The Infertility Issues of *Macbeth* in Context of Contemporary History

Though Shakespeare critics have mined the passages of *Macbeth* for every mention of fertility and children to provide new insights into the Scottish play since the first stirrings of literary criticism in the 18th century, few have examined the play from a historical perspective dealing with these issues. Still a number of things have been agreed on, including the fact that the play irrefutably honors King James I of England, also James VI of Scotland; was perhaps written in the wake of the Gunpowder Plot; was inspired by true events described by the historian Holinshed, but fictionalized and therefore classified amongst the tragedies as opposed to the histories; and the text of it may have been abridged or even corrupted and altered by other playwrights of the time. Nevertheless, little has been said about the abundant imagery of blood and infertility in connection with the recently fallen House of Tudor.

Although James VI of Scotland was himself a descendant of the House of Tudor, his grandmother being Margaret Tudor eldest sister to Henry VIII of England, and therefore justifiably the next in line to the English throne after Elizabeth’s death; his ascension still ended the Tudor monarchy by initiating the reign of the House of Stuart. While the Tudor monarchy enjoyed substantial popularity -- Henry VII established peace after years of a raging civil war, Henry VIII broke England away from the control of Rome and the Catholic Church, and Elizabeth I was the first successful female monarch who brought England to its Golden Age -- there was also quite a bit of resentment to be remembered. After all, Henry VIII tore down the monasteries in order to enrich his own exchequer, married a number of commoners to his people’s dissatisfaction, executed people at whim and persecuted Protestants and heretics widely, despite his own dubious religious practices. Mary I tried to purge England of all non-Catholics
and seek a reconciliation with Rome with such fervor that she earned herself the nickname Bloody Mary. And Elizabeth reigned long enough to turn from a glorious virgin queen to a cranky old woman of the supposedly self-described “barren stock.”\footnote{The source for this description is Historic-UK.com, which features a number of quotes linked to Elizabeth I however does not cite their original sources. This is the only place where I have been able to find the quote. It is Elizabeth’s supposed reply to the news of Mary Queen of Scots giving birth to James.} By the time James ascended the throne, people were ready for a change of scenery.

Despite any annoyance that the public may have felt toward Elizabeth by the end of her reign, she was their rightful queen and people still recognized and maintained their dutiful allegiance to her. Meanwhile James was a foreigner, despite his Tudor ancestry. He was the King of Scotland before becoming the King of England, and there was certainly some anxiety associated with the idea of a foreign ruler sitting on the English throne. It is possible therefore that under these circumstances 

\textit{Macbeth} is much more than a shout-out to the new monarch, and instead a finely tuned piece of propaganda meant to increase his popularity with the public. After all, upon coming to London, James became the new patron of Shakespeare’s company who went from being the Lord Chamberlain's Men to being the King’s Men. It would only be polite and politically shrewd of Shakespeare to repay the profitable compliment of such direct patronage by writing a play meant to support the monarch and ignite loyalty in the hearts of the people; we have seen Shakespeare do this before in 

\textit{Richard III}, a celebration of the House of Tudor over the evil Yorkist king, written during Elizabeth’s reign.

Plenty of evidence exists to support the belief that 

\textit{Macbeth} was written to please the new king. The obvious reasons consist first of the subject matter; 

\textit{Macbeth} is otherwise known as “the Scottish play” and the plot deals exclusively with political turmoil surrounding the Scottish throne at the time that James’s royal line is established, according to the general belief that the
Stuart kings descended from Banquo. Frank Kermode, however, suggests that this one bit of popular history generally accepted as fact, was just another piece of well-placed propaganda by the Stuarts. Second, there’s the prominent preoccupation with the supernatural which caters particularly to the king’s tastes, since many of the books authored by James himself dealt with the study of witchcraft, of which *Daemonologie* (1597) is considered most influential at the time.

