New Gorgons, Still Lives

Babies, Ballads, and *Macbeth*

ELIZABETH MAZZOLA

Abstract: Death assumes many faces in Macbeth*, but the variety of corpses and ghosts which tyrannise the play's protagonist signals problems larger than one man's ruthlessness or paranoia. Contemporary ballads often feature similar ontological confusion about where and how life ends, sometimes imagining the dead with the same sense of their vital non-being, moral authority, cunning magic, and important place in the community. Like* Macbeth*, these ballads also powerfully theorise the way offical power reconfigures social space, reconstructing neighborhoods as places of surveillance and households as sites of neglect, streets as settings where poverty spreads, and families as traps where new life gets put out. In fastening their gaze upon dead bodies which subvert rot and defy decay,* Macbeth *and contemporary ballads picture the collective social body as something that sprawls and suffers and moves but does not grow, something that the state keeps alive but also near death.*

> Alas, poor country!
> Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
> Be called our mother, but our grave, where nothing,
> But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
> Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
> Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
> A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell
> Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives
> Expire before the flowers in their caps,
> Dying or ere they sicken
> (*Macbeth* 4.3.164-73).

"To Be or not to Be"

Exhibited more than a hundred years after Andrea Mantegna's painting, *Dead Christ* (1470), Shakespeare's representations of corpses similarly invite audiences to see death as something slow, uncertain, and strangely vital. Macbeth is repeatedly surprised by the reappearance of things he believes are dead, for instance, people he thinks are bloody, buried, and abandoned in a ditch, rotten, obscured, and no longer viable. But there are clues about the failure or interruption of putrefaction in *Macbeth*, Ross's account of the sighs and groans and shrieks which rend the air in Scotland supplying just one example of the disorder which prevails when "good men's lives / Expire before the flowers in their caps" (4.3.172–173). "Discomfort swells" sometimes (1.2.28), and apparently one cannot always dismantle a person as easily as Macbeth "unseams" Macdonwald at the opening of the play (1.2.22). Some bodies resist the process, persisting after death, unabsorbed, or left outside or between the lines dividing being from non-being. Many contemporary ballads similarly chronicle this confusion and tally the losses, depicting life and death as occupying parts of a spectrum and sometimes switching places.

As I explore more fully below, *Macbeth* is an especially rich catalog of these uncertainties, and the bodies of Duncan, Banquo, and even the English King Edward symbolise this fog but also orient us inside it.[1] If the Thane of Cawdor takes advantage of such liminal space to reclaim his identity on the execution block, even more unsettling is the way Banquo's ghost challenges Macbeth when Banquo momentarily assumes Macbeth's rightful place at the banquet. Death might simply register another form of existence in *Macbeth*, the *barest* form of life, the toughest hold on flesh. However attenuated, Banquo's presence is obstinate and "rebellious" (4.1.112), his connections to the kingdom confounded but unbroken: if Banquo will "get kings" though he "will be none" (1.3.67), he stays alive by commanding the future, his death unable to deny the power of his blood.

Banquo's powers over death are ones shared more extensively, for nearly every effort to extinguish life in *Macbeth* goes hand in hand with energies to sustain it, like the baby Lady Macbeth inserts in her speech to her husband about murdering their king—its flesh made word, its creation a tool for destruction. The resulting

1 See Eric S. Mallin's exploration of *Macbeth's* reworking of rumors about royal succession and plague (62). Mallin focuses on the spread of such rumors; my emphasis instead is on the way these fears are managed, embodied, and localised in Shakespeare's play.

ambiguities are social and epistemological as well as biological, consequences of competing modes of measuring life and defining being.[2] Macbeth himself notes the ontological upset when, startled by the appearance of Banquo's ghost at the banquet, he comments: "The times has been / That, when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end. But now they rise again / With twenty mortal murders on their crowns, / And push us from our stools" (3.4.77–81). Medusa-like, the gruesome face of the unburied corpse is a tyrannical one, and its claims on the living are fierce and draining, reorganising space, affinity, obligation, and political life in a world where some people belong more than others. Some bodies absorb violence but some can repel it, some maintain connections while others stand on shakier ground, and some simply linger longer, their refusal to disintegrate providing radical evidence of belonging.

