

ECHOES OF HIDDEN CRIMES: MEDITATING THE MACBETHS

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THESIS ABSTRACT

Echoes of Hidden Crimes: Meditating the Macbeths

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This paper serves as an observation of mid-sixteenth through early-seventeenth century crimes of infanticide and witchcraft, as they relate to the Macbeths of the Shakespearean play. I observe the contemporary cases and literature pertaining to the crime and argue that Lady Macbeth's character serves as an example of a married woman, socially and economically upstanding, who is capable of committing various crimes against her neighbors, family, and herself with relative social impunity. The Macbeths collectively act out various forms of the crime of infanticide with their resources and mindsets sharply contrasting those of the crime's less economically-capable culprits. Shakespeare's two villainous masterminds, along with other examples in the contemporary literature, act on their infanticidal and child-murdering urges and expose the immense double-standard of justice, culpability, and responsibility for the crime. We also compare Lady Macbeth's contrasting murderers to the economically destitute – those whose crimes were more often motivated by necessity and fear rather than the ambition of the upper classes. This essay explores the character and mindset of the child murderer and discusses their capability to commit a murder most foul, strange and unnatural.

In his 1982 masterpiece *English Society 1580-1680* Keith Wrightson organizes the various economic and social classes of people into four distinct categories.¹ Much of one's understanding of each group, he observed, is recognized through the perspective of members of the opposite social classes; accordingly, the opinions, testaments, and works of the educated commoner serve tremendously in understanding their own economic hierarchies and the beliefs of those juxtaposed classes. Dr. Wrightson explores the great mysteries of the human experience in early modern English society, and the unignorable interconnection between the relationship of social classes and the events of their time; he explores the family, political, and economic dynamics which factor into the construction of a greater social picture, creating an informed supposition of the mindsets and reality of England's ancestors. In similar fashion, his discussion serves as a construction of the accounts, accords, and dramatic adaptations of England's notorious – the murdering mothers and wily witches, whose heinous crimes and public reception reveal a considerable deal about the culture and social climate of early modern English society.

It is evident that intimate bonds between people reveal more intimate and personal truths about a society. Thus, we begin the construction of our discussion on the wisdom of Dr. Wrightson, who argues “social bonds...how its members relate to one another...gave English society its special character in terms of social organization and its distinctive texture in terms of human experience” (Wrightson 48). The special character and the concept of the intimate truths apply even (and perhaps especially) to the seemingly inhumane and monstrous deeds of a small portion of people in early modern England; one's personal desperation, built upon a number of oppressive and driving factors, only begins

¹ Keith Wrightson *English Society 1580-1680*, pp. 25-46.

to identify some causes of crime and behavior. Through observing the actions and misdeeds of the despondent criminals, and understanding their reception by the perspective of a contemporary audience, we might understand the greater driving forces of England's society during the time; we observe the subtle, oftentimes indirect influencing forces, and compunctious visitings of nature, which contribute to the undermining of domestic order and tranquility during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I.

Records pertaining to the act of infanticide around the turn of the 16th century reveal a sharp rise during the late reign of Elizabeth I and after the introduction of the poor laws. The research of Peter Hoffer and N.E.H. Hull provides thorough and suggestive evidence in regards to trends of the crime during the early modern era; two crucial facts "Bastard neonaticides constituted over 70 percent of all murders of infants under nine years of age in the records" (Hoffer 18) and "in the years on average no more than 4 to 5 percent of the yearly births were of bastards" (Hoffer 100) confirms bastard children as the primary murder victims in cases of infanticide and an unmarried woman was more likely to be targeted for an accusation of infanticide by her peers than a married woman;² we also observe the prevalence of bastardy (1-in-20 people) and the motivated, systematic eradication of bastard children in contrast to their lawfully born counterparts. This particular section of English history similarly saw to a rise in crimes of property (burglary, larceny, etc.³) but not a sharp rise in cases of adult-on-adult homicide. From Hoffer's

² The point's made in Hoffer's *Murder Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England 1558-1803* pp. 100-101.

³ I estimate over 80% of cases in J.S. Cockburn's *Calendar of Assize Records*, which boasts a majority of larceny and burglary cases, with a small (but significant) number of witchcraft cases and sparse sprinklings of other crimes, pp. 2-549.

research, one might safely begin a speculation as to the nature of the sources of the trend of infanticide: want for economic relief.

One commonly pervading thought in any expecting parent's mind would, of course, be the issue of funding and sustaining the health of their child; the added factor of the child's bastardy in early modern England creates the additional stresses of illegitimacy issues and the obligation of resources from the local parish. Laura Gowing's article on the social aspect of infanticide argues "Infanticide is... a product of unexceptional economic and social circumstances, where unmarried women might very well see no way in which they could bear and keep a child" (Gowing 88). By evidence of the increasing rate of property-related crimes and the social necessity for the various forms of the Elizabethan poor laws, one begins to understand the absolutely crushing economic conditions which an unfortunate and under-prepared single mother might have been expected to face.⁴ Conditions of price-inflation upwards of four- or five-hundred-percent, coupled with some of the worst harvest failures in English history near the end of the 16th-century reveal the depth of economic hardship faced by the English people of the time, which only begin to scrape at the surface of real, oppressive conditions for the average of England's citizens.⁵ Deeper analysis of a single mother's likely conditions provides a similar expectation of conditions and reasonability in the parent's choice of child destruction.

In the case of an early modern Englishwoman's plight, one possible solution to the potential issue of financial hardship centers on the responsibility of the paternal figure. A portion of Dr. Gowing's argument centers on the distinct lack of commitment on the part

⁴ Motivated, perhaps, by increased inflation since the early 1500s, as noted by Keith Wrightson *English Society 1580-1680* pp. 133-134.

⁵ Dr. Chris Fitter's excellent *Radical Shakespeare* goes into much detail on this topic in the chapter "Historical Foundations: The Black Nineties and the Tudor Richesse of Political Dissidence" pp. 1-33.

of a bastard child's father in the interest of their child. For the cases of infanticide against bastardy in her historical discussion, she notes many offenders who claim "although the [baby's] father had not encouraged them to kill the infant, very few said he had guaranteed to keep it" (Gowing 105). Dr. Gowing's finding suggests that single, unmarried mothers were largely at the mercy of inconsistent lovers for economic and social support, and whose failing in such duties ultimately contributes to the motivation for child-murder. It is no surprise that diminishing economic and social support alienate and estrange a newly-made mother from her community, which all too easily may lead to either the mindless, stress-induced crimes of passion or well-crafted plans of child destruction. In the Shakespearean setting, one remembers *Macbeth's* Lady Macduff, though married, reflects on her husband's absentee behavior and her want for security "Wisdom? To leave his wife, to leave his babes, / His mansion, and his titles in a place / From whence himself does fly? He loves us not" (4.2.6-8). Lady Macduff's spiteful sentiment reflects the insecurity of an abandoned mother's position in the world – much more at the mercy of the hardships of a judgmental society. Shakespeare's echoing of the sentiment through the plight of a noblewoman exemplifies the necessity for marital support which, when lacking, proves fatal to the family structure.

