seen to invoke the Red Hand of Ulster, an Irish emblem adopted by Hugh O'Neill, Earl of Tyrone, and invoked by Spenser in the shape of Ruddymane in *The Faerie Queene* (II.iii.2). With Hugh O'Neill gone, the red hand he had brandished in battle was incorporated into a new British-Irish heraldry by James I as a heraldic badge of the baronets in 1611/12.²² Consultant Radiologist Barry Kelly, in his valedictory editorial for the *Ulster Medical Journal* in 2014, reflected on the dismembered hand that lay behind both publication and province – “our shore defines us, literally. This Province (and our Society’s symbol) is The Red Hand” – and he cites among versions of the legend one in which “the captain of a Viking longboat, approaching Ireland promised that the first man to put his hand on the land could claim it. A mercenary on board named O’Neill used his sword to sever his own hand, and the mutilated appendage thrown ashore claimed it for him and his family, becoming the symbol for Ulster – the Red Hand”.²³

In a play about mutilated appendages – severed heads and bloody hands – it is not too far-fetched to suggest that Macbeth’s bloody hand invokes O’Neill’s. Later, Macbeth tells his servant: “Go prick thy face and over-red thy fear” (5.3.14). According to Edmund Spenser, “the Gaules used to drinke their enemyes blood, and to painte themselves therewith”, a practice also imputed to the Irish.²⁴ Face-painting and giving suck had different meanings in Spenser’s Ireland:

at the execution of a notable traitor at Limericke, called Murrough O-Brien, I saw an old woman which was his foster mother, take up his head, whilst he was quartered, and sucked up all the blood that runne thereout, saying, that the earth was not worthy to drinke it, and therewith also steeped her face and breast, and tore her haire, crying and shrieking most terribly.²⁵

Is *Macbeth* a play about dismemberment (quartering) as well as decapitation and disemboweling?²⁶ It is certainly a play about bereavement and grief and the call for vengeance that accompanies violent death. This distressed foster mother prompts us to rephrase a familiar question: How many children had lady Macbeth fostered? “Mac-Beth” is a name that puns on “son of Elizabeth”, a fitting title for a play directed at the successor of a childless monarch, her cousin’s son.²⁷

2. Unspeakable Grief

The previous section dealt with headwounds literal and metaphorical, establishing the key point that war damages all who partake of its violence, and with the corrosive sub-text of the Irish wars. This section expands on the grief or suffering that *Macbeth* carries with him, integrating it into such sub-themes as gender and masculinity, and, through the Scottish hero William Wallace – heroic even in English accounts – the burden of empire, for and against. In line with recent scholarship, including medical and military responses to *Macbeth*, the 2015 film version played down the demonizing and foregrounded the personal consequences of conflict.²⁸ *Macbeth*’s early aside highlights how anxiety supplants battlefield courage:

Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings. (1.3.139-40)

Fresh from the fray and his fraught encounter with the weird sisters, *Macbeth*’s “dull brain [is] wrought/ With things forgotten” (1.3.152-3). The emerging orthodoxy is that this drama depicts state hypocrisy in deploying soldiers to carry out acts on

foreign fields condemned in domestic contexts, and that war neuroses and traumatic memory are part of the play's texture.²⁹ Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) by any other name is an old condition – “shellshock” in the First World War, “battle fatigue” during World War Two, PTSD after Vietnam.³⁰ The word “trauma” has its own history. Early works tied it to injury.³¹ Edward Phillips, Milton's nephew glossed “Traumatick” as “(Greek) belonging to wounds”.³² For Steven Blankaart, “Troma, is a Wound from an external Cause”, while “traumatica, are those things, which being taken in Decoctions and Potions, fetch the serous and sharp Humours out of the Body, and so attenuate the Blood, that it may be conveniently driven to the wounded, broken, or bruised parts”.³³ According to Daniel Sennert, “if a soft part be dissolved by a thing that cutteth, it is called by the Greeks *Trauma*, by the Latines *Vulnus*, i.e. a wound”.³⁴

Beyond physical wounding lies the trauma of witnessing and remembering, “The grief that does not speak” (4.3.209). The dream activity recounted in a play heavy with sleep disturbed by wakefulness suggests remembrance or remorse:

Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. (3.2.19-22)