Macbeth's outburst when he sees Banquo's ghost thus expresses the frustration of the statesman as well as of the murderer: the brutal killer thinks the job is done, the bureaucrat wants the numbers to match up. The anxious wish for a lost world of dead bodies "safely stowed" in *Hamlet* (4.2.1) is underscored in *Macbeth* by a nervous obsession with tabulations that remain untidy. Early-modern demography unfolds as an inexact science, only partly able to do what *Macbeth*'s witches do and "say which grain will grow, / and which will not" (1.3.58–59). But predicting the future is made harder when one has difficulty establishing figures for the present: after all, what does belonging mean when one cannot pinpoint the limits of community or the extent of the claims made by members who might be less visible, less important, maybe less alive?[3] Yet the tenacity of blood to withstand death and the wherewithal of life to pass through walls and keep flowing is a chief part of Shakespeare's stagecraft. If other critics have noticed the playwright's preoccupation with the magic of corpses which can be resurrected or retain their shape—like Juliet, Hermione, Hamlet's father, Desdemona, and Falstaff (so unlike other mortals good enough to toss, ripe for death, food for powder)[4]—what I would emphasise

2 Mallin similarly describes pestilence in *Hamlet* as "epistemological" (73).

3 Dorothy Parker investigates the early modern historical background for some of these questions and their answers (5).

4 For a contemporary investigation of how the reappearance of corpses might be tied to a politics designed to grant and withhold personhood, see Kevin Lewis O'Neill, who looks at the practices of burial and exhumation at Guatemala City's public cemetery for evidence of the "concomitant reconstruction of personhood and of not-belonging (of exile, of marginality, of trash)" (514). Scholars like Valerie Traub point out the way Shakespeare frequently represents female bodies

is that this undecay is both a theatrical achievement and a social product, a hard-won victory in a battle over scarce resources, where belonging has become a commodity in a community whose borders have become unstable.

Those critics who describe the reappearance of the dead on Shakespeare's stage still neglect to consider the larger ramifications for public health and safety in the worlds the dead reoccupy, although these concerns often explicitly animate many early modern broadsides and ballads circulating soon after *Macbeth* is written, when the plague is also in the air. That some things might reject the insults which dead bodies absorb, or merely refuse to stay safely stowed is the subject, for instance, of *The Midwife of Poplar's Sorrowful Confession and Lamentation in Newgate* (1693).[5] Accused of villainy that "would melt a heart of stone," the midwife's confession of the murder of several children in her care is prefaced by a description of her own uncertain being. "My thread of Life is almost spun, / now I'm Condemned to dye," she announces when her crimes are uncovered, her monstrous condition particularly underscored by the frailty and innocence of her victims, those "pritty Murther'd Infants" she destroyed whose remains linger to damn her. The midwife's cruelty is revealed after she leaves a baby in the care of a little boy and girl with only water and cheese for them to eat and drink. The cries of the starving infant arouse the neighbors' attention, and the people storm the midwife's home, to be told by the boy about the bodies of two other babies "in a basket dead, / upon a shelf below." After those remains are recovered, unburied and covered by vermin, the boy directs the neightbors to dig up the cellar floor "where two or three more bodies" are discovered. Although the violence directed against these helpless infants is extensive, it is also incomplete, for when one of the children is discovered

as dead, immobile, or otherwise devitalised; Susan Zimmerman and Andrew Sofer explore how dead characters in the plays are often used as props. Mariko Ichikawa makes the case that the liminal figure of the dead body in Shakespeare's plays straddles the division between actor and prop.

