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DATING SHAKESPEARE'S WOMEN¹

BY

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The earliest illustration we have of a scene from one of Shakespeare's plays depicts Tamora, the Queen of the Goths in *Titus Andronicus* pleading with Titus to spare her two sons.² In keeping with the ancient Roman setting of the play, Titus is dressed in a classical-looking draped garment, perhaps copied from a Roman statue. Tamora, along with the low-born men, wears a contemporary Elizabethan costume. The difference is exemplary because the women in Shakespeare's plays, like the plebeian men, often seem to exist in an unchanging theatrical present, even when royal and aristocratic male characters are historically situated. We do not have a contemporary illustration of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, but the playscript indicates that she too must have been dressed in anachronistically modern clothing. Early in the play, Shakespeare's ancient Egyptian queen asks her attendant to cut her lace,³ a demand that would have made sense only if she wore a tight, stiffened busk or bodice like the costumes worn by fashionable ladies in Shakespeare's own time.

As the illustration from *Titus Andronicus* reminds us, however, anachronistic clothing was more the rule than the exception on Shakespeare's stage. The difference between the historical location of Shakespeare's leading male characters and the anachronistic modernity of his women and plebeian men lies deeper than dress. It is probably most apparent in the *Henry IV* plays, where the historical court of Henry IV is inhabited entirely by highborn men while the anachronistically modern Boar's Head tavern is presided over by a female Hostess, who entertains a dissolute crew of equally unhistorical, low-life men with anachronistic cups of sack, a wine that was not served in English taverns until 1543,⁴ and the prostitute

¹ This paper was presented at the Weimar Shakespeare Tage, 1997. An abstract of an earlier version, presented at the 1997 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America, was published in the October 1997 issue of *Shakespeare* magazine. For helpful responses to earlier versions, I am indebted to Crystal Bartolovich, Rebecca Bushnell, Jean E. Howard, Donald Rackin, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, and Peter Stallybrass.

² Reproduced as plate 9 in G. Blakemore Evans et al. (eds.), *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

³ 1.3.72. This and all subsequent citations of Shakespeare's plays come from *The Riverside Shakespeare*.

⁴ Samuel Burdett Hemingway (ed.), the Variorum edition of Shakespeare's *Henry the Fourth Part I* (Philadelphia & London: J. B. Lippincott, 1936), p. 174n.

Doll Tearsheet reproaches the anachronistically named Pistol for tearing her anachronistically Elizabethan ruff (2H4: 2.4.144–45). Doll and the Hostess are fictional characters. Hotspur's wife had a real historical prototype – the granddaughter of Lionel, Duke of Clarence, the same ancestor on whom the Mortimers based their claim to the English throne; but she probably did not, as Hotspur claims in the play,

...swear like a comfit-maker's wife...
 And give such sarcenet surety for thy oaths
 As if thou never walk'st further than Finsbury.
 Swear me, Kate, like a lady as thou art,
 A good mouth-filling oath, and leave "in sooth",
 And such protest of pepper-gingerbread,
 To velvet-guards and Sunday-citizens. (3.1.247–56)

All these details – the references to confectioners and their wares; to Finsbury, a district of open walks and fields favored by London citizens; to the velvet guards that ornamented the gowns of aldermen's wives⁵ – associate Shakespeare's Lady Percy with the late sixteenth-century citizens' wives in his playhouse, even though her historical prototype had died in 1403.

The reason Shakespeare's women are so difficult to date, I think, is that they are always updated and always dateless – first, in Shakespeare's texts, where they are imagined as existing in an eternal, theatrical present, and then, in subsequent reproductions, where they are repeatedly updated to conform to new conceptions of women's place and women's role. For that very reason, however, Shakespeare's women seem dateless, serving in ever-changing guises as models of an unchanging, universal female nature immune to the accidents of historical contingency. Last spring, there was a remarkable exhibition at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., of nineteenth-century images of Shakespeare's heroines. As Georgianna Ziegler points out in the accompanying catalogue, Shakespeare's female characters were interpreted to conform to Victorian ideals of female behavior: even Lady Macbeth was redeemed as a woman whose "ambition was all for her husband".⁶ The exhibition owed much of its quaintness and charm to the fact that our own conceptions of womanhood – and of Shakespeare's heroines – are so different from those of the Victorians. Nonetheless, the representation of Shakespeare's women as models of universal feminine nature is still alive and

⁵ Hemingway, pp. 204–5 n.