This “ecstasy” or trance-like state pervades the nation, a place “where violent sorrow seems/ A modern ecstasy” (4.3.169-70). In *Macbeth* the mental health of character and country are intertwined, so that Scotland is “almost afraid to know itself” (4.3.165) while its hero-turned-villain is “a soldier and afeard” (5.1.32-3).³⁵ This fear

is in fact integral to Macbeth's makeup as a soldier, part of a watchful, wakeful state of being, an attitude of vigilance, heightened consciousness and hypersensitivity. In a verbal echo of an earlier speech – "The times has been/ That, when the brains were out, the man would die" (3.4.80-82) – Macbeth plays on the same sense of fear and the uncanny when says:

The time has been my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir. (5.5.10-12)

To fear "a night-shriek" or "a dismal treatise" appears at odds with the violence of war and with Macbeth's status as a soldier. Yet such utterances acknowledging his unease trip readily from his tongue, as when he asks: "How is't with me, when every noise appalls me?" (2.2.61). These sounds, like the "air-drawn dagger", seem "Impostors to true fear" (3.4.65). The impression here is that even before the encounter with the weird sisters Macbeth's nerves were on edge. History is a nightmare from which he is trying to awake. Trauma is an occupational hazard, one of the consequences of warring and witnessing. And killing and its consequences are connected in the first act, when Ross praises Macbeth as:

Nothing afeard of what thyself didst make,
Strange images of death. (1.3.97-8)

Here Macbeth is depicted as an artist illustrating a bloody canvas or a sculptor carving out immobile figures. This foreshadows Macbeth's fearful encounter with Banquo's

ghost, a strange image of death that he “didst make” and that makes him “afeard”.

When Macduff speaks of Scotland’s tainted rule – “The title is affeered” (4.3.34) – he plays on affirmed and afraid.³⁶ Like Scotland, like soldiers, the title (the crown) and the play’s very name all are “afeard”. This fits with Ross’s later lament that Scotland “cannot/ Be called our mother, but our grave” (4.3.165-6).

How does this theme of fearfulness fit with the play’s emphasis on warlike courage? Stephen Orgel asks: “What constitutes acting like a man in this play: what other than killing?”³⁷ “To be a man, in this tragedy’s central terms”, David Willbern adds, “means to be bloody or bloodied. Wounds are the mark of manliness”.³⁸ As they see it, *Macbeth* is a play about militant masculinity, and yet its male protagonists appear fretful in ways that other Shakespeare warriors are not, recoiling with horror at the sight of blood. Conversely, Lady Macbeth handles bloody blades but later finds that it takes more than a little water to wash her hands of the deed and the dead (2.2.70). It transpires that it is not so easy to “Stop up th’access and passage to remorse” (1.5.42) as she imagined. Macduff’s not being born of woman is certainly integral to the play’s misogynistic structure: “surgery was a male prerogative – the surgeon was always a man; midwives were not allowed to use surgical instruments – and the surgical birth thus means [...] Macduff was brought to life by men, not women [...] Such a birth, all but invariably, involved the mother’s death”.³⁹ On this basis, Orgel concludes that Macbeth “really is an astonishingly male-oriented and misogynistic play”.⁴⁰ But was the surgeon always a man, especially on a battlefield? It has been argued that surgeons proved expensive, and that “female camp followers quite often stepped into the gap and provided medical assistance to soldiers”.⁴¹ Women stalked the battlefield for other purposes, from identifying relatives to supplying goods and services.⁴² Spartan women, Barnabe Rich recalled, “would goe

into the field to see in what place their husbandes and friendes were wounded, if it were before, they would with ioy and gladnes shewe them to euerie man, and so burie them with great solemnitie: if behinde, they al ashamed would depart leauing them vnburied”.⁴³ This accords with Siward’s question of his dead son: “Had he his hurts before?” (5.7.76).

Connected to this theme of masculinity in crisis is one of the play’s most remarkable speeches, Lady Macbeth’s call for gender reassignment:

Come, you spirits

That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full

Of direst cruelty! (1.5.38-41)

That word “unsex” is rare for the time.⁴⁴ Viewed in the context of the play’s preoccupation with battlefield violence it can be seen to invoke the practice of mutilation. Soldiers “unseamed”, unsexed, were common sights, castration a familiar manifestation of dismembering the dead. Shakespeare knew of such unsexing when he invoked – after *Holinshed* – the English corpses subjected to “bestly shameless transformation” by Welshwomen (*IH4* 1.1.44). His source was more explicit: “the women of Wales cut off their priuities, and put one part thereof into the mouthes of euerie dead man, in such sort that the cullions hoong downe to their chins”.⁴⁵ Barnabe Rich recommended the same treatment for England’s Irish enemies.⁴⁶ Irishwomen were unsexed in another sense. Neither swaddled in infancy nor corseted in adulthood, Irishwomen were “perceived as unencumbered by the ideological constraints that corseting symbolized”, prompting one of Shakespeare’s

contemporaries to declare that they “are not straitlaced [...] and the greatest part are not laced at all”.⁴⁷ Perhaps Lady Macbeth, in calling to be unsexed, was asking to be unraveled, as in Lear’s “Off, off, you lendings!” (3.4.96).