Third, while many editors and scholars alike believe the text we have of *Macbeth* to be either incomplete or corrupted by the hand of another writer -- most notably Thomas Middleton -- due to its unusually short duration for Shakespeare, Kermode boldly suggests that the play today is as long as Shakespeare ever intended it to be, in order to please James who preferred shorter pieces. Finally, the most obvious tip of the hat to his majesty is the famous speech in Act 4 Scene 1 where the apparition appears onstage holding a mirror as a prop:

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Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo.
Down!
Thy crown does sear mine eyelids. And thy hair,
Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first.
A third is like the former. Filthy hags!
Why do you show me this? A fourth! Start, eyes!
What, will the line stretch out to th’ crack of doom?
Another yet! A seventh! I’ll see no more.
And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass
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2 According to Kermode in his untitled essay on *Macbeth* in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Miffling Company, 1997), “the glorification of Banquo and of Fleance, founder of the Stuart line, was an essential part of the Stuart political myth, which sought to provide the Stuarts with a proper ancestry, stretching back through Banquo to the first king, Kenneth Macalpine.” pp. 1356. Sylvan Barnet takes this a step further when he denies Banquo’s existence altogether in his introduction to the 1963 Signet edition of *Macbeth*. He writes, “Banquo, for example, was a convenient invention of a Scottish historian who in the early sixteenth century needed to give the Stuart line a proper beginning.” (pp.xxiii)

3 Also see A. C. Bradley’s “Duration of the Action in *Macbeth*. Macbeth’s Age. ‘He has no children.’” *Shakespearean Tragedy Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth* (London: Macmillan, 1969) pp. 419-424 where Bradley argues against Middleton’s involvement and attributes the few textual evidence critics cite to Shakespeare’s own edits of the play, while also pointing out that *Macbeth*, similarly to *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Tempest*, was most likely written to celebrate a big event at court, and therefore involved a lot of action which still takes time although it may not involve lines. Therefore the performance time of *Macbeth* does not feel so much shorter and so it’s not an incomplete text.
Which shows me many more; and some I see
That twofold balls and treble scepters carry:
Horrible sight! Now I see ‘tis true;
For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon me,
And points at them for his. What, is this so? (IV. i. 112 - 124)

The vision is that of eight generations of kings, all descending from Banquo, and the final holding a mirror to show the line stretching into infinity, but also strategically positioned to allow James to catch a glimpse of himself in it as a legendary descendant uniting two spheres. A clever trick and very flattering indeed. The kings Macbeth supposedly sees in the mirror hold “twofold balls and treble scepters” which directly reference the unification of the two kingdoms of England and Scotland, as well as the royal authority stretching over England, Scotland and Ireland all as a result of James’s ascension to the English throne. But beyond the personalized characteristics of the play centering on celebrating James’s heritage, Macbeth also deals with two topics which could prove particularly dangerous depending on the sensibilities of the presiding monarch: fertility and usurpation.

Although it will indubitably violate Cleanth Brooks’ view on the proper limits of metaphor, in this paper I will argue that Shakespeare focuses Macbeth on the ideas of fertility as a sign of usurpation, or god’s rejection of a ruling monarch, in order to blacken the then recently fallen House of Tudor which with every monarch grew more infamous for its problems with procreation, in order to glorify James by comparison.⁴

While a number of existing conspiracy theories mark Henry VII and his mother, Margaret Beaufort, as responsible for the death of Edward IV’s two young heirs, also known as the two

⁴ In his essay, “The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness” The Well Wrought Urn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co, Inc., 1947) reprinted in the 1963 Signet edition of Macbeth edited by Sylvan Barnet, Cleanth Brooks discusses the distances to which metaphor in Shakespeare can be considered and to what extent readers and critics can confidently ascribe certain inferences that they make to having been intentionally crafted by Shakespeare himself. In the end, he decides to err on the side of caution before certainly pinning something on the bard.
princes in the tower, in order for the succession to pass to Elizabeth of York and after their
marriage strengthen Henry’s claim to the throne but also portray him as a usurper after killing
Richard III; because it all happened in the chaos of the War of the Roses, the English people
generally accepted Henry and the Tudor line as the rightful heirs to the throne. But upon closer
examination, one persistent plague seemed to haunt almost every generation of this glorious line
of monarchs: infertility. And it is this condition, also so abundantly manifest in the play, that is
the crutch upon which the anti-Tudor propaganda, meant to glorify James, rests.