5 *The Midwife of Poplar's Sorrowful Confession and Lamentation in Newgate*. Reproduced in *The English Broadside Ballad Archive*. Pepys Ballads 2.192. Downloaded 3 January 2019. Subsequent references to the ballads collected in this archive will be abbreviated *EBBA*. This ballad is also cited by Caitlin Scott. Other treatments of ballads about infanticide include Frances E. Dolan (*Dangerous Familiars*) and Laura Gowing. Patricia Fumerton studies ballads as evidence for some of the causes for childhood mortality, such as widespread unemployment and recurrent food shortages, and Dolan, in "Mopsa's Method," offers details about the lower-class audiences for these works; for additional details about ballad audiences and their expectations, see Paxton Hehmeyer.

to still be alive but starving, it is given to a nurse who, undressing it, removes some linens and finds that "[t]he very Ears were rotted off."

The details in *The Midwife of Poplar* are grotesque, the violence awful, the misery abounding, but the emphasis has special effects, and the rot a set of consequences. A number of other seventeenth-century ballads highlight this same ontological fuzziness, and they raise the spectre of a crisis over knowing where being begins and ends—a worrying and insidious confusion which endangers people who are invisible and lowly exactly because they are invisible and lowly. If Lady Macbeth's elegy is a confession, her confession is part of a recovery effort. But the needs and status of victims like her baby continue to be unclear, and many early modern ballads about the casualties of such a crisis share *Macbeth's* concern with deciphering what is owed people who hover at the limits of life. An army of decayed souls can be dangerous, as we are reminded in Shakespeare's play when the captain tells *Macbeth*'s Duncan about the "terrible numbers" of men commanded by the Norwegian Lord. Where these supplies come from or how large the pool is from which they are drawn are unstated, but the threat seems enormous and difficult to manage. Orphaned, silent, wounded, starving, some lives only get counted when they fall apart or bleed. In repeatedly telling us that even living things can rot, early modern ballads and *Macbeth* also toy with new models of authority, punishment, redemption, and incorporation. Transforming pictures of household space and communal limits, they unveil settings like the "poor country" over which Ross mourns, where a failure to love or to see can convert a safe spot into a grave or a battlefield.

Freaks and Fascists

If *Macbeth* and contemporary ballads uncover what Kevin Lewis O'Neill calls a "shifiting rapport" between the dead and the living, we can also detect in such artifacts the outlines of a new dynamic between the state and its members, such that some people stay hidden or scattered, at least until death reduces them to waste, dust, or mud.[6] We learn, for instance, that the Midwife of Poplar's household lacks proper surveillance: children are left in charge there, hunger rages, decay seeps in, and vermin creep about bodies that have been left unburied. Accurate headcounts become impossible in a home overrun with spoiling fleshy things, and the meat and cheese

6 Drew Gilpin Faust describes how civil violence "violates prevailing assumptions about life's proper end about who should die, when and where, and under what circumstances" (4; qtd. in O'Neill 513).

we hear about alongside predatory rats and tiny children are all part of the mess stuffed inside the Midwife's wretched household. The imprecision in knowing whether there are "two or three" other bodies in the Midwife's cellar signals carelessness as well as power, the disarray collapsing animals and people, confusing appetites, and reclaiming what had been discarded as garbage. Ultimately, though, the casual violence serves a purpose: we can trust that the things inside the home will fade away slowly and quietly, and cruelty can hide its purposes and effects, its terror and its reach. The "bare life" Giorgio Agamben describes has its double in "bare death" according to O'Neill, because forgotten beings also die unseen, the meager information about their ends a match for the silence surrounding their lives.[7]

Shakespeare invites his audience to consider the means by which power promotes "bare life" and "bare death" by putting together the image of the baby Lady Macbeth lovingly cradles and then destroys alongside the grouping of broken twigs and subjects Malcolm employs to win back Scotland's throne. Sovereign power can bring life into being as a way to sustain itself, and it can even revive dead or dying things, although such beings remain harmless, fractured, and noiseless. Macbeth's butchery is unable to stay their approach or detect their secret advances, but Shakespeare's staging gives non-being a place, a history, and a clear fate.