The stench of war – “the smell of blood” (5.1.44), of Hell, of Sulphur – hangs over *Macbeth* from first stage direction to final image of severed head, doubling the rehearsed beheading of Macdonwald in the second scene.⁴⁸ Tripling, in fact, because between times Duncan’s death prompts Macduff to invite his fellow subjects to:

Approach the chamber and destroy your sight

With a new Gorgon. (2.3.66-7)

Here Macduff foreshadows his own decapitation of Macbeth, his head “Painted upon a pole” (5.7.56), and perhaps suggests that we view the three witches as Gorgons. The “blasted heath” on which the weary soldiers are greeted is a battlefield (1.3.78).⁴⁹

Malcolm compares Macbeth to Satan – “Angels are bright still though the brightest fell” (4.3.22) – so fittingly, in the wake of war, Milton’s Satan “Stands on the blasted Heath” (l.615).⁵⁰ The play’s action, unfolding on battlefields and under battlements, begins and ends with a beheading, the first greeted as a demonstration of courage. We hear of “brave Macbeth” (1.2.18), “valour’s minion” (1.2.21), fighting the rebel Macdonwald, whom he disembowels and decapitates:

Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’ chops,

And fixed his head upon our battlements. (1.2.22-3)⁵¹

Disemboweling precedes beheading – in meting out a traitor’s death Macbeth’s “brandished steel [...] smoked with bloody execution” (1.2.17-18), but unlike an official executioner, he “ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell” to his victim (1.2.21).⁵²

One seventeenth-century commentator denounced “double Deaths of Strangling and Burning, or Strangling and Disemboweling”.⁵³ This double death was one associated with a particular historical figure, William Wallace, whose “execution was the first in which a half-strangled man was disemboweled and beheaded; he was no ordinary enemy”.⁵⁴ Wallace’s death and dismemberment in London is recounted in *Holinshed* in a sympathetic light, filtered through the lens of Scottish chronicler Hector Boece.⁵⁵ Holinshed’s *Description of Scotland* is complicated by the fact that William Harrison, commissioned to write it, “had chosen to English John Bellenden’s Scots vernacular translation of Hector Boece’s original *Scotorum Historia*, published in Paris in 1527”.⁵⁶ Wallace is relevant here not only because a character called “Mackbeth” appears in a 1637 play about Wallace, but because in 1617 on a visit to Scotland Wallace was invoked in order to remind James I of his origins.⁵⁷ That Robert the Bruce’s chief physician and surgeon was “Gaelic doctor Patrick MacBeth” of the *Clann Meic-bethad* reinforces the sense of a play haunted by history.⁵⁸

If Harrison on behalf of Holinshed could only anglicize Bellenden’s Boece in the four days he had at his disposal, then what of John Speed, who in 1612 still managed, albeit in a more nuanced fashion, to preserve Wallace’s heroism and indeed use it as an example to his own nation. In Speed’s account Wallace lives on as legend and lesson: “whom though (with *Hectors* translatur) we doe not call a *Martyr*, yet must we thinke his Countrey honoured in him, wishing many the like in our owne”.⁵⁹ My suggestion here is that Wallace and the Anglo-Scottish wars of the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries, wars bound up with larger questions of empire, are as vital to our understanding of *Macbeth* as the Bothwell (1591), Gowrie (1600) or Gunpowder (1605) plots. Yet if the play is about empire then it is so only in an odd and oblique way because although it maps out a war fought across borders – Scotland, Norway, Ireland and England – there are only two passing allusions to imperialism:

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of th'imperial theme. (1.3.129-31)

Macbeth's aside on "th'imperial theme" (1.3.131) sits oddly next to Malcolm telling Macduff, "A good and virtuous nature may recoil/ In an imperial charge" (4.3.19-20). As critics have noted, "The phrase 'imperial theme' did not come into the play from Holinshed".⁶⁰ And despite Malcolm's loaded language the commission he alludes to is religious rather than military, as when contemporaries speak of "the imperiall charge and command of Christ".⁶¹ The imperial theme persists insofar as Banquo's line, James's line, "has endured as an imperial succession to this day".⁶²