The strong correlation among poverty, marital status, and gender of the suspect helps in our understanding of the established "normal" profile of the accused: that they are usually women, usually single, and almost always poor. The accords similarly almost always refer to their infanticide suspects as "spinsters", a term which by Shakespeare's lifetime signified the suspect as unmarried and past the conventional age for marriage.⁶

⁶ Oxford English Dictionary's entry on the word "spinster"

The surviving record of the 1563 case of Margaret Lynnett, for example, meets the established criteria “Lynnett, Margaret, of Loughton, spinster, indicted for infanticide... she gave birth to a male child in a field... and killed it by drowning it in a pond. / Guilty; to hang” (Cockburn 26). Two signifiers in this case infer her status: her recognition as a spinster⁷ and that both the birth and subsequent murder of her child occur in the locality of a field. The former signifier adds an example to our discussion, as Lynnett’s distinction of spinster supersedes any other trade or distinction used to describe criminals of other types of crime (e.g. laborer or yeoman), rendering any other form of identification less relevant; the latter signifier of the Lynnett case possesses far more suggestive – and comparative – power in identifying the suspect. That Ms. Lynnett’s crime was committed within the seclusion of a field, in the same timeframe of the birth of the child, reveals her attempt at a secretive birth and subsequent disposal of her child. Although the lacking narrative of the record forces us to speculate her motive, the likely motivation for her seclusion would be to escape the punitive response of the law and society. Stephanie Chamberlain describes most motivating factors “infanticidal mothers purportedly killed their babies rather than face the wrath, disdain, even indifference of a society less concerned about infant murder than the problems such mothers had always posed to the economic well-being” (Chamberlain 75). For fear of public ridicule and persecution, the child’s timely and secret death alleviates potential economic stress for the mother and outright dispels public condemnation. Hence, Ms. Lynnett’s seemingly strange behavior in handling her child’s

⁷ Whether the term ‘spinster’ applied strictly to the aforementioned case or also applied, in special cases, to particularly heinous married women is argued by Carol Weiner “Is a Spinster an Unmarried Woman?” p. 30; in either conception, the term serves as a negative distinction for the suspect.

murder seems all too easily explained by her desire to mitigate the consequences of her sexual imprudence.

That Margaret Lynnett's environment for childbirth reflected a need for secrecy shows a commonly repeated trend among the unmarried murderers: a lack of safety and secrecy in the domestic sphere; contrastingly, cases in which married women murder their offspring tend to occur closer to their home and with substantial safety in their environment. Examples of a married woman's contrast include the 1563 case of Anne Gowsworth, a yeoman of Halstead, who gave birth to a female child which she immediately strangled, and from the comfort of her husband's home; or the case of Maud Smythe, in which she suffocated her 6-year-old son to death in their family's oven, which was similarly committed in a place of relative safety and, as Dr. Hoffer argues, she "received the pardon of the crown, because her act seemed mad" (Hoffer 153). Although not all cases of infanticide occur in the binary of a domestic or wild setting, a majority of cases in the records of the time reveal the crime was committed in a place where the guilty could perform their murder with both secrecy and security and (for married women in particular) with substantial time (oftentimes years) between birth and murder of the child.⁸ For the unmarried woman of few resources, a secluded field or wood would provide the escape from the public eye, whereas a married murderer might commit her crime from the comfort of her home and in due time, with excuses such as madness to shield them from public retaliation.

⁸ Infanticide as a concept arguably still applies to non-infants during this time, as the traditional and legal definitions of an infant extend the age to several years, as late as 14-years-old; see Peter C. Hoffer's *Murdering Mothers: Infanticide in England and New England 1558-1803* p. XIII

From our understanding of the general infanticidal character, we might begin to understand a character such as Lady Macbeth through the lens of Shakespeare's contemporaries; that the married woman could perform infanticide confidently and comfortably from the convenience of her home in popular contemporary examples might have struck an ominously similar feeling to the lines of Lady Macbeth "The raven himself is hoarse / That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements" (1.5.36-38). This popular prelude to the famous "unsex" speech confers, as Alice Fox expertly observes "Duncan's entrance under Lady Macbeth's battlements seems to her fevered imagination a birth which must be followed by death" (Fox 128). The image of a guest passing through the liminal space of the battlements under which Lady Macbeth stands, while her soliloquy divulges information about her own dehumanization and contemplation of heinous murder, provokes the image and comparison to a woman's contemplation of child murder;⁹ the stagecraft revealing this married woman's security in the action of murder is undeniably pertinent to interpreting the scene. As the astute Dr. Chris Fitter observes in his *Radical Shakespeare* "the plays' stagecraft secrets harboured dissident subtextual dimensions that were readily triggered in the conditions specific to the public playhouse" (Fitter 36). Lady Macbeth, a powerful and economically stable aristocrat contemplates her guest's murder from the high and imposing castle catwalk – her victim as unaware as a baby of the schemes of the murderess-to-be. Lady Macbeth stands at the metaphoric height of a married woman's power over the domestic sphere, preparing for acts of direst cruelty upon the unsuspecting Duncan.

⁹ David Willbern's *Phantasmagoric Macbeth*, though largely speculative, suggests regicide in the context of the play as symbolic of a more complex infanticide pp. 520-524.

Lady Macbeth's ambitions for greater political advantage hardly compare to the commoner's contemporary example, as the latter generally sought to *survive* and not diminish their station, rather than use infanticide as a means by which to excel in personal ambitions. As we have discussed, the poor and unmarried mothers could attempt to receive financial aid through the child's father; as Steve Hindle argues in his well-established *On the Parish?* "Liability for those considered undeserving might be shifted either (as we have seen) onto other parishes (under the terms of indemnity bonds and removal orders) or even onto specific individuals (putative fathers, for instance, under the terms of paternity bonds designed to disburden the parish of bastards)" (Hindle 380). The universality of the parishes' underfunding, the marked drop in charitability during the late-16th century and the overwhelming number of unemployed or otherwise needful people in early modern England greatly challenge any attempt at receiving much-needed relief. Dr. Hindle further adds "That such undesirables might include unmarried daughters is a function of both the institutionalization of poor relief and the contemporary mania about the moral and economic perils of illegitimacy" (Hindle 391) signifying the society's growing mistrust of accepting the unmarried women for the aforementioned reasons. One can only imagine an unmarried woman's anxiety as her pregnancy is seen as a moral "peril" in addition to the economic issue for her parish; that unmarried women were considered "undesirables" from an economic standpoint for the community evidences a growing negative sentiment for that portion of the population.

The reality which a late-Elizabethan populace receives is a local government's condemnation of the poor, based on the Poor Relief Laws,¹⁰ and additional taxes on the community. Accordingly, we find popular reactions to such social trends conveniently in the works of the contemporary playwrights who recognized such trends and represented popular sentiment; as Mark Fortier notes in his article on England's social history "men face the constant fear that their heirs are not their own but are bastards, enemies incapable by nature of filial loyalty... In this economy the father stands in the way of even a legitimate son, to whose triumph he must give way once dead" (Fortier 584). The hesitation of the implicated father (e.g. Leontes and his daughter from *The Winter's Tale*), especially in the case of bastardy, is perhaps most famously found in Shakespeare's *King Lear* through the sentiments of Edmund, bastard and firstborn of the Duke of Gloucester. Annabel Patterson's *Shakespeare and the Popular Voice* echoes popular theory regarding one theme of the play "If men can change places on the social hierarchy, then those places have no absolute value, and complete inversion becomes, to the seeing ear of madness, utterly thinkable" (Patterson 111). If Edmund, a bastard *and* would-be heir of Gloucester possesses the potential for lawful claim of his father's wealth,¹¹ his speech "Wherefore should I / Stand in the plague of custom and permit / The curiosity of nations to deprive me... / Well, then, / Legitimate Edgar, I must have your land" (*King Lear* 1.2. 2-4, 15-16) speaks to the cultural fear of a bastard's potential for social unrest. As the potentiality for

¹⁰ Particularly the 1576 Poor Relief Act which distinguished the "idle poor" and "impotent", and the 1597 Act for Relief of the Poor which created the overseers of the poor to dole out resources, discussed at length in Steve Hindle's *On the Parish?* pp. 104-105.

