**Assay 1: families**

Our story begins with two little families, both survivors of *Macbeth*: an old man alone with his sons; a young girl deprived of her baby. *Macbeth* delivers a cruel world.Indeed Shakespeare’s world can seem so pitiless towards love that we might think mothers and children barely exist in it – or barely exist in the forms that we are accustomed to see in daily life. There is a single scene of a mother with her children. But even here the roles are violently denied. The wife accuses her absent husband of treachery, of loveless fear and cowardly treason, and appears to wish him or think him dead. Perhaps we think she is secretly faithful to him; but such fondness is ours to imagine, not hers to admit. The son jokes about his father being a traitor, or dead, and about the ways he will thrive now his father has gone. The son’s words have an alarming precociousness that clearly has the doom upon it. The next moment nameless Murderers enter, and that is the end of them: wife, mother, children.

Other than saintly Lady Macduff and her pretty chickens, what does Shakespeare give us in the way of women and children? We all think we know the fiend-like queen, the anti-woman, who would have plucked her nipple from the boneless gums of her babe and dashed out its brains rather than recant her promise to kill. We all think we know those other anti-women, the bearded witches, teasing the warrior into sin and spicing their cauldron with the finger of a ditch-delivered, birth-strangled babe. The conclusion seems irresistible. *Macbeth* is a savage world, where women are sacrificed and families, it seems, are impossible.

Or are they? Perhaps they are all the more inescapable precisely for being so violated.

The secret given to Macbeth by the witches is that no one of woman born shall harm him – as though he has ascended to some rare and untouchable place, beyond mothers entirely, the fierce wish of all this world’s lonely ravaged men. But then the other side of this is the mother’s hold upon the child. Why cherish such a thought unless one remains at heart a boy, idly dreaming of being an orphan, fatally unable to grow-up? As his Lady knows, the great Macbeth is never really more than an infant, to be rewarded for doing what he’s told.

The men in this world unavailingly suffer the great existential debt: that we haven’t earned the life we are given. They aim to prove themselves through violence. Their debt is never paid to the mother. It passes instead into death - or marriage. And here is another curiosity of this world. Though it is rarely noticed, *Macbeth* gives an alarming diagnosis of married life. We witness the unnerving guiltiness of marriage - but also its life-making or life-marring intimacy, an intimacy that hinges on the fact that the life-debt is owed to the other. This is as true of Macduff in his marriage as it is of Macbeth in his. The men of *Macbeth* threaten to shrivel beneath married life’s pitiless expectations; they close up inside themselves; or they run away, preferring private guilt to household exposure. Far from a play without families, perhaps this is Shakespeare’s greatest domestic tragedy.

There are mysteries amid the violence. Most mysterious of all is the survival of children. If the Lady had children, where are they now? And whose, indeed, were they? Is their sacrifice an imaginary vow or a settled fact? Where do they go to when they go? Literary criticism famously attempted to rule out such questions - but the imagination will not be warned off. Because one thing is certain in the world of *Macbeth* – the dead haunt the living, whether in the form of accusing ghosts, or horrible visions, or baroque images of naked babes, newborn or undead, striding the blast.

In other words, no one is safely dead in this world. But then no one is safely alive either - and indeed it isn’t always possible to tell which is which. Hence the anxiety of care that bedevils what becomes this world’s normative and broken family set-up (found with Duncan, Banquo, Seyward, Old Man): when boys survive their mothers and are raised by their fathers alone. But however hard the fathers try, the primal fear remains: the fear that the bone has been pointed; that their sons shall not escape the original curse; that everything returns to what it came from – life to death, and death to life.

Men seem to fill this world’s stage. Yet the women remain, often out of view, but never out of earshot. This world’s echoing cry is often the wail of women, either the death-pangs of giving birth or the shriek of grief at another’s passing. We should remember such everyday heartache and violence every time we meet a woman in this world. After all, what makes a woman become a witch? What kinds of denial or cruelty could do that to someone who was once a bonny hopeful girl? Verily, this Scotland is a savage place, where children are ripped from their mothers, where women are brutalized by the fact that such a thing is even possible. So many mothers weeping, and sisters sacked, and never an innocent tear.