Yet this is not a play to which we look for evidence of patriotism. It uses the word "nation" only once, in Macduff's plaintive cry for Scotland – "O nation miserable" (4.3.103), and of the ten mentions of "country", most are negative, as in the "poor country" invoked by Macduff (4.3.31), Malcolm (4.3.46; 4.3.132), and Ross (4.3.164). But if Empire lurks in the margins, then *Macbeth* is certainly a play that deals head-on with the hypocrisy of war. The report of Macdonwald's disembowelment and decapitation draws from Duncan the exclamation: "O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman!" (1.2.24). Valiant and violent are synonymous, and since

Duncan and Macbeth's mothers were sisters the salutation "cousin" is fitting, as is Duncan's subsequent allusion to Macbeth as "a peerless kinsman" (1.4.58).⁶³ In putting son before cousin, "Duncan was thus creating in Scotland an hereditary monarchy".⁶⁴ The messenger bearing the glad tidings of Macbeth's courageous deeds is well-treated in a double sense:

So well thy words become thee as thy wounds;

They smack of honor both. – Go, get him surgeons. (1.2.43-4)

Surgeons here, unlike the doctor who later tends Lady Macbeth, have a purpose. Macbeth's actions, in which "justice had, with valor armed" (1.2.29) vanquished the king's enemies, are commendable. This image is mirrored at the play's end, where Macduff enters with Macbeth's severed head, declaring:

Behold where stands,

Th'usurper's cursèd head. (5.7.84-5)

And where does it stand? "Painted upon a pole and underwrit/ 'Here may you see the tyrant'" (5.7.56-7). Underwrit, under it, as with Rory Oge, this is a posthumous pole speech, and an ironic echo perhaps of Macbeth's appeal to his wife's physician to "Raze out the written troubles of the brain" (5.3.42). An echo of the play's opening too. Macbeth beheads Macdonwald for Duncan (and reward); Macduff beheads Macbeth for Malcolm (and revenge). Justice is in the hands of the beheader.

Macbeth, a hero when butchering on behalf of the state, a demon when fighting against it, resembles modern combatants, praised in warzones, but, back

home, condemned as troubled and troublesome civilians. Displaying heads as trophies of war has a long history that runs into the present:

One recurring motif is the parading of decapitated “insurgent” heads, demonstratively held up in front of the camera [...] This continuous posting of [...] a motif that the soldiers themselves callously call the “headshot”, indicates a mode of pathological fixation in which the acts of taking and circulating these atrocious photographs function to reproduce traumatic war experiences in the form of a compulsive acting out.⁶⁵

Veterans find homecoming hard because after what they have witnessed or enacted no land fit for heroes awaits them.

Macbeth is the “Soldiers’ play” as well as the “Scottish play”. In 2004, as part of the National Endowment for the Humanities “Bard at the Bases” project, a production of Alabama Shakespeare Festival’s *Macbeth* toured US military bases, prompting the headline: “Pentagon money is sending a stage play about a military hero who murders his commander in chief on a tour of 13 military bases”.⁶⁶ Director Kent Thompson found that speeches like Siward’s about his son’s death resonated with those more familiar with the theatre of war than with historical drama – closer to “Shakespeare’s audience” than any he had played to before.⁶⁷ Kathleen McCall as Lady Macbeth felt the drama was forged afresh in front of soldiers: “*Macbeth* seems to speak directly to them and their world”.⁶⁸ Asked after a performance by an army general, “How do you stay so emotionally connected night after night doing Lady Macbeth?”, McCall said she had acquired an added sense of what it meant when Lady Macbeth goaded her husband, saying “a soldier, and afeard?”⁶⁹

Macbeth speaking directly to soldiers is nothing new. Neither is it novel to talk of the play in relation to the aftereffects of trauma or under the banner of war neuroses. As early as May 1947 an article appeared in *College English* entitled “Was Macbeth a Victim of Battle Fatigue?” For its author, Robert Bossler, the only novel aspect of the condition was its name. Shakespeare lacked knowledge of modern psychology and medical terms, but understood “the reaction to an overdose of combat”.⁷⁰ Bossler, a student at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania, was a former GI with combat experience in Europe.⁷¹ As a returning soldier, he saw in *Macbeth* a fellow combatant.⁷² In 2007, sixty years after Bossler’s essay, another former American soldier, Christy Clothier, a student at the University of New Hampshire, likewise identified *Macbeth* as “a fellow vet”.⁷³ Witnessing violence and treating the aftereffects of war is not new. In Shakespeare’s time care of soldiers was beginning to be perceived as crucial. In *Allarme to England* (1578), Barnabe Rich issued a wake-up call for a state with a neglected soldiery:

But the warres being once finished [...] howe be they rewarded [...] what other thing gaine they then slaunder, misreporte, false impositions, hatred and despight? ⁷⁴

Rich was a veteran of the Irish wars who had also served on the Anglo-Scottish border. Scotland, like Ireland, was a soldiering nation where the effects of border warfare and mercenary service were far-reaching.

3. Scotland

How is the problem of *Macbeth* relevant to contemporary Scotland? Macduff's question, "Stands Scotland where it did?" (4.3.164), echoes the First Witch's query, "But why/ Stands Macbeth thus amazedly?" (4.1.124-5). Both questions are bound up with the future, and in Shakespeare's time, a time of union and plantation, that future is uncertain. *Macbeth* was written at a time of the make-up of Britain, the formation of a new multi-nation imperial monarchy. Four centuries on we may be looking at the break-up of Britain. Stands Scotland where it did? Or will it study war no more? In Scotland, a culture of violence has accompanied a soldiering tradition harnessed to foreign wars bound up with the imperial theme. Is Scotland still afraid to know itself? Or is it now at a stage in its history where it is ready to question the militarism that diverts vital resources to killing, resources that would be better committed to constructing communities and building bridges?

Alan Sinfield pointed to the play's circular nature, bookended by beheadings.⁷⁵ History is on a loop in *Macbeth*. My conclusion is in keeping with such circularity. I began Rory Oge O'More. I end with his son. Owney MacRory O'More was around twenty-three years old when fatally wounded in August 1600. He had been a baby when his mother and brothers were murdered and his father – Rory Oge – beheaded by Henry Sidney. Rather than have his head fixed on the battlements of Dublin Castle like his father's, Owney "wyled it to be cutt of after his death and buried".⁷⁶ Shaken by the sight of Banquo's risen spirit Macbeth remarks:

This is more strange

Than such a murder is. (3.4.84-5)

Macbeth excuses his “strange infirmity” (3.4.88), and his conduct in this scene is as curious as his language, for this same speech contains a puzzling allusion to law and civility having previously put an end to war in the commonwealth:

Blood hath been shed ere now, i'th' olden time,
Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal. (3.4.77-8)

Editors gloss “weal” as “commonweal” (*OED* n1) rather than as wound or welt (*OED* n2), understandably, since the earliest occurrences given are 1444 and 1664 respectively, yet the later sense accords with bloodshed and “purged”, and with the play’s only other use of the word, the allusion to Malcolm as “the med’cine of the sickly weal [...] our country’s purge” (5.2.27-8). In any case, “gentle weal” is an odd phrase that sits uneasily alongside both the play’s medieval context and its setting at a moment of danger for union and empire.

Such double-talk and strangeness are the play’s strengths. *Macbeth* furnishes the finest example of a character whose brutality is condemned soon after being celebrated. There is an exploration of doublethink in a play that upholds savagery as heroism in its opening act in the shape of the severed head of a rebel and holds up the head of the executioner, a hero-turned-villain, in its closing scene. With all the smoke and mirrors of witches and ghosts, audiences need to be alert to the play’s exploration of hypocrisy and realpolitik, and its deep meditation on the experience and memory of conflict and survival. Vital to *Macbeth*’s political doublethink is its simultaneous enlarging upon and shrinking from moral equivocation, exemplified in the figure of the porter. War makes equivocators of us all, for who would not lie to escape death or damnation? Macbeth, realizing he has been “played” by the witches – “That palter

with us in a double sense” (5.7.50) – tells Macduff “I will not fight with thee”, only to go back on his word – palter – once his adversary envisages his head “Painted upon a pole” (5.7.56). Macbeth then declares: “I will not yield [...] Before my body/ I throw my warlike shield” (5.5.57, 62-3). As with Shakespeare’s other uses of “palter” – *Antony and Cleopatra* (3.12.63); *Julius Caesar* (2.1.125); *Troilus Cressida* (5.2.48) – violent conflict goes hand-in-hand with false report. And not just war but, crucially for *Macbeth*, political violence at home. If one can detect a pun on “palter” in the name of porter then it is worth remembering that the Earl of Gowrie’s porter, Robert Christie, famously contradicted his master as to the king’s exit: “some of his maiesties seruants inquiring at the Porter when his Maiestie went forth? the Porter affirmed that the king was not yet forth, whereupon the said Earle looked verie angerly vpon him, and said he was but a liar”.⁷⁷

¹ See Franciscus Arcaeus, *A Most Excellent and Compendious Method of Curing Woundes in the Head*, trans. John Read (London: Thomas East, 1588).