Infertility is an issue haunting the Macbets unceasingly throughout the play. We know
Lady Macbeth previously had children because she tells Macbeth that she had “given suck” and
knows “How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me.” (I. vii. 54-55) However we learn from
Macduff that Macbeth has no children (IV. iii. 216), therefore the general inference is that the
Macbets have had children in the past, but they’ve all died.5 Another possibility is that Lady
Macbeth had this experience in her previous marriage and therefore her union with Macbeth is a
completely childless one, as discussed by A.C. Bradley:

Lady Macbeth’s child (I. vii. 54) may be alive or may be dead. It may even be, or have been, her child by a former husband; though if Shakespeare had followed history in making Macbeth marry a widow (as some writers gravely assume) he would probably have told us so. (Bradley 422)

Bradley more or less dismisses the possibility that Shakespeare would drag Lady Macbeth’s past
into the present affairs of the play and more or less dismisses the significance of whether or not

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5 In his essay, “Lady Macbeth’s Indispensable Child” Educational Theatre Journal Vol. 26 No. 1 (Mar. 1974) pp. 14-19, Marvin Rosenberg argues that Macduff is not referring to Macbeth in this line, but instead rebuking Malcolm for his insensitivity and misunderstanding of Macduff’s grief at losing his family because he, Malcolm, does not have any children. Although this is a possible reading, since Shakespeare does not clarify any further, another recognized reading, and the one that I accept in this paper, is that he is in fact referring to Macbeth, and his cruelty resulting also from not having any children. For another point in this debate see: Bradley’s “Duration of the Action in Macbeth. Macbeth’s Age. ‘He has no children.’” Shakespearean Tragedy Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth (London: Macmillan, 1969) pp. 419-424.
the Macbeths have living children. Meanwhile, Marvin Rosenberg argues shamelessly that the Macbeths did in fact have a child, who is even present on stage during their plotting of Duncan’s murder, and that this already living child is the motivation that drives Macbeth to commit the subsequent murders necessary to secure the crown for his own offspring. However, taking into account the tongue-in-cheek attitude of his final footnote, “If Marvin Rosenberg’s interpretation is used in performance, he would like to know how it went”, even the author knows how far-fetched this theory is.

As improbable as a living child of Macbeth’s is during the course of the play, the thought of securing the crown for his own offspring does plague Macbeth after he ascends the throne:

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
And put a barren scepter in my gripe,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If ‘t be so,
For Banquo’s issue have I filed my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered;
Put rancors in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings!
(III. i. 61-70)

The witches predict that Macbeth will become king before Banquo, but Banquo’s children will succeed Macbeth. As a result, Macbeth’s crown is to be without heir of his own flesh and blood. But since Macbeth forsook his mortal soul to achieve the monarchy, only the eternal rule of Macbeths is a worthy price to sacrifice his soul, or his “eternal jewel” for. And Macbeth clearly feels that his children would be cheated if they didn’t inherit the crown, therefore showing that he means to have children.
Macbeth’s plan to have children who could inherit his throne is most apparent in the bloodshed he wreaks after murdering Duncan. According to his belief of “blood will have blood” (III. iv. 123), Macbeth must dispose of all who threaten his monarchy and all who would want to avenge them. So in order to prevent the fulfilling of the witches’ prophecy, he must murder Banquo to keep him from having any more children as well avoid his avenging the death of Fleance, which would certainly be the case if Macbeth had actually succeeded in killing the son and not the father. He must also kill Macduff so that he can’t support Malcolm’s return from England since Duncan managed to proclaim him Prince of Cumberland and therefore the immediate successor to the throne (the legality of this is questionable since at this time Scotland’s monarchy was elected not hereditary which is how Macbeth was able to ascend). Macduff anticipates Macbeth’s plan however and makes for England, so Macbeth must satisfy himself with killing his entire family with the conviction of, by the by, also killing Macduff and so not having anyone to come back and avenge him. And if Macbeth had actually succeeded in carrying out this bloody coup, he may possibly have secured the crown for any children he planned to have.

Macbeth’s intention of still having children is also plain in some smaller textual details. For instance, his remark to Lady Macbeth, “Bring forth men-children only; / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males.” (I. vii. 72-74) Of course this comment is mostly meant to show that Lady Macbeth’s previous call on the spirits to “unsex” her and replace weaknesses characteristic to women with relentless cruelty had been answered and she surprises her husband with her unfeminine ruthlessness. Nevertheless, Macbeth sounds impressed. After all, a queen only giving birth to sons is most desirable since it would ensure heirs upon heirs. But
are the Macbeths even able to still conceive? Macbeth’s comment suggests that he thinks so.