Listen to *Macbeth*, and hear behind the walls the cry of women. It is one of the things that this world is built on. Even the supposedly saintly royal family of Duncan suffers this original curse. Recall some of the words rarely mentioned in criticism, those spoken by Macduff to Malcolm, telling the fledgling prince about his mother:

*The Queen that bore thee,*

*Oftener upon her knees, than on her feet,*

*Died every day she lived.*

This is the only presence she’s allowed. Praying daily, inexplicably guilty, lashed by existence, wound upon wound, worried for her sons, severed from her sainted-king, living the dying life, every day a suffering rehearsal of death. This is the rightful Queen. We can imagine anything we like, a whole backstory flowering in her silence - and each detail a pre-echo of the play that she too haunts. Her suffering bleeds into everyone’s, it shadows everything. Scotland becomes a country that, “almost afraid to know itself”, “cannot be called our Mother, but our Grave”. How then to know it – or even know ourselves - other than by recovering once more the mother - and, what makes the mother, rescuing from oblivion the child? We should find out the buried lives.

Of course where we might find them is no easy thing.

**Assay 2: Ross**

Who on earth is the Thane of Ross? The simplest answer is that he isn’t really anyone at all. He is just one of Shakespeare’s reporter-figures, one of those adjuncts without a past or a future, a family or a personality, who fill in details of battles, convey necessary pieces of news to characters and audience, and then retreat into the background.

But then listen to how he is first introduced:

King. *Who comes here?*

Malcolm*. The worthy Thane of Ross.*

Lennox. *What a haste looks through his eyes!*

*So should he look, that seems to speak things strange.*

What are we to make of this description? Perhaps that this Ross is supercharged with some kind of volatile electricity; that his eyes are not regular eyes, seeing only what is before him, or what others can also see and attest to; that his eyes are not in fact the organs of *his* vision at all, but are instead the vectors of some other-worldly “haste”, a hurry and urgency which he is subject to, that he must suffer, that has to pass through him and into the slower world he has entered. He is a time-traveller; an agent of apocalypse; a clairvoyant burning with visions.

More than that, Ross ‘seems to *speak things strange*’ – not just speak of strange things, but to make things strange through the act of speaking. When Ross speaks, the world shudders, as though breaking into dangerous novelty, or spying its own present death.

But then having been teed up to speak in this way, what exactly does Ross say? He says this:

*God save the King.*

Imagine Ross speaking these words as the haste looks through his eyes. What can he be seeing to make him say, *God save the king?* How alarming this mundane, boringly ideological greeting suddenly sounds, in the mouth of a man whose speech makes strange what is otherwise familiar. What foreknowledge could make him say *this*? Has the regicide already happened? Or might Ross’s words prevent what he sees from happening? Or on the contrary, will they make the horror come true?

Ross knows too much, always. He speaks of the “strange images of death” made by Macbeth in the killing fields – as though these are not the actual deaths of soldiers, but uncanny simulations, images that echo and repeat what they report even in the reporting. Ross’s world trembles between reality and virtuality, confusing distinctions between the two. He is the king’s messenger, but he is also the one who makes the witches’ prophecies come true. Whose side, then, is he on?

Listen to Banquo’s’s reply, after Ross hails Macbeth as the newly minted Thane of Cawdor:

*What, can the Devil speak true?*

It is usually assumed that Banquo refers to the witches. But it is a single man who has just spoken to him, and a singular figure that Banquo now invokes: *the Devil.*  And who exactly is Ross, come to think of it? Who is he related to, or from where does he come? Might the Devil himself be floating before us in the shape of this abstracted messenger? Like so much in this world, the figure of Ross is a topsy-turvy, handy-dandy question-mark.