² Ciarán Brady, *A Viceroy’s Vindication?: Sir Henry Sidney’s Memoir of Service in Ireland, 1556-1578* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002), 98.

³ David Finnegan, “O’More, Rory Oge [Ruaidhri Óg Ua Mordha] (c.1540–1578), Chieftain and Rebel”, *ODNB*. Retrieved 21 July 2018.

⁴ John Derricke, *The Image of Irelande* (London: John Day, 1581), title page.

⁵ John Harington, *Orlando Furioso in English Heroical Verse* (London: Richard Field, 1591), 94.

⁶ John Harington, *Nugae Antiquae*, ed. Thomas Park and Henry Harington, 2 vols. (London: J. Wright, 1804), I, 268, 267.

⁷ On the bewitching backwater of Ireland see Christopher Highley, “The Place of Scots in the Scottish Play: Macbeth and the Politics of Language”, in *Shakespeare and Scotland*, ed. Willy Maley and Andrew Murphy (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 53-66, at 62.

⁸ *Gowreis Conspiracie a Discourse of the Unnaturall and Vyle Conspiracie Attempted Against the Kings Majesties Person at Sanct-Iohnstoun upon Twysday the 5. of August. 1600* (Edinburgh: Robert Charteris, 1600), C3^r.

⁹ Finnegan, “O’More, Rory Oge”.

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- ¹⁰ Derricke, *The Image of Irelande*, Kiiii^v, Liii^f.
- ¹¹ John Kerrigan, "Archipelagic *Macbeth*", in *Archipelagic English: Literature, History, and Politics 1603-1707* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 91-114, at 99.
- ¹² Stephen Orgel, "Macbeth and the Antic Round", *Shakespeare Survey* 1, 52 (1999): 143-153, at 147.
- ¹³ Donald W. Foster, "Macbeth's War on Time", *English Literary Renaissance* 16, 2 (1986): 319-342, at 321.
- ¹⁴ Gerard Boate, "Of the Woods in Ireland", in *Irelands Naturall History* (London: John Wright, 1652), 118-122, at 119.
- ¹⁵ See Ronald J. Boling, "Tanistry, Primogeniture, and the Anglicizing of Scotland in *Macbeth*", *Publications of the Arkansas Philological Association* 25, 1 (1999): 1-14.
- ¹⁶ John Barry, "Guide to Records of the Genealogical Office, Dublin, with a Commentary on Heraldry in Ireland and on the History of the Office", *Analecta Hibernica* 26 (1970), 3-43, at 17.
- ¹⁷ Christopher Maginn, "O'Neill, Shane [Sean O'Neill] (c. 1530-1567), Chieftain", ODNB. Retrieved 12 November 2018.
- ¹⁸ Ralph F. Sett, "Dunsinane Revisited: Medicine in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*", *The Linacre Quarterly* 29, 4 (1962): 185-189, at 185.
- ¹⁹ Joan Redmond, "Memories of Violence and New English Identities in Early Modern Ireland", *Historical Research* 89, 246 (2016): 708-729, at 712.
- ²⁰ Irenicus Philodikaios, *A Treatise Declaring [...] the Just Title and Right of [...] James the Sixt, King of Scotland, to the Succession of the Crown of England* (Edinburgh: Robert Waldegrave, 1599), 3.
- ²¹ Henry Smith, *Sixe Sermons* (London: Richard Field, 1592), 153.
- ²² For O'Neill's adoption of the red hand see Barry, "Guide to Records of the Genealogical Office, Dublin", 17.
- ²³ Barry Kelly, "The Last Post", *Ulster Medical Journal* 83, 3 (2014): 133-34.
- ²⁴ Edmund Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland (1633): From the First Printed Edition*, eds. Andrew Hadfield and Willy Maley (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 66.
- ²⁵ Spenser, *A View of the State of Ireland*, 66.
- ²⁶ Millicent Bell, "Macbeth and Dismemberment", *Raritan* 25, 3 (2006): 13-29.
- ²⁷ Fatherless and childless Macbeth is doubly ironically "Mac-, 'son of'". Kerrigan, "Archipelagic *Macbeth*", 105. This limits would-be child-killer Macduff's revenge options, as he laments of Macbeth: "He has no children" (4.3.216).
- ²⁸ Henry Barnes, "Michael Fassbender: 'Macbeth suffered from PTSD'", *The Guardian* (23 May 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/may/23/michael-fassbender-macbeth-suffered-from-ptsd>, accessed 11 July 2018.
- ²⁹ On the wider implications of trauma for drama of the period see Patricia A. Cahill, *Unto the Breach: Martial Formations, Historical Trauma, and the Early Modern Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), esp. 138-9.
- ³⁰ Earlier alluded to – in 1972 – as "post-Vietnam syndrome". See Allan Young, *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 109. According to Brian Outhwaite, the Irish conflict, "as far as the professional soldiers were concerned, was the most hated war of their era: England's Vietnam". R. B. Outhwaite, "Dearth, the English Crown and the 'Crisis of the 1590s'", in Peter Clark (ed.), *The European Crisis of the 1590s: Essays in Comparative History* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985), 23-43, at 32.