Lady Macbeth's dead baby is thus just one early example, a strangely vital and carefully expunged one. Indeed, the expectant image of the innocent child (what Lee Edelman calls the "fascism of the baby's face" [*No Future* 75]) is subjected to repeated assault in *Macbeth*, where children are left for dead in ditches, murdered while trying to run away, brought into view only long enough to be held to the breast before their brains are dashed out (1.7.58) or, like Siward's son, allowed to ripen and then die in service to the state.[8] There is no future here, no healthy picture of generativity in the play, Malcolm's beguiling performance as next-in-line another version of a younger generation mostly left with the unhappy choice not to pretend to be alive. Edelman's model needs revision, however, for alongside the dejected baby's face is the curious face of non-being catalogued by the range of dead and dying things

7 O'Neill's ideas about "bare death" are drawn from the model of "bare life" supplied by Giorgio Agamben (2003).

8 That society sometimes orchestrates this kind of collapse of the future is explored in *No Future* by Lee Edelman; in "Against Survival," Edelman discusses the ways children and death are linked rather than opposed in *Hamlet.* For broader considerations of the state's role in prescribing the divisions between viable beings and nonviable ones—legal versus illegal members of society, aliens versus citizens—see Roberto Esposito.

in *Macbeth*, an inertia variegated in its outlines as living things in Shakespeare's play are made to gradually expire or waste away. When creatures die in *Macbeth* they do not disappear; if they rot they also continue to exert a hold on other living things around them. "What bloody man is that?" Duncan asks at the outset of *Macbeth* (1.2.1), and his question signals a pervasive curiosity about bodies which crowd around the living and take their power from their proximity to the grave. "Who would have thought [Duncan] to have had so much blood in him?" Lady Macbeth finally wonders, because the king's hold on her imagination is tied to his extended withdrawal, his almost endlessly protracted ending.

Dead things are not humbled or abased or abjected, but kept in view in *Macbeth*, forbidden to dissolve completely. Battered but not despised, they hover and sometimes retain their shape, and although they threaten Macbeth as much as the image of the unborn child, the future the baby encapsulates is no match for the spectre of common life which the dead seem to conjure and inhabit. Often there is no need for reanimation, and we are reminded that the boy left in charge in *The Midwife's Lament* does not rescue the babies he knows about but simply keeps track of their whereabouts. "Unstable," "nonteleological," "mongrel" forms of being, like the "restless," "post-human hybrid" or model of "freakish becoming" which Jeffrey Jerome Cohen sees in medieval monsters (20),[9] such fugitive forms of life can persist in settings which have begun to reconfigure walls and bounds and the families inside them. Other architectural tools are provided by disease, poverty, famine, and similar disasters which rob communities without completely destroying them, reestablishing how people live together.

Dying/Rising Gods

"New gorgons" (2.3.74) show their faces alongside old ones in *Macbeth,* Scotland's scenery a patchwork of what Ross calls "[s]trange images of death" (1.3.97), including, Duncan's "drenched" and "spongy" guards (1.7.69, 72)—submerged in "downy sleep," "death's counterfeit" (2.3.78)—Lady Macbeth's remembered murdered baby, as well as, her mourned father, Macbeth's headless corpse, and the witches' "withered" forms, which make them "look not like th' inhabitants o'th'earth" (1.3.29–40).

9 Although the fascinating insights of medievalists who study stones, dreamers, and monsters have not been greatly extended by early modern scholars, Laurie Shannon's posthuman readings of Shakespeare propose important new avenues for investigation.

In addition, there is Macduff's son—an "egg"—who tells his mother about his killing (4.2.88), the traitor who reclaims his life with honour as he awaits execution, and even Duncan's "holy" wife, "oft'ner upon her knees than on her feet," who "[d]ied every day she lived" (4.3.110–111). Meat without sauce (3.4.36), such "quasi-objects," are remains that somehow remain, overlooking infirmity, circumventing ruin.[10]