⁶ Georgianna Ziegler, with Frances E. Dolan and Jeanne Addison Roberts, *Shakespeare's Unruly Women* (Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library, 1997), p. 75.

well in contemporary films and stagings, and also in our own scholarship and criticism.

Consider, for instance, the case of Lady Macbeth, a character who has proved especially amenable to modern psychoanalytic readings. Recent critics and playgoers have been fascinated by her soliloquy calling on murderous spirits to "unsex" her (1.5.40–50). Often accompanied by autoerotic display as she fondles her own breasts, breathes hard and writhes in the throes of passion, the speech clearly demonstrates that the lady is, in fact, sexed; and it locates her sex in the eroticized breasts of the woman who performs the role. Although some scholars have speculated that the male actor who originally performed the part may have gestured toward his crotch at this point, alluding to his own "unsexing" as he took on the woman's part, the references to "my woman's breasts" and "my milk" suggest that he probably did gesture towards the place where the woman's breasts would have been if he had had them. From this distance in time, however, it is impossible to know exactly how the soliloquy was performed or exactly what its implications were in Shakespeare's playhouse.⁷

Medieval images of the lactating Virgin, of the Church allegorized as a nursing mother, and of souls suckled at the breast of Christ associated breast milk with charity and spiritual sustenance,⁸ but although those associations were still current in the Renaissance, female breasts were also eroticized as tokens of female sexuality, celebrated by poets as "buds", "strawberries", or "hemispheres" and featured in erotic paintings "with a man's proprietary hand cupped on them".⁹ Until the late middle ages, men and women had worn similar long, loose robes. In Shakespeare's time, however, clothing was designed to produce embodied sexual difference. Men's robes had been shortened to reveal their legs, and the codpiece had been invented. Women wore tight bodices that altered the shape of their breasts and low-cut gowns to display them.¹⁰

⁷ For a thoughtful meditation on the significance of references to women's breasts on Shakespeare's stage, see Peter Stallybrass, "Transvestism and the 'body beneath': speculating on the boy actor" in Susan Zimmerman (ed.), *Erotic Politics: Desire on the Renaissance Stage* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 64–83.

⁸ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 270–71. See also Londa Schiebinger, "Why Mammals are Called Mammals", *American Historical Review* (April 1993), 398.

⁹ Natalie Angier, "Goddesses, Harlots and Other Male Fantasies", review of Marilyn Yalom, *A History of the Breast* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), in *The New York Times Book Review*, February 23, 1997, p. 4. See also Yalom, pp. 87–9.

¹⁰ "The Body, Appearance, and Sexuality", by Sara F. Matthews Grieco, in Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge (ed.), *A History of Women in the West*, Vol III (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 56. See also Francois Boucher, *20,000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1987), p. 198.

To modern Western eyes, the eroticization of women's breasts seems "natural"; on a modern stage, the meaning of Lady Macbeth's soliloquy seems equally self-evident. The beliefs it assumes – that there is a psychological polarity between men and women, based on sexual differences that are embodied, natural, biologically grounded and visually self-evident – are by now too familiar to require explication. At the time the speech was written, however, these assumptions did not yet represent a cultural consensus. In fact, Shakespeare had to make significant alterations in his historical source in order to write it.

In Shakespeare's version, Lady Macbeth prepares herself for Duncan's murder by calling on evil spirits to

unsex me here,

And fill me from the crown to the toe topful
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and [it]! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief. (1.S. 41–50)

Her speech implies that women have a natural aversion to killing, physically grounded in their sexed and gendered bodies. Before she can kill, the spirits that "wait on nature's mischief" will have to "unsex" her. The assumption that feminine gentleness is grounded by nature in a lactating female body is clearly legible in twentieth-century terms. However, as M. C. Bradbrook pointed out over forty years ago, this speech should probably be read in connection with a passage in Holinshed's *Chronicles* in a chapter entitled "Of the Maners of the Scots in these Daies, and their Comparison with the Behaviour of the Old, and Such as Lived Long Since within this Island".¹¹ As the title suggests, the chapter's theme is the conventional Renaissance opposition between a virile, heroic past and a degenerate, effeminate present. In ancient Scotland, according to the chronicler,