- ³¹ Andrew Boorde, *The Breuiary of Helthe* (London: W. Myddelton, 1547), 120; John Brown, *A Compleat Discourse of Wounds* (London: E. Flesher, 1678), 11.
- ³² Edward Phillips, *The New World of English Words* (London: Evan Tyler for Nathaniel Brooke, 1658), Pp3^v.
- ³³ Steven Blankaart, *A Physical Dictionary* (London: J. D., 1684), 285, 284.
- ³⁴ Daniel Sennert, *Nine Books of Physick and Chirurgery*, trans. N.D.B.P. (London: Lodowick Lloyd, 1658), 40.
- ³⁵ See Paul A. Cantor, “‘A Soldier and Afeard’: *Macbeth* and the Gospelling of Scotland”, *Interpretation: A Journal of Political Philosophy* 24, 3 (1997): 287-318.
- ³⁶ Kerrigan, “Archipelagic *Macbeth*”, 109, 457 n. 64.
- ³⁷ Orgel, “*Macbeth* and the Antic Round”, 145.
- ³⁸ David Willbern, “Phantasmagoric *Macbeth*”, *English Literary Renaissance* 16, 3 (1986): 520-549, at 531-2.
- ³⁹ Orgel, “*Macbeth* and the Antic Round”, 150.
- ⁴⁰ Orgel, “*Macbeth* and the Antic Round”, 150.
- ⁴¹ Ailes, “Camp Followers, Sutlers, and Soldiers’ Wives”, 79.
- ⁴² See Mary Elizabeth Ailes, “Camp Followers, Sutlers, and Soldiers’ Wives: Women in Early Modern Armies (c. 1450-c. 1650)”, in *A Companion to Women’s Military History*, edited by Barton C. Hacker and Margaret Vining (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 61-92.
- ⁴³ Rich, *Allarme to England*, Biii^r.
- ⁴⁴ In one seventeenth-century verse the male protagonist is “Unsex’d [...] a while/ With [...] Silken cloathes”. See J. H., *The history of Polindor and Flostella, with other poems* (London: Thomas Dring, 1657), 58.
- ⁴⁵ Raphael Holinshed, *The Third Volume of Chronicles* (London: Henry Denham, 1587), 528.
- ⁴⁶ Barnabe Rich, *A New Description of Ireland* (London: William Jaggard, 1610), 23, cited in Christopher Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Crisis in Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 101.
- ⁴⁷ Highley, *Shakespeare, Spenser, and the Crisis in Ireland*, 102, citing Fynes Moryson.
- ⁴⁸ Jonathan Gil Harris, “The Smell of *Macbeth*”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58, 4 (2007): 465-486, at 466.
- ⁴⁹ John Babington, *Pyrotechnia or, A Discourse of Artificiall Fire-works* (London: Thomas Harper, for Ralph Mab, 1635), 63.
- ⁵⁰ See Alwin Thaler, “The Shaksperian Element in Milton”, *PMLA* 40, 3 (1925): 645-691, at 662.
- ⁵¹ A line traced to Marlowe’s *Dido, Queen of Carthage* (2.1.255-6): “Then from the navel to the throat at once,/ He ript old Priam”. Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragedie of Dido Queene of Carthage* (London: Thomas Woodcocke, 1594), C1^r. Cited in J. M. Nosworthy, “The Bleeding Captain Scene in *Macbeth*”, *The Review of English Studies* 22, 86 (1946): 126-130, at 129.
- ⁵² David Willbern links Macdonwald’s unseaming to Macduff’s Caesarean section. See Willbern, “Phantasmagoric *Macbeth*”, 528-29.
- ⁵³ William Lawrence, *The Right of Primogeniture, in Succession to the Kingdoms of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (London: [s.n.] 1681), 173.
- ⁵⁴ A. A. M. Duncan, “Our Kingdom Had No Head”, in *The Nation of Scots and the Declaration of Arbroath (1320)* (London: Historical Association, 1970), 10-18, at 17.