¹¹ Under the Act of 1576 which allowed, under proper condition, the right of a firstborn bastard to their father's wealth, noted in Steve Hindle's *On the Parish?* pp. 379-399.

a family's lawful upheaval rests largely on the ambition of a bastard, society thus fears a bastard for their potential ambition as well as their economic drain on the supporting parish.

We begin to perceive a clearer picture as to *why* a poor, unmarried woman generates anxiety for the community and finds a lack of financial support from her partner in the late 16th-century; the legitimacy of her child plays paramount importance in the social acceptance or rejection of the mother. Similarly, the potential estrangement or economic inconsistency of the illegitimate child's father provides greater complication and consideration for the overall fate of the child. A man's rejection of their child and/or partner, regardless of legitimacy, pervades the dramatic scene in countless examples: in the folio of Marlowe, Queen Dido's rejection by Aeneas condemns her to suicide,¹² or the infanticidal mother, and the several child murders in *Tamburlaine* are the results of a father's absence or rejection "Therefore, die by thy loving mother's hand, / Who gently now will lance thy ivory throat / And quickly rid thee both of pain and life" (*Tamburlaine the Great, Part II*, 3.4. 23-25) and Tamburlaine's own murdering of his son Calyphas "A form not meet to give that subject essence / Whose matter is the flesh of Tamburlaine" (4.1. 112-113). Countless similar scenarios of legitimacy crises persist in the Elizabethan literary tradition, and especially within the Shakespearean canon;¹³ theatric exploration of crime aside, the society itself understood the concept far too well in contemporary, real-life cases of child murder.

¹² Mark Dido's conversation with Aeneas and his son in Act 2, where she wishes to assimilate herself into a family dynamic through the offer of being a mother to Aeneas's children. Christopher Marlowe's *The Complete Plays* (II.I.96-97).

¹³ E.g. Leontes' rejection of his children in *The Winter's Tale* or Hamlet, whose angst at Gertrude's complacency with Claudius generates the plot of the play (2.3.73-76) and (1.2.129-159), respectively.

The evidence of the accords provides us with glances into the misdeeds and motivations of murderous mothers, as well as the law's reaction to their crime. The case of Grace Howe, who in 1586 "in her master's house...gave birth to a female infant child...and on the following Saturday buried its body in a pile of 'horse dunge and other fylthe' outside Harte's (her master) orchard. Harte, who is thought to be the child's father, abetted her in burying its body" (Cockburn 280), tells us a considerable deal about the motivation of an infanticidal mother to destroy her illegitimate offspring – for the sake of appeasing her lover; in the case of Grace Howe, surviving records indicate she was later bailed by her master and the suspected father. Similarly, a male associate may perform the deed himself, as was the case of Catherine Bonde, who in 1576 was accused of giving birth to a male infant in a field and "that she threw it into a muddy ditch where it suffocated" (Cockburn 149). It was proven her associate, John Style, had committed the murderous deed instead, immediately after the birth of Bonde's child. Further, the records indicate four separate cases in which widows or spinsters murdered their children but were remanded due to current pregnancies; although this last point of fact does not establish the involvement of a male accessory, the cases suggest the active presence of a partner to the infanticidal women. For vulnerable women during the time of strict law and public intrigue, the prospect of economic relief and the security of a potential partner seem achievable goals when coupled with the proper motivations.

In one relation to the Macbeths, such cases as the aforementioned provide similar examples of targeting to those for which the murderous couple are responsible. We might recall Macbeth's two attempts at child murder through the play and his case for each "There is none but [Banquo] / Whose being I do fear... / They hailed him father to a line of kings.

/ Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown /... Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand, / No son of mine succeeding” (3.1.54-55, 60-61, 63-64). Macbeth’s fear of the prospect of losing his hard-earned crown to a succeeding familiar prompts his solution of child murder; similarly, the methodical nature of his first attempt at child murder resonates with the married mother’s security of setting (near Dunsinane) and the timeframe (years after the child’s birth) when the attempt of murder is performed. Contrastingly, Macbeth’s second attempt of child murder (and more appropriately considered an infanticide) occurs against the children of Macduff. The lines preceding the murder of Macduff’s family indicate the state of mind of Macbeth “From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand... / Seize upon Fife, give to th’ edge o’ th’ sword / His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line” (4.1.145-147, 150-152). In this scene, the illogical, passionate and desperation-driven Macbeth lashes out spontaneously to the slighting Macduff, showing the heat-oppressed brain of Macbeth acts in similar fashion to that of the desperate mother, one less calculating and confident than the secure counterpart, but desirous of security and the resolution of their conflict.

Although a spouse-apparent provides certain security (or belief thereof) in economic hardships, the desperate mothers oftentimes turn to supernatural suppliers of security when a more substantive alternative is lacking. Popular in the Middlesex accords are the cases of devil-instigated crime in which a former mother admits her heinous crime is due to the coercion of the Devil, who promises an end to her financial woes on the condition of the child’s death. One of the most striking cases of infanticide occurs in the records of Middlesex county in the case of Jane Stanly, who in 1573 was alone in a field

and gave birth to a male child whom she instantly and violently murdered;¹⁴ charged with the murder, Jane Stanly pled guilty and confessed “forthwith at the instigation of the devil [she] assaulted the male child” (Jeaffreson 83). The instigation of the Devil persists in similar cases, such as the Martha Godfrey case, a near-identical scenario,¹⁵ and in over a half-dozen cases of suicide and witchcraft in the Middlesex records. The reasoning of the Devil’s instigation as the root cause for especially heinous cases infanticide, or standard cases of witchcraft and suicide marks another important distinction of these crimes: that a witch, a child-killer, and the suicidal were believed to act by the Devil’s power and not entirely of their own free will;¹⁶ we see a driving need for economic support which, in the most extreme and perilous cases, results in more supernatural solicitations.

But whereas the poor might be willing to sacrifice their child and their own immortal soul for the hope of financial security, we witness deep contrast which lies in the motivation of the married woman of the economic upper class, whose security and financial freedom are much less subject to negative alteration than their unmarried counterpart. Lady Macbeth’s murderous intentions fit into the archetypical child-murderer, whose willingness to sacrifice for the sake of her partner’s affection is a quality expounded upon by Shakespeare, as reflected in her true desire to have Duncan killed “From this time / Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire?” (1.7. 38-41); she equates her husband’s murder of King Duncan to her willingness to sacrifice her own child in devotion to her partner of greatness “I would, while it was smiling in my face, / ... And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you have

¹⁴ Stanley’s case, May 31, 1573 *Middlesex County Records, I, Indictments* (Jeaffreson ed.,) p. 83.

¹⁵ *Middlesex County Records, I, Indictments* (Jeaffreson ed.,) p. 154.