¹¹ Bradbrook, "The Sources of Macbeth," *ShS* 4 (1951), 35–48. Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 2nd ed, 1587 (rpt. London: J. Johnson *et al.*, 1808) Vol. 5, pp. 22–7. "Holinshed's" is shorthand: The *Chronicles* included the work of many writers – predecessors whose work had been incorporated, successors who augmented the narrative after Holinshed's death, and collaborators at the time of its original production. The "Description of Scotland", for instance, was translated by William Harrison from a Scots translation by John Belenden of Hector Boece's (or Boethius's) early sixteenth-century Latin text *Historia Scotorum*.

the women [...] were of no lesse courage than the men; for all stout maidens and wives [...] marched as well in the field as did the men, and so soone as the armie did set forward, they slue the first living creature that they found, in whose blood they not onelie bathed their swords, but also tasted thereof with their mouthes with no lesse religion and assurance conceived, than if they had alreadie bene sure of some notable and fortunate victorie. When they saw their owne blood run from them in the fight, they waxed neuer a whit astonished with the matter, but rather doubling their courages, with more eagernesse they assailed their enimies (p. 24).

Although Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth seems to have inherited some of the fierceness of her ancient predecessors, she lacks their taste for blood. The obsessive theme of her sleepwalking, in fact, will be her repeated, futile efforts to wash what she calls the "damned spots" of Duncan's blood from her hands (5.1.35). Here, as in her preparation for Duncan's murder, Shakespeare's eleventh-century Scotswoman models a prototypically modern conception of universal femininity, proving once again in her madness that killing is antithetical to woman's essential nature. In the words of the eighteenth-century English actress, Sarah Siddons, most celebrated for her portrayal of Lady Macbeth, the lady's "feminine nature, her delicate structure, it is too evident, are soon overwhelmed by the enormous pressure of her crimes".¹²

Shakespeare's antithesis between women's milk and murder, which also became an essential feature of the Lady Macbeth's character, required an even more radical revision of his source. In the "Description of Scotland", lactation is not opposed to killing; the two, in fact, are associated. Those same bloodthirsty women of ancient Scotland, according to the chronicler,

would take intollerable paines to bring up and nourish [their] owne children [...] nay they feared least they should degenerat and grow out of kind, except they gaue them sucke themselves, and eschewed strange milke, *therefore* in labour and painfulnesse they were equall, & neither sex regarded the heat in summer or cold in winter, but travelled bare-footed.¹³

Here maternal breastfeeding is evidence both of the women's physical hardiness and of the equality of the sexes in a primitive culture that lived close to nature.

¹² Nina Auerbach, *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time* (New York: Norton, 1987), p. 352.

¹³ Holinshed, Vol 5, pp. 23–4 (my italics). This passage in the chronicle is not illustrated, but a very similar conception of ancient Scotswomen seems to lie behind "the true picture of a women nighbour to the Pictes", which was published in Thomas Hariot's *A briefe and true report of the new found land of Virginia* (London, 1590; rpt. New York: Dover, 1972). The woman in the picture is armed, scantily dressed, and barefooted, and the caption explains, "they lett hange their brests outt, as for the rest the dyd carye suche waepens as the men did, and wear as good as the men for the warre".



Neither the chronicle nor the play offers a reliable picture of ancient Scotswomen. Both are inflected by sixteenth and seventeenth century debates about breastfeeding – and also by changing conceptions of women's place in the world, and the basis of gender itself. Historians of sexual difference have argued that "sex as we know it was invented" some time "in the eighteenth century", but the modern conception of sexual difference that Thomas Laqueur identifies as the "two-sex model"¹⁴ seems clearly anticipated in Shakespeare's representation of Lady Macbeth. For although both the chronicler and the playwright can be said to advocate maternal breastfeeding, their advocacy takes strikingly different forms. In the chronicle it is a means by which the strong mothers of ancient Scotland produced strong offspring; in *Macbeth* it is a distinctively female activity which expresses the gendered gentleness that is the natural disposition of all women in every time and place.

Because this conception of womanhood has become so well established, Shakespeare's characterization of Lady Macbeth has been both accessible and acceptable to modern audiences. But it would not have seemed so familiar at the beginning of the seventeenth century. In fact, Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth differs as much from the women of the playwright's own time as she does from the ancient Scotswoman she purports to represent. In another speech frequently cited in modern criticism, Lady Macbeth states that she has "given suck, and know[s] / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.54–55), but a real woman of Lady Macbeth's station would have been extremely unlikely to do so at the time the play was written. The tradition of using wet nurses was so widely accepted in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that wealthy and aristocratic mothers who decided to nurse their own babies were regarded as extraordinary.¹⁵ In John Webster's early seventeenth-century play *The White Devil* (1610–12), for instance, maternal breastfeeding provides the final touch in the playwright's portrait of Brachiano's long-suffering wife, Isabella, as an incredibly selfless woman. Murdered by order of her faithless husband, Isabella is fervently mourned by her son Giovanni:

I have often heard her say she gave me suck
And it should seem by that she dearly loved me
Since princes seldom do it (3.2.336–39).¹⁶

¹⁴ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990), p.149.