Mantegna's *Dead Christ* offers a visual analogue to these still lives, its view of a god arrayed on a slab organised by the same perspective that pulls him upright (Figure 1). We can put Mantegna's image next to those of Duncan's corpse, Banquo's ghost, and Edward's unseeen figure in *Macbeth*, each of these images equivocal in its powers to awe and astonish and transform its audience. In Mantegna's painting, Christ's energies seem untapped, yet his stiffening flesh overwhelms the bodies of the mourners gathered around him, their grief a lifeless thing next to the unmoving object of their devotion, the cavernous space they inhabit more empty than the shell encasing a holy ghost. "Christ occupies space differently from the living," Willard Speigelman observes.[11] Such a clash of forms of being can make the viewer wonder: What is the limit of life? Does it ever finally end, or merely fan out? Shakespeare makes us wonder, too. In the absence of brain scans or monitors to detect the faintest of heartbeats, he provides Lear with only a mirror and feather to catch Cordelia's breath. Other than Polonius's smelly carcass, the playwright more typically leaves his audience with a trove of more ambiguous non-beings, Antony's bloated shape trailing Cleopatra's sympathetic handling, and Desdemona's marble cold, which repels her husband long before he finally kills her. The fledgling projects of early modern demographers and political economists to measure growth, grasp illness, and plan for the future were no doubt thwarted by these lifeless beings who continued to take up space and interrupt renewal, like

10 I borrow the term from Lucinda Cole, who puts sick people and rats together as active carriers of disease and abjected parts of the household in the early modern period.

11 According to Willard Speigelman, "[i]f intended for an altarpiece, we still don't know how, or from what angle, Mantegna might have wished his viewers to see the picture." There is a tradition of paintings of the dead Christ featuring his entombment or the deposition from the cross, and Julia Kristeva provides a psychoanalytic reading of Holbein's *Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520–1522) which links this work with Mantegna's. "Does Holbein forsake us," Kristeva asks, "as Christ, for an instant, had imagined himself forsaken?" "Or does he, on the contrary, invite us to change the Christly tomb into a living tomb, to participate in the painted death and thus include it in our own life, in order to live with it and make it live?" (105).

Malcolm's army of broken branches, a collection of energies that move and can strike, but do not grow.

What is "[f]air is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.11) in Mantegna's painting, too, where two kinds of being vie for attention. Seventeenth-century ballads often point to similar dismal spectacles which couple life with death and detail conditions where the confusions between the two states can themselves lead to murder, famine, or neglect. If the mourners take up little space in *Dead Christ*, the evidence offered by these ballads just as clearly suggests an emerging contruct of society as comprised by people we cannot always see and whose invisibility is often punishing.[12] Historian Mildred Campbell likewise observes that as the term "population" starts to replace the phrase "numbers of people" at this time, living creatures come into view as objects that can isolated, counted, ejected, transplanted, starved, or fed, while conceptions of the future take shape as dependent on which people are alive right now. Ideas about the social body borrow from notions governing the individual body, too. Macbeth's description of his cruelty in terms of "multitudinous seas incarnadine" (2.2.61) envisions a form of redress in seeing the body's chambers as porous, its bloodstreams pouring into wider channels and ever-enlarging pools. Ideas about the future made possible by this way of mapping being also take their shape from ideas about population control, so that the numbers can stay the same and the balance of the living and the dead remain unchanged.

There is, in other words, a politics of mortification. If Duncan is carefully *split open*, "his silver skin laced with his golden blood" (2.3.114) so that his wounds invite admiration for a luminous ruin, its incongruous beauty is juxtaposed with the crudely *split apart* hands and faces of Duncan's chamberlains, horribly disfigured and "[a]ll badged with blood" (2.3.99). Disfiguration and dismemberment thus rival iconography as a way to illustate and protect a community's allegiances and priorities as well as its decisions about who lives on, who gets disposed of. There is a formula by which death spreads, and in the manipulation of decay, new ideas about public space and political order also take shape. This rethinking of politics, biology, and affect operate in Shakespeare's representations of Duncan, Banquo, and Edward. Their portraits supply evidence of methods for ushering people in and out of collective life, suggesting varieties of "rebirth" and what we might call "redeath" which are as compelling and as damaging as Lady Macbeth's brutalising love.