¹⁶ Louise Jackson’s *Witches, Wives, and Mothers* article gives considerable insight into the topic of free will’s violation by the Devil during the mid-17th-century pp. 68-73.

done to this” (1.7. 56, 59-60). Lady Macbeth’s devotion to her husband echoes the popular sentiment of a lover’s mentality: that even her own offspring are expendable in the pursuit of her deep and black desires; her ambition and self-sacrifice for the sake of her husband’s advancement in society rests on her willingness to compromise any motherly inclinations.

An ambition such as the pursuit of the golden round and the success of her husband drives Lady Macbeth to the act pact-making, and her realization of the necessity of sacrifice: of her womanly features and capabilities, her compassion and humanity, and her immortal soul. Lady Macbeth’s devilish pact is akin to that of a witch’s pact, which in Shakespeare’s time was understood as a commitment to the Devil in which a person offers a variety of resources: their soul, their sanity,¹⁷ or the lives of others in exchange for one’s desires. There is no doubt in the necessity of a sacrifice in the creation of a pact with the Devil in the era of Shakespeare’s drama “that there were individuals who entered into semi-feudal contracts with him, mortgaging their souls in return for a temporary access of supernatural knowledge or power” (Thomas 564) and that it was known “in the late Middle Ages...that the witch owed her power to having made a deliberate pact with the Devil” (Thomas 521). The Macbeths, having made their pact and signing their contract with a crimson-coated dagger, made numerable sacrifices for the procurement and sustainment of their goal of kingship; maintaining the pact and power requires the continuous sacrifice of threats to their power: Duncan, Banquo, the Lady Macduff and her children, and the innumerable unnamed.

Such treasonous and murderous intent is not unique to Lady Macbeth’s character, and the overbearing arrogance which accompanies her is not lacking in the contemporary

¹⁷ As a result of their sacrifice and loss of former humanity. See Thomas’ *Religion and the Decline of Magic* p.678.

cases of the crime. Lady Macbeth's guile in her deception and the confidence with which she believes her station will generate belief in her innocence convey an important factor on the culpability of her class "Who dares receive it other, / As we shall make our griefs and clamor roar / Upon his death?" (2.1. 77-79) and her following "Woe, alas! What, in our house?" (2.3. 84). Lady Macbeth's belief in her station's inherent disposition against crime, and the further dedication to emotional deception as a means of ensuring favorable public reception, marks Shakespeare's acknowledgement of the inherent double-standard in the public's view of the criminal; that an unmarried woman might murder, and be assumed guilty of her child's murder in the case of its death by the community, is the same perception which assumes Lady Macbeth's innocence for similar diabolical actions such as murder due to her social rank. This truth is evidenced further by the later 1624 Act in which an unmarried woman could be found guilty of infanticide, and a married woman would not, due to the law *only applying* to unmarried women "In most cases, juries focused solely on the marital status of the accused to the exclusion of other forms of evidence" (Hillman 112). What an unsuspected noble might perform on the unguarded victim and receive no penalty is the crime for which an innocent wretch might suffer for their life.

When considering murder and child-destruction in the context of the play, it is important to understand the crime in all of its relevant legal and conceptual context; that we might extrapolate the precise risk which a woman recognized and weighed in undertaking the deed, we might also recognize what her society *considered* infanticide during the time. In the span of four-hundred years the legal definition of infanticide has developed, as has the public's perception and treatment of the guilty and the victim; the development of infanticide's lawful perception deals more with the mixed conceptions of

how the crime was addressed by lawful authorities and in the severity of the punishment resulting from the crime. In early modern England, the notion of infanticide was viewed by the Church in the context of smothering “it is clear that the church was concerned with the classic form of infanticide, i.e., a mother, not unrelated woman, smothering her infant” (Damme 4). As smothering is often accidental, the church possessed the power to “always look at any mitigating circumstances that might have prompted an act of infanticide” (Damme 5). As infanticide was often an accidental crime, it could warrant less-severe punishment as a crime of negligence rather than a more malicious action of homicide, pending the perception of the judging authority.

Conversely, the deliberate action of smothering or other forms of murderous violence, if proven by the court, resulted in contrastingly harsher punishments than those afforded to suspects of accidental deaths;¹⁸ as the deliberate murder of one’s child (e.g. deliberate smothering) constitutes a greater penalty upon the murderous parent, a deciding court’s conviction might weigh heavily on the social and marital statuses of the mother. In cases of more obscure infanticides, where the guiltiness of murder lies less in material evidence and more in the belief of guilt, the subjective value of a mother’s status may decide her sentence “but in quite different circumstances, they were concerned with the question of guilt and the portrayal of pathos” (Gowing 113) in the narratives and retellings of the crime. As a person’s moral character plays a significant role in the determination of their guilt, a court might look favorably on one whose justification for their crime was due to factors beyond their control,¹⁹ such as temporary insanity or malnutrition due to the

¹⁸ Threat of excommunication in medieval statute, *Statute of Winchester I*, 1224.

¹⁹ Catherine Damme’s excellent article *Infanticide: the worth of an infant under law* goes into extensive historical analysis on the trend pp. 4-6.

country's "chronic cycles of famine" (Damme 5). In these most extreme and desperate situations a sympathetic court might have acted with more consideration than condemnation.

Beyond the church's classic view of infanticide, early modern English society and its government recognized child murder for its more varied and malicious components. Similarly, it is believed during the reign of Henry VIII and onwards the crime of infanticide came closer to public forethought and lawful intrigue for numerous reasons: increasing urbanization of the population in dense community centers made the former secretive-birth-and-murder less possible without fear of witnesses²⁰ (thereby also increasing the number of cases exposed rather than committed in secret²¹) and the increasing sensationalism of the crime as evidenced by the prevalence of late 16th-century ballads and similar popular media. The increase of public attention and prevalence of the crime are evidenced in the emergence of higher reported rates of infanticide which, as Dr. Keith Wrightson makes abundantly clear "Such cases, then, while not common-place, were very far from unknown" (Wrightson 12). The *known* cases of infanticide came to greater public attention during the late 16th and early 17th – century, and an emerging attention to the criminal accessories is observed in the proceedings as well.

In the greater social construct of the crime, those who bear the most relevance to the case include those associates of the murdering mother; the existence of such accessories to the crime help in determining factors (such as culpability, mind-frame of the suspect, etc.) which may play a significant role in the prosecution of the suspect. By accessories to the crime, we mean those who participate in the willful neglect of a child which results in

²⁰ Refer to Damme's article, p. 11.

²¹ Keith Wrightson's *Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England*, table 1 chart on p. 12.

the crime of child-murder, or those who contribute to the disposal and concealment of the crime, and could include accessories to the crime in the form of wet-nurses or similar associates of the murderer.²² Such cases stood apart from the argument of a mother's temporary insanity for their premeditative and planned-out procedure. In his article on infanticide, Keith Wrightson notes "clear evidence of the disposal of bastard children through the system of nursing exists, independently of the evidence of coroner's inquisitions or assize indictments, among the quarter sessions records of the period" (Wrightson 16). This particular form of infanticide complements the creation of the statute of 1624, which made the deliberate concealment of a dead child evidence of murder; for example, the 1662 case of Ann Dalas was one in which the suspect was found guilty of infanticide specifically because of the fact her child was found concealed.²³ For such cases in which a mother murders, the contribution of a friend or ally is neither uncommon or unnoticed in the evidence of the court records. Such a case of an accomplice includes that of Elizabeth Crabb, a widow who in 1601 "strangled her new-born child and Reade abetted her" (Jeaffreson 526), in which her infanticidal action was attributed, in part, to the instigation of a fellow widow named Joan Reade. Although the vast majority of these crimes were committed with the intention of complete solidarity from others, occasional cases (especially for those with the means and connections) persist in which other individuals help in the disposal (or even murder) process. Barbara Hanawalt's article on late medieval homicide indicates female murderers acted with accomplices who "frequently was a husband or lover, and their role was often that of an abettor or inciter of the deed" (Hanawalt 306) which evidences the preexistence of the trend. Fellow struggling,

²² Midwives also would dispose of stillborns "in secret places" Gowing, p. 108.