Bradley discusses the possible age of Macbeth and states that though there is no absolute indication of how old he is, he must be old enough to lead an army and win a number of military honors, but can’t be so old that he’s hardly able to fight as valiantly as he’s reported to have done in the opening scene. Bradley concludes that Macbeth must therefore be comfortably middle-aged, and certainly looking forward to having an heir of his own to succeed him. That’s why the murder of Duncan occurs so early on in the play, because the rest of Macbeth’s tragedy is his struggle to create a dynasty of his own offspring; resulting in failure to do either -- secure the crown or reproduce.

Since reproduction is the ultimate goal of society as the sole means of its survival, infertility has been viewed as a curse or punishment from God. Henry VIII used the reasoning that God was punishing him for committing incest by marrying his brother’s widow by not granting them any living male offspring, as the basis for obtaining a divorce from Katherine of Aragon. According to Raphael Holinshed’s account of Macbeth’s story, the tragic title character heard a similar curse from God placed on himself as well:

Think not Kenneth that the wicked slaughter of Malcolme Duffe by thee contrived, is kept secret from the knowledge of the eternal God: thou art he that didst conspire the innocent’s death, enterprising by traitorous means to do that to thy neighbor, which thou wouldst have revenged by cruel punishment in any of thy subjects, if it had been offered to thyself. It shall therefore come to pass, that both thou, thyself, and thy issue, through the just vengeance of almighty God, shall suffer worthy punishment, to the infamy of thy house and family for evermore. For even at this present are there in hand secret practices, to dispatch both thee and thy issue out of the way, that other may enjoy this kingdom which thou dost endeavor to assure unto thine issue. (Holinshed 140)

Kenneth refers to Donwald whose role in the murder of King Duffe Shakespeare used as the basis for the Macbeths’ role in the murder of Duncan in his play. The curse suggests that it shall not only fall upon Donwald (or Macbeth) himself but also upon all of his line to follow, implying as a result that Macbeth would have children who could still be punished for him. Nevertheless, it is never made clear what the infamy befalling upon their house should consist of, other than a general sort of doom. The worst thing that can happen to a monarch, however, is the lack of surviving heirs. And, if instead of being made barren, the Macbeths were made to have children who would all die in turn, that would be a curse which would not only touch Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, but also quite literally befall their offspring by killing them. So it can reasonably be accepted that Shakespeare had the curse of infertility hanging upon the Macbeths.

Macbeth even refers to such a blight when his paranoia has peaked and resignation is starting to settle into his breast as he prepares for war against Malcolm:

I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall’n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany my old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep.
(V. iii. 22 - 27)

Macbeth feels his age weighing down upon him. He has no doubt been aware of his wife’s sleeplessness and slow descent into madness, of which he is once again informed in this scene, as he has been suffering from similar symptoms. From his speech, it sounds like suddenly Macbeth considers himself and his wife past their prime; they should have children by now who would honor, love, and obey them. Sons who would serve to lead Macbeth’s army in support of their father. But Macbeth finally accepts, possibly in light of his wife’s madness, that he can no longer
hope to achieve any offspring, and in their place has curses. What he refers to by “curses” isn’t completely clear, but a curse one hears uttered in the night could be something that’s not loud but runs deep, as for generations, so the curse Kenneth hears in Holinshed’s account. A similar blight appears to have afflicted the Tudor monarchy which presided over England directly prior to James’ ascent to the throne, and whose rise was a direct result of this plague upon their dynasty as it eventually left them without any heirs.