¹⁵ Valerie Fildes, *Breasts Bottles & Babies: a history of infant feeding* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1986), p. 100.

¹⁶ Ed. J. R. Brown, *Revels Plays Series*. London, 1960.

Seventeenth-century tombstones also record instances of maternal breastfeeding as exceptional examples of motherly devotion. The memorial brass to Elizabeth Brand and her husband, for instance, recorded in 1638 that the couple had left "their rare examples to 6 sonnes and 6 daughters (all nursed with her unborrowed milk)". The 1658 monument to Lady Essex, Countess of Manchester records that she "left 8 children 6 sonns & 2 daughters 7 of them shee nursed with her owne breasts".¹⁷

Testimonials such as these were rare, not only because maternal breastfeeding was exceptional, but also because it was more often discouraged than celebrated: In 1598, for example, when the sister of one of Queen Elizabeth's ladies in waiting decided to nurse her own child, her father wrote, "I am sorry that yourself will needs nurse her", and the child's godfather wrote, "I should like nothing that you play the nurse if you were my wife". Husbands in particular often objected to maternal breastfeeding, for a number of reasons.¹⁸ Even if the Galenic injunction that nursing women should abstain from sexual relations was ignored, other issues remained: the husband's interest in his wife's company and productive and reproductive labor and concerns about the preservation of the mother's health and beauty. The erotic ideal of small, high rounded breasts was inconsistent with lactation: the tight corsets that were used to produce beautiful breasts could also produce inverted nipples, which made nursing difficult, and if the lady did manage to nurse, the appearance of her breasts would be "ruined".

The controversy persisted for hundreds of years. Prince Henry heard a disputation on the subject at Oxford in 1605,¹⁹ and it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that maternal breastfeeding became the normal custom in England.²⁰ Nonetheless, by the time Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, there was already a growing chorus of authoritative voices urging Englishwomen to breastfeed their own children.²¹ In 1580, Thomas Tusser had recommended in doggerel verse:

¹⁷ Photographs of these inscriptions can be found in Fildes, pp. 100, 101.

¹⁸ Both quotations come from a list of similar statements in Fildes, p. 104, which also includes William Gouge's observation in his 1622 treatise *Of Domestic Duties*, "Husbands for the most part are the cause that their wives nurse not their owne children" and James Nelson's claim in his 1753 *Essay on the Government of Children* that "many a tender mother, has her heart yearning to suckle her child, and is prevented by the misplac'd authority of a husband".

¹⁹ Craig Thompson (ed. and tr.), Desiderius Erasmus, "The New Mother (*Puerpera*)", in *The Colloquies of Erasmus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), p. 267.

²⁰ Some women still used wet nurses in England, however, and the practice remained customary on the continent. In *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500–1800* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 430, Lawrence Stone quotes a German visitor who visited England in 1784 and "remarked with surprise" that "even women of quality nurse their children".

²¹ Susan Cahn, *Industry of Devotion: The Transformation of Women's Work in England, 1500–1660* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), pp. 104–5.

Good housewives take pain, and do count it good luck
to make their own breast their own child to give suck.
Though wrangling [i.e. quarreling] and rocking be noisome so near,
yet lost by ill nursing is worse to hear.
But one thing I warn thee, let housewife be nurse
least husband do find thee too frank with his purse.²²

Tusser gives practical arguments for maternal nursing: children sent out to wet nurses are less likely to survive, and a husband is less likely to complain about a wife's extravagance if she provides free milk for the children. Other advocates for maternal nursing decried mercenary motives (and in fact ascribed them to the poor wet nurses and not to the more affluent parents), resting their appeals instead on ethical and religious grounds. Erasmus's colloquy "The New Mother" (1526) for instance, a curious combination of arguments for maternal nursing and instruction on the nature of the soul, argued that the nurse may have "neither good health nor good morals and [...] may be much more concerned about a bit of money than about a whole baby". "Children's characters", he explains, "are injured by the nature of the milk just as in fruits or plants the moisture of the soil changes the quality of what it nourishes. Or do you suppose the common saying, 'He drank in his spite with his nurse's milk' has no basis?"²³