²³ Hoffer, *Murdering Mothers*, p. 25.

despondent widows, companions, and spinsters might have impregnated a mind with murderous thoughts, and promote murder as a viable solution to one's financial struggles.

The established motive of a mother desiring their child's death plays one of the most important roles in determining a mother's guilt in a case of infanticide, as opposed to a child's blameless death from natural cause. Infant mortality rates were significantly higher during the Elizabethan period, as "Shakespeare's contemporaries would have known the phenomenon of infant mortality intimately" (Fox 128); when this fact is coupled with England's underdeveloped system of forensics,²⁴ it is understandable that the society's ability to recognize and punish cases of infanticide relied heavily on two factors: the motive of a mother to murder and the woman's economic and social backgrounds; Hoffer notes "Her moral reputation must have been relevant to the verdict" (Hoffer 10), because "her immorality implied a disregard for community sanctions and domestic norms" (Hoffer 10-11). In terms of motive, our chief suspects in the case are the child's bastardy and the mother's potential psychological stress factors; the offspring's bastardy, or more generally illegitimacy, acts complementary to a murderous mother's economic status, as statistically proven by Hoffer.²⁵ As verifiable physical evidence was not always necessary, as was the case for Agnes Death, whose murder of her infant babe was argued "yt was not directly proved the child was in lyff" (Jeaffreson 197) but 'guilty; to hang' regardless, a jury's *belief* of guilt and a jury's willingness to convict a suspect based primarily on belief proves vital in recognizing the value of the accused's disposition amongst her peers. As Lady Macbeth declares "Who knows it when / none can call our power to account?" (5.1. 33-34). The

²⁴ Numerous cases, such as that of Mary Lauance, had been indicted for infanticide but found innocent because the child was believed to be stillborn. Jeaffreson, p. 87.

²⁵ Hoffer, *Murdering Mothers*, p. 97. 72.7% of victims were verifiably illegitimate in the cases of the study, while 15.1% were unknown; 75.6% of perpetrators were unwedded.

arrogance of the queen, by contrast to the assumed guilty, was less susceptible to public recourse to her crime than a powerless and vulnerable commoner.

Arguably, the accused's relationship with their peers played a more vital role in determining her verdict and culpability than any other social factor aforementioned, for it was the lawful 'Jury of Matrons' which inspected and confirmed or denied any gynecological facts bearing relevance to the trials (e.g. a woman who pleaded pregnancy could delay punishment or remove it entirely, if it was found she was truly pregnant). A woman would be "remanded because pregnant" or found to have lied about pregnancy based on the findings and beliefs of the female jury. The female jury was a dangerous variable in the case of any suspect, who were just as likely to help as they were to condemn a suspect. Similarly, the targets of some of the more invasive tests on the female body (for pregnancy, infanticide, and evidence of witchcraft) tended to be young, unmarried women of humble economic origins "Daughters who lived at home and, especially, servants were much likelier to be confronted and forced to reveal their bodies than widows and older single women. Servants were the most vulnerable to rumour, as well as the largest group of women accused of infanticide" (Gowing 92). The lack of individual and private rights, coupled with the invasive and domineering nature of the court, allows for the most vulnerable and oftentimes accused class of women to have their autonomy surrendered to the will of the court and Jury of Matrons. This is recognized towards the end of *Macbeth* in the rising vulnerability of Lady Macbeth, whose first and only direct interaction with a female character is that of a nurse who discovers secrets "She has spoke what she should not, / I am sure of that" (5.2. 42-43); the gentlewoman's only hesitation in divulging such secrets "having no witness / to confirm my speech" (5.2. 14-15). One of the most vulnerable

moment for the entirety of Lady Macbeth's character simultaneously coincides with the emergence of one of the most exploitative types of characters in the context of infanticide, witchcraft, and similar crimes; for numerous reasons, the concepts of the crimes of witchcraft and infanticide share parallels "the best measures of the effect of aggressive stress upon infanticide cases would be the most clearly linked to women. Witchcraft, which fits this prescription, does show a strong relationship to infanticide" (Hoffer 122), indicating a strong association between the two crimes and their practitioners. While infanticide was not as common during the lifetime of Shakespeare as witchcraft, we would do well to recognize even an annual average of about one case per year is not an insignificant figure, for either a small English county or a resourceful dramatist.²⁶

The witches of *Macbeth* stem from a greater cultural history with which the whole of Europe grappled even until the early twenty-first century.²⁷ Both the literary and "real" (or accused) witch of early modern England is many things: usually a woman (though not exclusively²⁸), in a state of destitution, emotionally unstable or distraught, and socially isolated from their peers;²⁹ in the accords, they were usually spinsters and the occasional widow, bewitching (in order of most to least popular): animals,³⁰ children, women and men to cause them pain, paralysis, and (*especially* for children) death.³¹ Witches similarly were

²⁶ Comparing statistics of the Essex assizes, Keith Wrightson points out only sixty cases of infanticide in Essex during the years 1601 through 1665. See Keith Wrightson *Infanticide in Earlier Seventeenth-Century England*, p. 11.

²⁷ Repeal of the 1951 Fraudulent Mediums Act in 2008.

²⁸ J.S. Cockburn, *Calendar of Assize Records* (Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1974), pp. 19, 33, 100, 108, etc. A few of the several examples in the Essex accords of the late-16th century in which males were accused of witchcraft.

²⁹ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 623.

³⁰ Louise Jackson, *Witches, Wives, and Mothers* (Women's History Review, 4:1, 1995), p. 65. On a humorous note, a roughly 20% of the 124 cases of witchcraft in Suffolk county involved cattle and disputes over butter and cheese.

³¹ Cockburn, *Calendar of Assize Records*, pp. 19, 31, 33, 36, etc.

quite popular in the literature of the period, and the witches of English fables provided considerable insight into degenerate themes “In English pamphlet literature about trials, tales... accounts of witches’ relations with their familiars are often infused with comparable erotic interest” (Garrett 39). Finally, an English witch was thought to be old, as Diane Purkiss discusses “A witch’s blood was thought to be so thick with old age, so lacking in fire that it was impossible to extract it” (Hillman 45). This image, largely in-line with popular depictions of the Weird Sisters of the play, loosely serves as our context for the term ‘witch’. Witches were one of the greatest perceived threats to the stability of English peace and prosperity in Shakespeare’s time,³² recognized and feared at even the highest level of authority in the kingdom for their ability to afflict (usually) pregnant women and children.