- ⁵⁵ Raphael Holinshed, *The Firste Volume of the Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (London: John Hunne, 1577), 310-311.
- ⁵⁶ Roger Mason, "Scotland", in *The Oxford Handbook of Holinshed's "Chronicles"*, edited by Paulina Kewes, Ian W. Archer, and Felicity Heal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 647-662, at 648.
- ⁵⁷ Kerrigan, *Archipelagic English*, 115, 141.
- ⁵⁸ Iain A. MacInnes, 'Heads, Shoulders, Knees and Toes: Injury and Death in Anglo-Scottish Combat, c. 1296-c.1403', in Larissa Tracy and Kelly DeVries (eds.), *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), pp. 102-127, at 121.
- ⁵⁹ John Speed, *The Theatre of the Empire of Great Britaine* (London: William Hall, 1612), 550.
- ⁶⁰ See Henry N. Paul, "The Imperial Theme in *Macbeth*", in James G. McManaway, Giles E. Dawson and Edwin E. Willoughby (eds.), *Joseph Quincy Adams Memorial Studies* (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1948), 253-2, at 253.
- ⁶¹ William Gouge, *An Exposition on the Whole Fifth Chapter of S. Johns Gospell* (London: John Bartlett, 1630), 158.
- ⁶² Paul, "The Imperial Theme in *Macbeth*", 256.
- ⁶³ Paul, "The Imperial Theme in *Macbeth*", 257.
- ⁶⁴ Paul, "The Imperial Theme in *Macbeth*", 265.
- ⁶⁵ Kari Andén-Papadopoulos, "Body Horror on the Internet: US Soldiers Recording the War in Iraq and Afghanistan", *Media, Culture & Society* 31, 6 (2009): 921-938, at 927.
- ⁶⁶ Kent Thompson, "Operation *Macbeth*: How the Alabama Shakespeare Festival Took the Front Line in a New Cultural Campaign", *American Theatre* 22, 2 (2005): 22-24, 76-79, at 78. See "The Bard at the Bases", https://www.arts.gov/sites/default/files/nea_arts/neaARTS_2004_v3_0.pdf, accessed 15 July 2018.
- ⁶⁷ Thompson, "Operation *Macbeth*", 78, 79..
- ⁶⁸ Kathleen McCall, "Tour of Duty", *American Theatre* 22, 2 (2005): 25-27, 80-82, at 25.
- ⁶⁹ McCall, "Tour of Duty", 82.
- ⁷⁰ Robert Bossler, "Was *Macbeth* a Victim of Battle Fatigue?", *College English* 8, 8 (1947): 436-438, at 436.
- ⁷¹ Bossler, "Was *Macbeth* a Victim of Battle Fatigue?", 436.
- ⁷² Bossler, "Was *Macbeth* a Victim of Battle Fatigue?", 436.
- ⁷³ Christy Clothier, "Understanding *Macbeth*: A Returning Soldier", *Inquiry Journal* 2007. Paper 1, http://scholars.unh.edu/inquiry_2007/1, accessed 10 July 2018.
- ⁷⁴ Barnabe Rich, *Allarme to England* (London: Henry Middleton, 1578), Eiiii^v.
- ⁷⁵ Alan Sinfield, "*Macbeth*: History, Ideology and Intellectuals", *Critical Quarterly* 28, 1-2 (1986): 63-77.
- ⁷⁶ David Finnegan, "O'More, Owny MacRory [Uaithne MacRuaidhri ua Mordha] (b. in or before 1577, d. 1600), Chieftain and Rebel", *ODNB*. Retrieved 10 Jul. 2018.
- ⁷⁷ *Gowreis Conspiracie*, B6^v-B7^r.