Starting with Henry VII, the first Tudor king -- who ended the War of the Roses which had caused discord in England for over thirty years, through killing Richard III and uniting the warring families of York and Lancaster by marriage to Elizabeth of York -- maintaining a Tudor male sitting on the throne proved a struggle. Of the seven children that Henry and Elizabeth had, only four -- Arthur, Margaret, Henry and Mary -- survived until adulthood. Of course, considering the high death rate of children and infants at the time, four out of seven, and in that two boys, was nothing to scoff at. But Henry was still nervous. And when Arthur died suddenly in 1502 at age 15 -- of what most historians assume to have been the sweating sickness but was never confirmed -- closely followed by his mother in 1503, Henry felt his lineage endangered:

His line of succession was very slender, and his continued fears for the future of his house induced his pertinacious efforts in his last years to find a second queen for himself. His endeavors were to be in vain, but the same fears and efforts were to be inherited and enormously magnified by his successor. (Chrim 94)

Of seven children, only four survived until adulthood, and then one of the male heirs died tragically and suddenly, leaving behind one. Considering that his remaining siblings were not only not eligible to inherit the throne as girls, Margaret also married the King of Scotland (the grandparents to James VI) so if she were to inherit the English throne it would fall under Scottish rule; Henry was the only hope of Tudor survival.
Though Henry VIII not only survived but reigned over England for almost 40 years and produced three monarchs, his actual efforts to maintain the monarchy were even more hindered than those of his father. Henry’s first wife, Katherine of Aragon, became pregnant six times throughout the course of their marriage and only one of the children, Mary, survived. All the rest were either stillborn, or lived for a very short time, dying within months or weeks, or sometimes even days of being born. Henry’s second wife, Anne Boleyn, became pregnant four times during the course of their marriage, but all results were stillborn with the exception of one daughter, Elizabeth.\(^7\) Henry’s third wife, Jane Seymour, only managed to give birth to one child before dying of the same childbed fever Henry’s own mother, Elizabeth of York, is believed to have suffered after giving birth to Henry’s youngest sister, Katherine who also died soon after. Jane Seymour’s death was not in vain, however, as the child she gave birth to would become Henry’s immediate heir, Edward VI. Unfortunately, Edward too would die at the age of 15 of a disease that historians still struggle to identify.\(^8\) Meanwhile, Henry’s following three marriages did not yield any offspring. During his marriage to Anne of Cleves, he complained of impotency, and after Anne testified that their marriage was never consummated it was annulled, and she was proclaimed his dear sister. His next marriage to Katherine Howard was a result of lust on the king’s part, as he was middle-aged and she was a teenager, and it’s debatable whether it was consummated to the brim or not at all. Nevertheless, Katherine Howard never became pregnant.

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\(^7\) Some historians argue that one of Anne Boleyn’s pregnancies resulted in a deformed fetus, a sure mark of witchcraft and certainly God’s damnation, but according to Alison Weir *The Lady in the Tower: The Fall of Anne Boleyn* (London: Vintage Books, 2010) pp. 89, no evidence supporting such an occurrence exists, and considering that Anne Boleyn’s enemies dug up everything they could to discredit her in the eyes of Henry VIII, such surely damning evidence would surely be brought to light and exploited during her trials.

\(^8\) After the recent discovery of Arthur Tudor’s grave, Dr. Julian Litten suggests that Arthur and Edward may have suffered from the same condition and it may have been hereditary. See David Derbyshire’s “Discovery of grave may solve mystery death of Henry VIII’s brother at 15.” *The Telegraph* 20 May 2002.
by Henry or any of her rumored lovers so she may as well have been barren for all that she contributed to the Tudor line. And Henry’s sixth and final wife, Catherine Parr, did not become pregnant until after she married Thomas Howard following Henry’s death.

After all this, Henry VIII, like his father, only succeeded in producing one legitimate male heir, and not one as strong as he himself had been. Edward VI only lasted some six years before dying and leaving a faultily drafted “devise for the succession” which overlooked his sisters’ rights in favor of Lady Jane Grey, granddaughter of Mary Tudor and Charles Brandon. After Edward’s death, a revolution erupted as supporters of Mary, Elizabeth, and Jane, the four women with substantial claims to the throne, each scrambled to have their favorite come out on top. Jane’s supporters managed to maneuver her onto the throne for a short nine days before Mary took over finding Jane guilty of treason and sentenced to beheading. Another descendant of Henry VII though through his daughter, Jane died tragically, and although briefly married, without issue.