Witchcraft’s relevance to our conversation on *Macbeth*’s acknowledgement of the disparity in social justice is based on two facts: that the crime of witchcraft was almost exclusively attributed to the lower classes of English society,³³ and that a large number of murder-by-witchcraft accusations pertain to child murder. We only have to look as far as *Macbeth*’s third scene to witness Shakespeare’s iteration of a popular theme “A sailor’s wife had chestnuts in her lap, / And munched, and munched, and munched. / ‘Give me,’ quoth I. / ‘Around thee, witch!’ the rump-fed runnion cries” (1.3.4-7). As vagrant beggars, the witches of *Macbeth* echo the actuality of the archetype – that they are of the poorest in society, vagrant posters of the sea and land whose effective ‘magic’ stems, in part, from the infamous ‘Beggar’s Curse’ and similar powers commonly associated with

³² The English pamphlet *A Strange Report of Sixe most notorious Witches, who by their devilish practices mured above the number of foure hundred small children*. Printed at London, 1601.

³³ I have not found *historical* evidence otherwise in court records, only Aesop-esque literary imaginings; while this finding does not confirm *nonexistence* of wealthy witches, it does suggest their exceeding rarity.

commoners.³⁴ Witches, in almost equal proclivity to the profiles of child murderers, were spinsters and widows whose social networks were generally equivalent to those of their non-magical murdering counterparts. Perhaps one of the few major distinctions in the social background of a witch and murdering mother is the relationship between the perpetrator of the crime and their victim.

The relationship between the accused witch and her victim is comparatively unique from the relationships in most other crimes due to the supernatural and largely imagined nature of witchcraft. It is important for our sake to conceptualize the extent to which the society believed in and responded to the issue of witchcraft, echoed by the argument of Malcolm Gaskill “Even today, truth is no more than a version of reality which satisfies an audience, or which cannot either be proved or disproved more conclusively; and to our ancestors it was an even more elastic concept” (Gaskill 12); retaining the sentiment of Gaskill, we might more easily understand the similar example of Louise Jackson who argues “the criminal potential of witchcraft was completely dependent upon a belief in the spirit-world which had to be shared by victim, witnesses, judge and jury alike” (Jackson 68). Provable evidence for such an impossible crime as witchcraft and the bewitching of victims to death stems less from the tangible effigy dolls of victims or Faustian summoning circles and more directly with the personal belief of those in the communities that their destitute neighbors murder children and families, and pose a threat to society.

The excuse of witchcraft as the cause of unexplainable maladies and hardships not only pervades the dramatic scene of stage, but more relevantly persists in the social

³⁴ Prophecy, as discussed by Keith Thomas in his *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, could be used by any of the social classes, but was oftentimes used in misdirection, justification for certain actions, or inspiring false hope in a prophesized future pp. 461-514.

discourse of Shakespeare's formative years. The lawful accords of the Elizabethan-era reveal considerable insights worth observation, as the numerous cases of witchcraft, infanticide and devil-worship not only reveal the associated themes of witchcraft (murder-by-spells, devil-worship, etc.) but also the profile of the accused. Among the many available sources from the Middlesex and Essex accords of the reign of Elizabeth, two particularly striking cases reflect society's greatest fears of the capabilities of witches. In March of 1574, Alice Chaundeler was brought before a court and found guilty of murder by witchcraft, for having bewitched an 8-year-old girl, a man (on a separate occasion), and finally a father and his two children (2yo. George and 5yo. Prudence³⁵). The court's record shows little of the motivation of the individual, or the evidence which suggests her guilt in the three cases, but two points from Dr. Hoffer's *Murdering Mothers* help in our understanding of the likely proceeding; that "witchcraft as an explanation of – or name to – a type of personality some unlawful, disruptive woman had" (Hoffer 28) and "the Stuart infanticide law enabled courts to establish guilt on the basis of circumstantial evidence of concealment and prior sexual misconduct" (Hoffer 23) suggests the accused Alice Chaundeler's guilt is based largely on her community's perception of her guilt, and her likeness to the detestable character of a witch, which undoubtedly contributed to her final verdict. It is easy to notice the development of a pattern: that sexually active and perceivably immoral women were thought to be capable of the greatest evils – such as child murder and witchcraft – even when the evidence of the crime does not exist; the pervading judiciary system, reliant on the moral beliefs of its jury to find guilt in the suspect, seems to specifically target those of questionable moral character and lower economic standing.

³⁵ J.S. Cockburn, *Calendar of Assize Records*, p. 117.

Further evidence of the exploitation of the ‘morally suspect’ women of Shakespeare’s England might be found in the examples of lawful doctrine. The state and local governments during the reign of James I were diligent in executing the king’s agenda of establishing laws to prosecute witches and protect civil interests. Only a year after James’ ascension to the throne Parliament created a law by which the witch was further subject to greater punishment for their crimes – a stark contrast to the previously established Elizabethan law enacted in 1563 which was more lenient to offenders. In particular, the law under James I targeted those who invoked or conjured evil spirits for any purpose, or took up any bodily remains of dead men, women, and children, for use in charms and spells for the harm or death of others.³⁶ Policy prevailing, the prosecution of suspected criminals could be decided by the desires of the community or the necessity of the law. As Malcolm Gaskill notes “Although the prosecution of class-based offences... might have caused testimony to be manipulated in the interests of the status quo, this seems less likely where more consensually condemned crimes were concerned” (Gaskill 3). Both the status quo and universal condemnation worked against accused witches during the reign of James I, as Shakespeare undoubtedly observed whilst penning the play in honor of his patron and king.

The extent to which James I’s policies affect Shakespeare during the course of writing *Macbeth* can only be speculative, but well-observed by later critics. In Samuel Johnson’s *Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of Macbeth* he notes the undoubtable likelihood of Shakespeare’s recognition of the changing social climate “Thus, in the time of Shakespeare, was the Doctrine of Witchcraft at once established by Law and

³⁶ A Discourse on Witchcraft, printed for J. Read, in White-Fryars; and sold by the booksellers and pamphlet-shops of London and Westminster, 1736.

by Fashion, and it became not only unpolite, but criminal, to doubt it” (Johnson 5). That the inflated perception of the threat of witches was in style, even during James’ earliest years, is doubtless to one as socially aware as Shakespeare, who references the most immediate political happenings (e.g. Gunpowder Plot³⁷) and the precise theme of equivocation associated with the Jesuits (e.g. Father Henry Garnet³⁸). Although Shakespeare’s adaptability to the changing social clime is worth consideration, we would do well to recognize the extent of England’s persecution of witches before the time of James.³⁹

A similarly heinous and rather extreme case of witchcraft occurs in the Essex accords in the case of Joan Turner, a spinster similarly convicted of murder by witchcraft for making Ellen Sparrowe, a woman “being great with child” (Cockburn 212) bewitched to death, and similarly bewitching a different woman “so that her life was despaired of” (212) and a different child who “languished for six months”(212). This case, among eighty-eight cases of “murder by witchcraft” and forty-five⁴⁰ additional cases of witchcraft in Essex county during the reign of Elizabeth I,⁴¹ represents a standard by which most witches appear to follow. In most of these cases a witch is guilty of murdering children (or occasionally pregnant women), animals, and creating deathly maladies, as “most cases of witchcraft involved children” (Hoffer 28) proves true in Cockburn’s sample; and that “the witch, like the poor, wandering unwed mother, lived at the edge of society” (Hoffer 28) we

³⁷ Note Stephen Greenblatt’s introduction to *Macbeth* in *The Norton Shakespeare: Tragedies* p. 905.

³⁸ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* (Norton, 2016), p. 933. “Faith, here’s an equivocator that could swear in both / the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough / for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven” (*Macbeth* 2.3.7-9).