Consider the repeated enigma of his presence. He arrives at the murder-scene with Macbeth, bang on cue. “There’s nothing serious in mortality: All is but toys”, says the assassin; Ross floats in silence, neither staying nor departing, and speaking not a word. Why is he there? Who or what do his motions shadow?

Then he enters, who knows how or from where, with a nameless Old Man whom he twice addresses as “Father”. Perhaps the Old Man is not Ross’s father, just a venerable cove with whom to share the news of doomsday. But sure as day – which has been shamed into darkness – Ross does not speak of fathers innocently. How could he, in the immediate wake of the first father’s slaughter? The question of progenitors hovers in mind; so too the question of Ross’s particular parent.

Where he comes from remains a mystery; likewise how he gets to wherever he arrives. Always, he has seen too much, been where others dare not. He has seen the king’s horses eat each other up, he has seen the face of earth entombed ‘when living light should kiss it’. Love is going, or it has gone. Ross is alone with his witnessing, with his terrible clairvoyance, his helplessness in the face of history.

Above all, Ross haunts the places of death. He is found with Lady Macduff, and leaves her to her slaughter. Then he recurs in England, telling her husband the news. Then he is at the battle-field, silently ghosting the scene as Macbeth kills Young Seyward, before sneaking off to report the news to his father. Can we imagine the guilt of such haunting? The impotent knowledge, the time-serving, creeping attendance!

How possibly to redeem it? How possibly to speak what he knows? But speak he does.

*I have words*

*That would be howled out in the desert air,*

*Where hearing should not latch them.*

It is Ross’s words that evoke the time’s catastrophe, a catastrophe that splits him almost literally in two:

*Cruel are the times, when we are traitors*

*And do not know our selves: when we hold rumour*

*From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,*

*But float upon a wild and violent sea*

*Each way, and move.*

The theme is annihilation, of self and of country, and of knowledge of both:

*Alas poor country,*

*Almost afraid to know it self.*

To live inside this loss – to suffer moment by moment its knowledge – is Ross’s exceptional burden:

*Where nothing*

*But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile:*

*Where sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air*

*Are made, not marked: Where violent sorrow seems*

*A modern ecstasy.*

By ‘ecstasy’ he means more than a frenzy or a trance. He means to be out of place or out of body – violent sorrow expressing itself, collecting itself, suffering itself, in a body that cannot or will not be recognized. That body, we submit – never recognized, forever suffering what happens to others, bearing the unhealable wounds of history - is Ross.

Perhaps here is the true son of *Macbeth*. Perhaps.

**Assay 3: sex and sympathy**

*“Macbeth, Macbeth”* is a sequel to Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and one that seeks to extend and redouble that original's fatedness.  One of our aims is to renew the shock of Shakespeare's tragic determinism, and then to consider it freshly. This means that *“Macbeth, Macbeth”* is also a retelling, a kind of detonated repetition, of Shakespeare's original. We attempt a more embodied kind of knowledge than most criticism can even begin to venture. What would it mean to live – imaginatively *and* actually - in the wake of Macbeth? What might it mean actually to suffer *Macbeth*, as agent or victim or avenger, or as potentially one in the other? But this ambition hardly comes without peril, and not least the problem of sex, or more explicitly the sexual violence of war. Do we really need more raped girls, the staple of history since Herodotus, of epic since Homer, and the ugly fact of every war ever waged? And even if it is a fact of life, is it the place of two white men to tell it?