Mary I’s reign lasted five years. She married Prince Philip of Spain only a year after ascending the throne and instantly turned her thoughts to securing the crown for her own offspring against her half-sister Elizabeth. Mary’s desire for a child was strong, so strong in fact that she appears to have willed her body into becoming pregnant. She showed most signs of pregnancy including morning sickness and nausea, absence of menstruation and a swollen abdomen. But after almost twelve months of such symptoms, no child was born and Mary along with all her court became aware that it was a mistake. Two years later, Mary thought herself pregnant again, but it became clear that this was yet another false alarm and a few months later, in November 1558 she died of influenza not having produced any heirs. Maureen Waller
suggests that Mary’s infertility may have resulted from ovarian cysts or possibly even uterine cancer.\textsuperscript{9} Following Mary’s death, Elizabeth, the last true Tudor monarch ascended the throne.

Elizabeth of course had no offspring as she refused to marry, seeing herself married to England, and embracing the title of Virgin Queen. “In the end, this shall be for me sufficient, that a marble stone shall declare that a queen, having reigned such a time, lived and died a virgin.” (\textit{The Life of Elizabeth I} 44) As far as providing an heir to take over after her, she more or less left it to providence, declaring that England really does not actually want her children to replace her on the throne:

She was certain, ‘that God would so direct mine and your counsels that ye shall not need to doubt of a successor, who may be more beneficial to the commonwealth than he who may be born of me, considering that the issue of the best princes many times degenerateth.’ (Weir 44)

Though according to Weir, Elizabeth means that should she bear a son he may usurp her with the support of those still favoring a male monarchy, her choice of term “degenerateth” is interesting. She can have meant that her sons may be “degenerate” and therefore devoid of morals, or possibly even “degenerate” in the sense of a physical disability due to inbreeding between royalty. The latter certainly seems possible in context of all the trouble with offspring, which could have resulted from incest, Elizabeth witnessed in her own family. Although perhaps the genetic dangers of overlapping bloodlines may not have been thoroughly enough examined at the time. Weir even suggests that Elizabeth had a psychological prejudice against intercourse:

Elizabeth may well have confided to Harington the fact that she had a mental aversion to sex -- although this is by no means certain -- but he was purely speculating as to the physical indisposition. In fact, in her courtships, Elizabeth usually assumed that her marriage would be fruitful. (Weir 49)

Considering the fate that her mother, and many other people met during the reign of her father, it would not be surprising if Elizabeth failed to see the allure of sex. This view does not fit, however, with any of the reputed lovers Elizabeth entertained. As a result, critics stand divided on the issue of Elizabeth’s virginity. It’s suspicious however that if she was leading an active sexual life that she never became pregnant, since her physicians maintained all along that there did not exist any physical indispositions which should prevent it. Elizabeth, nevertheless, appears to have been suffering from the Tudor curse of no issue.

Elizabeth’s refusal to marry and lack of concern in regards to producing an heir never ceased bothering her subjects. Towards the end of her reign, farmers in England were experiencing a particularly blighted harvest and were blaming Elizabeth’s infertility as the cause.10 Similarly, in *Macbeth*, Ross describes Scotland under Macbeth’s rule, “Alas, poor country! / Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot / Be called our mother but our grave.” (IV. iii. 164 - 166) Their motherland has turned from a nourishing fertile land under Duncan, to one where citizens, its children, die. Perhaps, like England’s infertility results from that of its queen, so does Scotland’s.

Scotland’s queen, during Macbeth’s reign, is of course Lady Macbeth. A co-conspirator in her husband’s seizure of the throne, she’s very much his equal:

These two characters are fired by one and the same passion of ambition; and to a considerable extent they are alike. The disposition of each is high, proud, and commanding. They are born to rule, if not to reign. […] We observe in them no love of country, and no interest in the welfare of anyone outside their family. Their habitual thoughts and aims are, and, we imagine, long have been, all of station and power. And

10 For a discussion of Elizabeth’s status towards the end of her reign, as well as her relationship with James and as a potential candidate for Lady Macbeth’s character see Marjorie Garber’s essay on *Macbeth* in *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004) pp. 695-723.
though in both there is something, and in one much, of what is higher -- honor, conscience, humanity -- they do not live consciously in the light of these things or speak their language. Not that they are egoists, like Iago; or, if they are egoists, theirs is an egoisme a deux. They have no separate ambitions. They support and love one another. They suffer together. And if, as time goes on, they drift a little apart, they are not vulgar souls, to be alienated and recriminate when they experience the fruitlessness of their ambition. They remain to the end tragic, even grand. (Bradley 166-167)