³⁹ *Holinshed’s Chronicles*, the source material for *Macbeth*,

⁴⁰ Which, as per the calculation of Keith Thomas, accounts for 13% of the total “criminal business” of the records in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, p. 536.

⁴¹ J.S. Cockburn, *Calendar of Assize Records*, pp. 526-542 for the most examples with guilty convictions.

understand how easily the ostracized are afflicted with the assumption of guilt because it was both easy and convenient to blame the social outcast, and by James I's later standard it was entirely normal – even expected – to occur.

A final note on the profile of the witch draws a comparison to the play: although the evidence is too little to suggest the Weird Sisters are responsible for infanticide themselves,⁴² they otherwise completely fit the description of a witch. The Sisters are ostracized,⁴³ violate the law of James I by tampering with the remains of the dead (to include a murdered child and many animals), using their charm for the purpose of harming others, and consorting with devilish spirits. But a highly important comparison lies in the use of prophecy, “an elusively vague or ambiguous piece of prose or verse, resting on no clearly defined foundation, either magical or religious” (Thomas 461). A significant part of James I's 1604 Act targets any individual who would “exercise any Invocation or Conjuraton of any evill and wicked Spirit, or shall consult covenant with entertaine employ feede or rewarde any evill and wicked Spirit to or for any Intent or purpose”⁴⁴ which the witches, and later Lady Macbeth, employ. Recalling part of one of her most famous speeches “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! Make thick my blood, / ... Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers” (1.5.38-41, 45-46). Lady Macbeth's murderous plea to the devilish spirits, by the standards of Jacobean law, qualify the Scottish queen as a witch, or a would-be conjurer of spirits.

⁴² Aside from one of the components of their spell is the “Finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-deliver'd by a drab” (4.1.30-31), suggesting their reference to, but not necessarily participation in, an act of infanticide.

⁴³ “‘Aroint thee, witch!’ the rump-fed runnion cries” (1.3.7)

⁴⁴ J.S. Cockburn, *Calendar of Assize Records*, p. 117.

The most obvious signifier of Lady Macbeth's movement towards the classification of a witch lies in the intended audience of her speech: those spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, through which she seeks the power to commit murder, regicide, and treason. Similar to the Sisters' call to Hecate, or their later invocation of the apparitions (an armed head, a bloody child, and a crowned child), Lady Macbeth's plea to the sinister spirits markedly exemplifies her supernatural soliciting as the making of a witch. The other portions of the speech worth noting, the desire to "make thick" her blood references our previous entry by Hillman, that a witch's blood is too thick to be extracted; lastly, her third desire to trade her "milk for gall" bears a double meaning, in that it overtly signifies her transmutation into a witch and her symbolic sacrifice of motherly nurturance for the sake of her pursuits. Lady Macbeth's overt and subvert "modifications" not only represent a physical transformation from a young and beloved Scottish noblewoman to a sickly hag, but the psychological acceptance of the nature of a witch, as one who desires wickedness, subsequent greatness, and the everlasting golden round.⁴⁵

Unlike the witches, Lady Macbeth's ability to subvert public condemnation persists until towards the end of the play, at which point her overwhelming guilt drives her to madness and the exposition of her crime. Her encouragement of Macbeth's misdeeds, no less culpable than the initiating prophecy of the witches, receives hardly any recognition by the other characters until after her death,⁴⁶ while the witches receive universal condemnation throughout the play. The recognition of Lady Macbeth's guilt by her peers and the audience becomes apparent only after her maddened speech "What, will these hands ne'er be clean? / ...Here's the smell of blood still. All the per- / fumes of Arabia will

⁴⁵ All stated in Lady Macbeth's (1.5.1-28) speech.

⁴⁶ Save for Malcolm's epithet "his fiend-like queen" (5.7. 99)

not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!” (5.1. 38, 44-45). Easily recognizable is the blood Lady Macbeth imagines tainting her hand, representative of Duncan’s and those her husband murders. The symbology of the bloody hand stems from English belief that the corpse of the murdered could produce blood from the touch or presence of their murderer “No discovery of murder seems more factually dubious – or providentially impressive – than the ordeal whereby a corpse was supposed to bleed in the presence of the murderer” (Gaskill 8). That Lady Macbeth remarks “Yet who would have / thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (5.1. 34-35) whilst attempting to wash away the illusion of blood from her hands acknowledges the contemporary belief. The other voicing of contemporary belief lies directly in her sentiment about the perfumes of Arabia; Lady Macbeth’s subversive and treacherous nature is expounded upon when one considers her quote in contemporary context “Smell also became an index of truth about the body and its evils... and hence disguising it with perfume was also sinful and duplicitous, associated with the duplicity of femininity” (Hillman 34). Lady Macbeth’s madness and rantings serve in demonstrating her guilt to her peers, and as an exposé of her crimes to the audience.

Lady Macbeth and her husband stand so wholly apart from the nobility and lovers of the other plays of the Shakespearean folio in that so few others might be considered as devoted to their partner’s prosperity as these two. The couple’s relationship is largely complementary and, unlike most others, neither character betrays the other or gives reason to doubt their loyalty, unlike the unhealthy or treacherous bonds in *Othello*, *Taming of the Shrew*, or *Richard III*. One only has to recall the famous betrayals in *Othello*’s two leading couples “–Moor, she was chaste. She loved thee, cruel Moor” (*Othello* 5.2. 243) or the oppressive bonding of Petruchio to Katherine to recognize the sharp contrast in the mutual

love of the Macbeths, represented well in Macbeth's attempt to assuage the fears of his queen "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed" (*Macbeth* 3.2. 44-45). The couple's utter devotion to one another, and willingness to commit treasons and murders for the sake of each other's happiness gives depth to the audience's experience with the concept of child murder; whereas a poor mother might be concerned with the impossibly daunting task of child rearing during an economic crisis, the motivation of the married or economically prosperous more pointedly indicates a twisted notion of love as one's cause for such deeds of dreadful note.

Lady Macbeth stands apart from her less criminal female counterparts in Shakespearean drama beyond her complementary nature to Macbeth. In Mary Beth Rose's article on the women of Shakespearean drama, she remarks "there are among the *dramatis personae* of the comedies and tragedies female characters who enact prominent roles precisely because they *are* mothers" (Rose 292) and, culturally speaking "marriage and the family increasingly were seen to be institutions requiring secular legal control, they also gained considerably in moral stature and prestige" (Rose 297). The Macbeths distinctly lack both qualities of the expectation of the family dynamic, in which Lady Macbeth is neither a parent to Macbeth's children,⁴⁷ echoed by Macduff's realization of his contrast to the child murderer "He has no children. All my pretty ones? / Did you say all? Oh, hell-kite! All?" (4.3. 216-217) and their selfish attitudes contradict most conventional moral attitudes.

⁴⁷ Historically accurate too, as Queen Gruoch, the historical Lady Macbeth, only had one surviving child in her first marriage to Gillacomgain, and Macbeth had no heir otherwise. A. A. M. Duncan, *The Kingship of the Scots 842-1292*, p. 32.