There is no simple answer to these questions, but they come down to the basic ethics, the efficacy, and still more perhaps the basic *possibility*, of imaginative sympathy. Our instinctive answer is that you have to try to put yourself in the place of the other, including victim, including criminal. This is the task, and the justification for the task. How else to understand? How else to communicate any kind of truth? Even to attempt to live a world like *Macbeth –* more than that, to live it over and over again – is to suffer inescapably the fact of bloody violation; the only way to imagine a sequel and repetition of such a world is try truly to feel with its victims, and to embody, to enter the body, of its consequences. And this, absolutely centrally, means women and children. When Ross talks of his country as a brutalized, howling, grave-like mother, we take it as axiomatic that the violence includes the rape of girls and women that always accompany brutal conquest. We try to extend the ‘dolorous cry’ beyond the single speech that the play gives it; to enter the wounds that are so freely given, and so easily passed by, and which in the play get barely a passing requiem. Our project is more than perhaps anything else an attempt to embody the play’s passions (meaning suffering): to borrow from *The Tempest*’s Miranda, to suffer with those we saw suffer; to bridge those gaps in time and space, between a fiction and its experience; between history at a sanitary distance and history as a present and imminent nightmare. And this also means between the necessary categories of academic thinking, and the fact that life, like imagination, will disrespect all and any boundaries. The complicities at work are deep and troubling and endlessly cross-hatched. To take them on (in all senses) is a risk, but one we hope is worth taking.

Because to really live such violence is also to imagine – to try to imagine – what it would be to *do* it, and then to live in the knowledge of having done it. Or even what it might mean to wish to do it, even as you know it is wrong, and you know you will not be permitted to do it - as the hopeless soldiers in the cart do in the very first scene. How can a good man, the milk of human kindness (and all of us were children once) do such things? How can a girl become a witch, or a mother a monster? These too are the burning questions of Macbeth – to do such things, to remain a recognizable man or woman, and to live or die in their consequences. Questions of sex and gender are always urgently at work – but it is by no means only about the actions of men upon women and girls; nor is it the case that sexual identity is on either side fixed and immutable. *Macbeth* more than any other playworld knows how little the usual taxonomies, of sex or gender as of much else, really know about how the world works or the soul moves.

Nonetheless, our narrative identifies above all with Gru, sole survivor and moral compass of our world.  We recognise the war-torn world of men she is lost in, and we present her as seeking refuge from this in the nunnery.  In entering the nunnery, she is *both* the play’s lost and orphaned child and its denied mother. But she is also a bewildered and lonely person, quite unable to process what has happened to her, diffident to others from shock or fear, but once known, instantly trusting; and so dangerously susceptible to betrayal. She moves through numerous incarnations during the course of the narrative, shadowy or fragmented precursors to which she is indebted but also never reducible: this includes Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff, the witches, the suffering populace, the lost children, even Duncan’s ghostly wife. But she is always irreducibly something else, a girl then a woman, suffering life for the very first time, suffering the memories it insists upon. Certainly the book is about the desire of various men for Gru: but it is equally, if not more, about *her* desire - for them, and also *not* for them; for her lost baby, for revenge, for peace, for a metaphysical alternative, for survival.  *Macbeth* murders and neutralises its women (it is sometimes criticized for reducing women to witches, monsters, saintly mothers, or madness).  One of the motivations for writing *“Macbeth, Macbeth”* was to reverse this, both for ethical and political reasons, and because the play seems to demand or challenge us to revive this frustrated and even amputated aspect of its life.

Since ours is in large part a creative performance that tries to give life to its own characters, it cannot stand hygienically apart from the systems – even the sinfulness – that it critiques. But then no honestly engaged critique can.  *“Macbeth, Macbeth”*, like so many other acts of creativity and criticism, fights for what freedom it can within a violent world, one of endless interpellations, in which resistance can swiftly become reified and imitative.  If *“Macbeth, Macbeth”* glimpses alternative possibilities of sex and gender – some invidious, some thrilling, some inescapably ambivalent - these are inextricable from the play’s vision of a humanity always liable to prey upon itself. In *“Macbeth, Macbeth”* we partly sexualise this vision, especially in making the first ‘prize’ of the competitive men a woman rather than a crown. Here we were responding to a lingering puzzle about the play, its curious exclusion of sex, as though less primary to human *want* than more infantile or public drives. Among other things, we wanted to explore what might happen when you let it back in.