According to this description, the Macbaths compliment each other by sharing common goals and prioritizing each other, the only people who really make up their family, with the exception of maybe the children Macbeth looks forward to having, above all else. They share the ambition of occupying the throne of Scotland together, and while Macbeth is certainly the one who contains more of the honor, conscience and humanity which make him second-guess himself and hesitate, Lady Macbeth is more deficient of these qualities and can therefore push him onward. They do it for each other, without a doubt. However, the ambition that they both strive for changes ever so slightly after Duncan’s dead, and that’s what causes their drifting apart. While Macbeth’s ambition starts out focusing on obtaining the crown, once he accomplishes this he moves on to obsessing over securing it for his children, instead of enjoying it the way Lady Macbeth wants to. Lady Macbeth, however, cannot share in this goal since it is she who’s hindering its progress for Macbeth. She gives up her fertility in order to help Macbeth obtain the throne in the first place.

The argument for Lady Macbeth’s barrenness is stronger than that of Macbeth’s impotency due to age or any other reason, because we never hear her talking about looking forward to having children. In fact, in her most famous speech, she renounces the ability to conceive:

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,
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 murd’ring ministers.
(I. v. 41 - 49)

Jenijoy La Belle argues that in this speech, Lady Macbeth is quite literally asking spirits to “unsex” her by making her less of a woman by ceasing the bodily processes of the female. \(^{11}\) “To free herself of the basic psychological characteristics of femininity, she is asking the spirits to eliminate the basic biological characteristics of femininity.” (La Belle 381) By “compunctious visitings of nature” Lady Macbeth is referring to her period, the monthly reminder that she’s a woman of child-bearing age. When she asks that they thicken her blood and prevent passage to remorse, “she is asking for the periodic flow to cease, the genital tract to be blocked.” (La Belle 382) She also wants the milk in her breasts to be turned into bile, a bitter liquid. “There is a movement from the image of the womb (which would become infected from what one seventeenth-century medical directory for midwives calls “the burden of putrified blood”) to the image of the corrupted breasts.” (La Belle 382) Lady Macbeth is asking for her reproductive organs, the womb, where a child is formed, and the breasts, where it is nursed in its initial days of existence, to be destroyed. She sacrifices the ability to procreate in order to have the will-power to commit murder.

In her commitment to achieving her and her husband’s life ambition -- ultimate rule -- Lady Macbeth somewhat resembles Mary I. Mary’s ambition to achieve the crown and secure it

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for a Catholic heir carried her through many dangerous waters against all odds. “That she had outlived her father was an amazing improbability; that she had come to the throne a near miracle. Her triumph over Dudley, her resolute defiance of Wyatt, her determined accomplishment of the Spanish marriage were feats none of the men around her had believed possible.” (The Life of Elizabeth I 385) And finally, the hope of an heir also came into sight as she began to exhibit all outward signs of pregnancy.

But Mary’s pregnancies, two of them, both proved to be as fruitless as the marriage of the Macbeths. She wanted an heir so intensely that her body obeyed and began behaving as if it were in possession of one. A delusion as strong as that, followed by the disappointment of not actually giving birth, could result in, if it’s not already a sign of, a madness, similar to that of Lady Macbeth. In a recent article about pseudocyesis, the scientific term for phantom pregnancy, scientists suggest that “pseudocyesis is the result of a delicate mind-body feedback loop: an initial emotional state induces abnormal hormone secretion, which in turn has is own physical and psychological effects.”12 According to the article, commentators say that the violent persecution of heretics which earned Mary the nickname Bloody Mary, may have been a way of dealing with the disappointment of a false pregnancy. This is a possible reading when we consider Lady Macbeth’s psychological struggles resulting from her own unsexing. “According to Burton, ‘care, sorrow, and anxiety, obfuscation of spirits, agony, desperation, and the like’ come from spoilt menstrual blood (‘a sanguinis menstrui malitia’).” (La Belle 383) Lady Macbeth’s sleeplessness is another associated side-effect. Overall, all behaviors which begin to signal her fleeting sanity, are a result of her distorted menstrual cycle. Just as Mary’s execution

of some 280 Protestants was a result of “PPPSD” (post phantom - pregnancy stress disorder), perhaps. The condition of both, nevertheless, ensued from their grand ambitions. Mary’s phantom pregnancy was her body trying to satisfy the desires of her mind, despite the fact that it couldn’t do so. Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth’s sacrifice of her ability to bear children and its consequences result from her dedication to assisting her husband in obtaining the crown. “The consistency with which her troubled character embodies these symptoms indicated that she has indeed called down upon herself, with unfortunate success, the stoppage of her menstrual cycle.” (La Belle 384) She has brought the curse that plagues the Macbeth lineage down upon it and herself.