Lady Macbeth's murderous tendencies might also be better understood as differentiating from the narrative of a non-infanticidal woman, whose goals in society align with different values and pursuits. Katherina, for example, is bullied into her belief "But love, fair looks, and true obedience – / Too little payment for so great a debt. / Such duty as the subject owes the prince, / Even such a woman oweth to her husband" (*The Taming of the Shrew* 5.2. 153-156). Lady Macbeth's own contrasting sentiment "I would, while it was smiling in my face... and dashed the brains out" (*Macbeth* 1.7. 56, 58) remarks considerable difference. By contrast, it is Lady Macbeth's desire to transcend the role of a dutiful wife and secure the progeniture of his family by dehumanizing herself in telling of her intended purpose; the continuous reemphasis of Lady Macbeth's childlessness in the context of the play serves, as Karen Raber argues "to emphasize the unnatural role she adopts when she seeks to move out of the position of wife and mother and into the position of political advisor and schemer" (Raber 313). Lady Macbeth wholeheartedly devotes herself to the success and advancement of her husband, dismissing the inherent significance of progeny which may succeed them and *rivals* who may oppose them.

For a lover as ambitious as Lady Macbeth, her willingness to commit child murder and act with a complementarily immoral personality showcases Shakespeare's greatest disruption of the existing moral social structure. That Lady Macbeth would kill her child for Macbeth shows her defiance of every legislative effort in the regulation of morality in Shakespeare's England. David Atkinson argues "infanticide legislation was a further extension of the control of sexual morality and hence of social and economic relations, rather than an attempt to protect the lives of infants" (Atkinson 360-362). The value of social stability exceeding that of the infant's violated life seems popular in early modern

English law and sentiment, as R.J. Kellett argues in their article “the penalties for infanticide varied, but in general they were not severe... the infant’s life was not regarded as being of the same worth as that of an older child or adult” (Kellett 2). Such freedom to murder only further expands upon the frightening character of Lady Macbeth, whose ambition has little consequence in English law.⁴⁸ That Lady Macbeth represents a devoted and simultaneously unruly wife bears striking resemblance to the archetypal ‘Cruel Mother’, of whom Betty Travitsky writes “The suppression of disorderly or disobedient women was a matter of high priority and concern in Renaissance England” (Travitsky 68).⁴⁹ That the literary trends of early modern England might expand out of infanticidal or child murderers, rebellious wives, or witchcraft practitioners pervades ballad and theatre alike.

Attention to the social trend of infanticide amongst the economically and socially desperate in Shakespeare’s England is well witnessed in the reactionary literature and dramatic fictionalizations of the crimes: popular cases are not only referenced, but outright transcribed by the dramatist’s (or even official’s) pen. Likely the most famous case of infanticide in early modern English memory, the Calverley case of 1605, in which one Walter Calverley murdered his sons in Yorkshire, warranted publication in a popular pamphlet⁵⁰ and further in the production of *A Yorkshire Tragedy*, a play whose authorship is often assigned to either Shakespeare or Middleton. Regardless of which author’s case

⁴⁸ Also notable is the 1624 infanticide law’s specific application to unmarried women, and lacking power over a married woman’s infanticide, as noted in Hillman’s *Female Transgression in Early Modern Britain* p. 112.

⁴⁹ Expansive reading on the literary exploration of the ‘Cruel Mother’ archetype is found in Susan Staub’s *Nature’s Cruel Stepdames*, where a more learned scholar of the subject details the literary trend in 17th-century England, pp. 178-187.

⁵⁰ John Taylor, *The Unnaturall Father: Or, A Cruell Murther Committed by One John Rowse....upon Two of His Owne Children* (London, 1621).

stands strongest for authorship, the evidence of the contemporary play's existence, a play penned entirely on the dramatic potential of a case of infanticide, showcases the magnitude of public attention given to the crime.

An in-depth reading of the short play's fourth scene provides us with a Shakespearean-esque perspective of the villain, the Husband. Mere moments before his decision to murder three children occurs, his troubling justification for the crime eerily echoes our discussed pretenses for the crime of infanticide: the issues of poverty and questionable legitimacy. In addition to continually regarding his children as illegitimate products of adultery, "Puh, Bastards, bastards, bastards, begot in tricks, begot in tricks" (Shakespeare 5⁵¹) the husband's increasing financial frustration and desperation warrants an increasing alienation from the community.⁵² The evolution of the Husband's increasing alienation from the community reflects the trend of alienation observed in those accused of witchcraft and infanticide – social alienation and the community's unfavorable disposition towards an individual breeds rumor, gossip – and eventually, accusation. Although the character of the Husband draws little sympathy to his blight, he fits snugly into the mould of a monetarily-wanting and dejected lover, whose violent response to social stress is easily understandable, if not worth a measure of sympathy.

That the Husband in *A Yorkshire Tragedy* bases his crime on the questioned legitimacy of his children, the shame of his poverty, and his inability to further provide for his children reflects those greatest fears which plague the infanticidal parent's mind. Tremendous guilt moves a murderous hand whilst, often motivated by a desire to procure

⁵¹ *A Yorkshire Tragedie Not so New, as Lamentable and True. VVritten by VV. Shakespeare.* London, Printed by William Jaggard] for Thomas] Pavier], 1619.

an instant, painless death for their child who would otherwise suffer long periods of malnutrition, the parent chooses a perceivably more merciful approach. For the efforts of Lady Macbeth, whose sentiments reflect a powerful, wealthy woman's ability to nurture a child or murder one with greater impunity, the choice of infanticide reflects a devotion to a lover or spouse, whose affections appear more important than those of their child. Comparatively to the Yorkshire children, the children in *Macbeth* present an everlasting threat to the injustice of usurpers and treacherous familiars "If infants in tragedy exist to be killed, infants in Shakespeare exist to grow up" (Higginbotham 110). The murder of children and the simultaneous fear of them drives the Husband to kill his own offspring, and Macbeth to attempt to kill those of his rivals; but as "that we but teach / Bloody instructions which, being taught, return / to plague th' inventor" (1.7. 8-10) Macbeth, much like *King Lear's* Gloucester, had much to fear from a usurping heir.

Much of the mystery surrounding the Macbeths lies in the tragic beauty of their story and in the terrible, continuous losses against which they rebel. That the Macbeths wanted so desperately to propagate and satisfy each other's needs distinguishes the one unmistakable flaw to their world – the absence of an heir, "no son of mine succeeding" (3.1. 64). In Dr. David Willbern's excellent article, he notes "In such a world of apparitions and violated boundaries, Lady Macbeth's infant may be an *extradramatic* apparition: a transitional phenomenon proffered to us, the audience, as our own quandary, just as Macbeth's dagger is held out to him" (Willbern 537). That the Macbeths bore a child prior to or during the early portion of the play is confirmed in Lady Macbeth's aforementioned speech on nourishing and infanticide, and that it died ere the play's fourth act (recall Macduff's "he has no children" quote), confirms a tragic reality which never became a

point of focus in the plot of the play but, like the ethereal dagger or the ghost of Banquo, is only truly perceptible to one who is willing to recognize its existence. It is neither absurdly farfetched or rare for productions of the play to acknowledge the fate of the unpenned child,⁵³ whose unknown death and unsure life cast a deliberately tragic light on the murderous inclinations and loving drive of the murderous Macbeths.

⁵³ Three readily available examples of theatrical productions which include infanticide are found in the bibliography, two of which introduce the Macbeths with an opening scene where their child has recently died and the painful memory of their death prompts violent recourse; the third introduces the witches as avenging babes/children, providing a perspective based on the similarly popular motif of the 'Avenging Child' found, in worthy detail, in Lori Schroeder's article *The Only Witness a Tongueless Child: Hearing and Reading the Silent Babes of Titus Andronicus and The Winter's Tale*, pp. 221-223.

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