Puritans were especially opposed to the use of wet nurses. The most popular and influential early-seventeenth-century Puritan writers on household management – Robert Cleaver, John Dod, William Gouge, and William Perkins – all strongly advocated maternal breastfeeding.²⁴ Their advocacy seems to have had some effect because although the use of wet nurses persisted – and in fact even increased – during the seventeenth century, social historians have noted that "women of the stricter protestant sects were apparently more likely to breastfeed their own children" than other women of similar social station.²⁵ The only recorded condemnation of wet nursing by an aristocratic mother during the period is a case in point. Elizabeth Clinton nursed none of her sixteen children, but late in life, when she was already widowed, she wrote *The Countess of Lincoln's Nurserie*, explaining that she had not nursed her own children "partly [because] I was over-ruled by another's authority and partly deceived by some ill counsel, and partly I had not so well considered of my duty in this motherly office as since I did, when it was too

²² Thomas Tusser, *The Points of Housewifery* (1580), in Joan Larsen Klein (ed.), *Daughters Wives & Widows: Writings by Men about Women and Marriage in England, 1500–1640* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 228.

²³ Erasmus, pp. 273, 283.

²⁴ Stone, p. 428.

²⁵ Fildes, p. 99.

late for me to put it in execution". Now convinced that it was "the express ordinance of God that mothers should nurse their own children" and that failure to do so was a sin, she published her treatise on breastfeeding as a tribute to her daughter-in-law, who did nurse her own children, and in the hopes that other young women would see the light.²⁶

The growing insistence that women should nurse their own children can thus be seen as part of a Protestant redefinition of family life, but it can also be seen as part of a larger cultural project at the beginning of the modern era to institute gender as the essential axis of difference and to confine women within the household, which was being redefined as a private, domestic space, separate from the public world of masculine activity. "Motherhood", as Susan Cahn points out, "was increasingly presented by ministers, and accepted by the laity as so vital – and time-consuming – a chore that it was a 'special vocation'". A less idealized explanation comes from a citizen wife in Thomas Dekker and John Webster's play *Westward Ho* (1607), who denounces demands for maternal nursing as "the policy of husbands to keepe their Wives in" (1.2.116–17).²⁷

So long as motherhood and breastfeeding were seen as separate functions, different classes of women were assumed to perform different sorts of productive and reproductive labor. In 1592, Gervase Babington had advised women to decide whether or not to nurse "according to your place and other true circumstance".²⁸ As Gail Paster observes, "the institution of wet-nursing enforced a major [...] difference [...] between women of different stations".²⁹ Because lactation has a contraceptive effect, the use of wet-nurses to feed the babies of wealthy and aristocratic women helped to produce significant differences in fertility, enabling wealthy families, in effect, to appropriate the fertility of the poor. In one Somerset parish, for instance, Dorothy McLaren found that the fourteen rich women, "who almost certainly" used wet nurses, had a fertility rate double to that of the parish mothers "overall".³⁰

For the rich, wet-nursing served the need to produce heirs. For the women who served as wet nurses, it acted as a restraint on fertility. For families of the middling

²⁶ Elizabeth Clinton, *The Countess of Lincoln's Nurserie*, in *The Female Spectator: English Women Writers before 1800*, Mary R. Mahl and Helene Koon (eds.) (Old Westury, N. Y.: Feminist Press, 1977), pp. 96, 90.

²⁷ Cahn, pp. 104–6.

²⁸ *Certaine Plaine, briefe, and Comfortable Notes upon every Chapter of Genesis* (London, 1592), quoted in Cahn, p. 105.

²⁹ Gail Kern Paster, *The Body Embarrassed: Drama and the Disciplines of Shame in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 201.