Although Lady Macbeth cannot foresee that ceasing to menstruate can make her insane, she certainly must know that it will prevent her from having children. But unlike her husband, achieving the crown for the two of them is her top priority:

I have given suck, and know
How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn to you
Have done to this.

(I. vii. 54 - 59)

She admits it right here. Even if she did have a child, she’d kill it if she promised to do so. Her word to her husband, her pledge to risk all to achieve the crown, is more important than the welfare of their child. She does not want children the way that Macbeth does. Her concern is not for the future, but for the present; for their present reign.

In this concentration on what is as opposed to what will be, Lady Macbeth very much resembles Elizabeth. The Virgin Queen largely ignored the people’s calls for an heir, and focused
instead on bringing England into a golden age and making herself the monarch presiding over it. She wanted to be remembered for the things she did while Queen, not for the children she bore to supplant her. “Princes cannot like their children, those that should succeed unto them,” Elizabeth once said citing a number of examples of conflict between a monarch and heir. (*The Life of Elizabeth I* 44) Weir therefore suggests that perhaps Elizabeth wasn’t all that fond of children in the first place, and, so, prized her selfish reign above the need to reproduce. And as we saw in her appraisal of the worth of her promise in reference to a child of hers, so does Lady Macbeth.

With her priorities as such, it appears that not only are Lady Macbeth and her husband suddenly split by irreconcilable differences, but she is the very calamity that hangs upon the dynasty that Macbeth wants to establish. He, like Henry VII and Henry VIII after him, murders in order to purge his country of all possible threats to his children. And his greatest failure is in achieving the crown at a price higher than life, just to have it eventually pass into the eternal grip of another family -- that of Banquo (and eventually James).

This parallelism of the Tudors and Macbeths could not have been accidental. Especially for a play performed in front of an audience more than familiar with the woes of a monarchy struggling to supply an heir and thus constantly threatening the peace of the nation by not providing a stable line of succession; these references could have been as easily identifiable as the glorification of James in the mirror scene. The Macbeths were damned because of their part in the assassination of Duncan, by why the Tudors? The audience would remember the conspiracy and mystery surrounding the murder of the two young princes imprisoned in the Tower of London just before the ascension of Richard III slain by Henry VII. Though Henry VII fervently supported pinning the crime on Richard, there were still those who recognized that they
stood just as much on his own path to the throne as they did on the Yorkist king’s. Furthermore, the play *Richard III* was written during the Tudor reign, as some suggest, propaganda to clear the Tudor name in the case. Frank Kenmode suggests that *Macbeth* was intended to replace *Richard III* in the repertoire following James’ ascend; a piece of propaganda meant to strengthen James’ claim to the throne meant to replace the piece of propaganda which had once glorified the Tudors.

There is no better way to support James’ legitimacy of claim than to blacken the previous monarchs who sat on the throne before him, especially since their blood couldn’t “have blood” since they were all, for the most part, dead. So painting Henry VIII’s infertility as a curse from God meant to punish him for potential bigamy, murder of his wives, and abandonment of the true faith, along with possibly incest through his marriage to Katherine of Aragon -- or possibly meant to punish Henry VII’s slaughter of all possible Yorkist heirs, a practice continued by his son, and mirrored by Macbeth in his slaughter of the innocents -- seemed perfectly reasonable. Playing up Bloody Mary’s insanity and the Virgin Queen’s selfishness in the person of Lady Macbeth seemed tongue-in-cheek as well as effective. Golden age or not, they were both still female monarchs, and what good did that do England? Now England could celebrate the rightful return of fertility to its grounds. A male monarch, with somewhat of a rightful claim to the throne since he was a distant descendant of the Tudors, but more importantly a descendant of Banquo, the prophesied father to kings, finally coming to provide England with enough kings to last forever.
Bibliography

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