³⁰ Stone, pp. 63–66. Dorothy McLaren, "Marital fertility and lactation 1570–1720", in Mary Prior (ed.), *Women in English Society 1500–1800* (London and New York: Methuen, 1985), p. 43.

sort, wet-nursing served an additional function, since it enabled mothers to continue performing work that increased the wealth of the family. William Gouge was an advocate of maternal breastfeeding, but he nonetheless acknowledged, "a mother that hath a trade or that hath the care of an house will neglect much business by nursing her child: and her husband will save more by giving half a crown a week to nurse, than if his wife gave the child suck".³¹

Even this brief survey shows that the campaign for maternal breastfeeding had numerous rationales, often inconsistent with each other. Religious arguments and appeals to nature tended to emphasize gender differences at the expense of class distinctions by insisting that *all* women, regardless of their social station, should breastfeed their own children. On the other hand, many sixteenth and seventeenth-century advocates for maternal nursing based their arguments on the need to maintain the social hierarchy. Erasmus was not the only authority who warned that infants would imbibe "low" habits and dispositions from their nurses; and wet-nursing did in fact produce cross-class bonds which sometimes persisted into adult life, and even beyond, as many people remembered their old wet nurses in their wills.³² In most cases, the infant lived in the nurse's household. In all cases wet-nursing entailed an intimate, physical relationship between child and nurse. The nurse, moreover, was likely to be the person to teach the perhaps aristocratic and certainly wealthier infant its 'mother tongue'.

With the advantage of hindsight, however, the growing demand that all mothers breastfeed their own children can be seen as part of the long-term project of denying class difference in an ideology of universal humanity, differentiated only by gender – with the same modernizing project that produced the ideal of the domesticated wife. The traditional use of wet nurses divided the poor families whose women did the wet-nursing from their social and economic superiors. The new requirement that all mothers nurse their own children emphasized instead the distinctions between men and women – the division between the male domain of public, economic and political action and the female enclosure of private and domestic affairs. This is not to say that all women have ever been enclosed within the household. In fact, even to this day, many women are forced by economic necessity to work outside their homes; but the ideal of woman's 'natural' and 'traditional' place at home is undisturbed by that reality. The only division that 'counts' is the 'natural' division between men and women that was to become one of the salient features of modernity.

³¹ Gouge concluded, however, that maternal nursing should take precedence over economic expediency or a husband's desires because it was a "special calling", ordained by God. See Cahn, p. 105.

³² Fildes, pp. 162, 202.

Here too, Shakespeare's anachronistic rendering of his eleventh-century story is revealing. Instead of accompanying her husband into battle like the ancient Scots-women in the chronicle, Lady Macbeth waits at home for his letter and his return like a good, modern wife. In fact, the domestication of women appears to be a major project of this play. Rosse urges Malcolm to return to Scotland to fight against the tyrant by claiming, "your eye in Scotland/Would create soldiers, make our women fight" (4.3.186–187). In Shakespeare's ancient Scotland, unlike Holinshed's, this would be a remarkable anomaly. The only women who appear outside the home in Shakespeare's play are the weird sisters, and Shakespeare transforms his source material to emphasize that they are both unnatural and unwomanly. In



the *Chronicles*, they are described as "three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world" met by Macbeth and Banquo as they are "passing through the woods and fields".³³ In the 1577 edition the description is illustrated with a woodcut depicting two bearded men on horseback encountering three attractive and elaborately gowned women. Instead of Shakespeare's "blasted heath" (1.3.77), the illustration shows a landscape embellished with vegetation, including a large tree in full leaf. One of the women has prominent breasts and visible nipples, but there is no sign of the beards that have received so much attention from recent critics. Banquo's often-quoted reference to their embodied gender ambiguity "You should be women,/And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/That you are so" (1.3.45–7) is entirely Shakespeare's invention.

³³ Holinshed, vol. 5, p. 268.

Shakespeare did include one unambiguously feminine woman in *Macbeth*, but here too he had to modify his source, which gave no indication of Lady Macduff's character but simply recorded her murder, along with the rest of Macduff's household. According to the *Chronicles*, Macbeth

came hastily with a great power into Fife, and forthwith besieged the castell where Makduffe dwelled, trusting to have found him therein. They that kept the house, without anie resistance opened the gates, and suffered him to enter, mistrusting none evill. But neverthesse Makbeth most cruellie caused the wife and children of Makduffe, with all other whom he found in that castell, to be slaine.³⁴

Instead of the mistaken trust of Macduff's household, Shakespeare emphasizes the feminine helplessness of Macduff's wife, a woman whose husband has 'unnaturally' left her unprotected in a dangerous situation. "He loves us not", she complains, "He wants the natural touch; for the poor wren,/The most diminutive of birds, will fight,/Her young ones in her nest, against the owl" (4.2.8–11). Instead of following the wren's example, however, she simply announces her female weakness:

Whither should I fly?
I have done no harm. But [...] Why [...]
Do I put up that womanly defense,
To say I have done no harm? (4.2.73–79)

Significantly, the Folio speech headings designate Lady Macduff, throughout the scene, as "Wife". A medieval noblewoman would have been expected to lead the defense of the castle in her husband's absence, but this lady is represented as a domesticated modern "wife", helpless without her husband's protection, easy prey to the assassins who violate her domestic space. In Shakespeare's script, Macduff's medieval castle seems to be reimagined as a modern household rather than a feudal stronghold. The chronicle clearly implies that the castle might have been defended, but no one in the play seems to entertain that possibility. Rosse advises the Lady to be patient (4.2.2). The Messenger warns her to flee (4.2.67–9). Macduff, hearing of the slaughter, mourns his lost family as helpless domesticated creatures: "All my pretty ones?/Did you say all? [...] What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam,/At one fell swoop?" (4.3.216–19).

Although the history Shakespeare stages in *Macbeth* was taken from Holinshed's *Chronicles*, by the time it got to the Jacobean stage, it had been updated for current

³⁴ Holinshed, vol. 5, p. 274.

consumption. The process of updating, however, did not end with Shakespeare's playscript. Thus, although the play seems clearly legible in modern terms, I do not believe it could have been read in the same way at the beginning of the seventeenth century. When we hear Lady Macbeth worry that her husband may not be able to murder Duncan because his "nature" is "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (1.5.16–17), we are likely to assume that she is afraid he lacks manliness. The text offers some support for this view: Lady Macbeth herself connects manliness and murder when Macbeth does in fact attempt to back out of their agreement to murder the king, rebuking him, "when you durst do it, then you were a man" (1.7.49). However, the definition of "manliness" is a subject of repeated contestation in the playscript. Even here, Macbeth has just argued, "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares [do] more is none" (1.7.46–7).

This is not the only place where Shakespeare's script offers significant resistances to the kind of seamless, ideological fiction I have been suggesting because the ideological regime it prefigures – and indeed helped to produce – was only beginning to take shape. Consider, for instance, the modern ideal of a loving, companionate marriage, an innovation by no means universally celebrated in Shakespeare's time, and certainly not in this play. Lord and Lady Macbeth have a remarkable mutuality of purpose and emotional intimacy when they conspire to murder Duncan. The virtuous Macduffs never even appeared together on stage until Davenant rewrote the play for Restoration audiences. Davenant had to add three new scenes, where Lady Macduff was shown as her husband's confidant, advisor, and inspiration, in order to insure that the good people would have a good, modern marriage.

Davenant made numerous revisions, designed, like these, to update the story for a new audience. His modernized version held the stage for over a century.³⁵ Significantly, one place where he did *not* feel the need to revise was the soliloquy in which Lady Macbeth called on the spirits to "unsex" her, which Davenant imported substantially unchanged into the new script. Its meaning must have seemed clear and contemporary (or, perhaps I should say 'dateless') because now it could be performed by a female actor, Mrs. Betterton, who really did have a woman's breasts.

Zusammenfassung

Der Artikel geht aus vom Gegensatz zwischen den oft historisch entworfenen männlichen Hauptrollen und den zumeist zeitgenössisch konzipierten Frauen- und Nebenrollen in Shake-

speare's Dramen. (vgl. z. B. die Kostüme in der *Titus Andronicus* – Skizze). Dann werden Lady Macbeth und Lady Macduff auf ihre historischen (11. Jh.) bzw. zeitgenössischen Rollenverhalten hin analysiert. Lady Macbeth, die ihre Weiblichkeit ablegen will, weil sie einen Widerspruch zwischen Stillen und Morden empfindet, entspricht weder den als wehrhaft und zugleich als mütterlich gezeichneten Schottinnen in Holinsheds Chroniken, noch zeitgenössischen Aristokratinnen, die nur in Ausnahmefällen ihre Säuglinge selbst stillten. Ebenso entspricht Lady Macduff in ihrer Passivität und Hilflosigkeit weder historischen noch zeitgenössischen Verhaltensmustern. Beide Figuren erweisen sich somit als Shakespeares Konstrukte extrem typisierter Feminität.

³⁵ Davenant's version held the stage from the 1660's until 1774. See Philip Bordinat and Sophia B. Blaydes, *Sir William Davenant* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981), p. 141.