12 For a recent parallel presented by American President Donald Trump's immigration policies, see Miriam Jordan.

We might counterpose Mantegna's radiant corpse with Shakespeare's mangy picture of disorderly and disinterred dead, for the ghostly presence of these figures in *Macbeth* permits Shakespeare's audience not only to see how bodies come together but also to grasp how they uneasily, perilously stay together. Relationships in the play are denoted by ever-changing conditions of safety and suspicion, corruption, loyalty, silence, and sterility, and protected by specific laws of increase, transmission, and ruin. The masque of kings descending from Banquo is matched by the spectacle of Siward's heirs expanded exponentially, and in both cases the states's strength is doubled by its numbers, its hold on the future calculated by how many individual members are willing to die in its service (5.7.78–79). Humanity is encoded and guaranteed by such bloodsharing and bloodshedding. Judith Butler notes that the state receives its army from the family, even as the family meets its dissolution in the state (36). But the state is also a being in flux, contingent, and subject to ebb and flow: the baby Lady Macbeth summons to life quickly returns to formlessless, and Duncan's reprieve from death—given his resemblance to her sleeping father—only briefly spares him from a more permanent rest. Discussing Sophocles' *Antigone*, Butler proposes that "'bloodshed' [is] that which must be remaindered for authoritarian states to be maintained." Antigone's predicament, Butler explains, makes us wonder "which social arrangements can be recognised as legitimate love, and which human losses can be explicitly grieved as real and consequential loss?" (24).

Yet we might also ask what it means to die if one's powers continue to feed the state or nourish the polity? A revised way of experiencing and calculating the losses Butler describes becomes obvious when we put *The Midwife's Lament* next to a picture of infanticide supplied in a 1633 ballad *No naturall Mother, but a Monster*, where the narrator, a young woman hung for her crimes, offers a confession from beyond the grave and a warning to her readers. Her beginnings, she first relates, promised good things: loving parents, beauty and favor—her appearance "in every part / made completely"—but wildness and wilfulness lead her to sin. Pregnant and abandoned by the child's father, the narrator secretly delivers a child and strangles it to avoid suspicion, seeing the unwanted baby as a "fault" and "foule fact." Notably, the young woman's mistress only notices her shrunken belly, not the pregant one; the baby is a surplus thing not meriting much attention and discounted not once but three times in this ballad, the first time by the mother who

kills it, the second time by the woman who only comments on the absence, and the third time by the song itself, which only considers its existence in passing, more interested in the young woman's plight and the varieties of shame she undergoes. This narrator compares herself negatively to "Savage creatures" like snakes and tygers who take better care of their young: the female snake protecting her children by hiding them in her belly, making herself pregnant a second time, while the "Tyger," "though by kind, truculent, truculent," is "wondrous tender" to her young. Unlike these animal examples, the narrator has defied the laws of God and of nature, and she remains an aberration before and after her crime, even when she uses her lament to warn other "Sweet Maidens" to "take heed" and avoid her mistakes. She is an exception to the rules which arrange and elevate life, as much an outcast or lost cause as the infant she murders.

The same aberrations organise social relations in the *Midwife's Lament*, however, because the Midwife is apparently only one of many strangers in Poplar. Although she provides no information about her crimes, her confession in the ballad notwithstanding, she has been overlooked for thirty years, during which time she has been permitted to fashion her household as a place of deliberate cruelty. This place is secret and disconnected, and only the voice of children—the baby's cries, the boy's directions—point out, explain, and ultimately correct the foul situation. The adult world is negligent, hard of hearing, slow to act and insensitive to pain, almost dead to the face of the future. The loathing of new life is profected onto the Midwife's horrible figure, while new life is at the same time rendered animal-like, weak, defenceless, and sickly. The Midwife is as bad or spoiled as the babies under her watch, but life tends to waste and, left on its own, nature spoils the things in its care. The state then assumes its power through outrage at carnage and garbage, as a refuge from, rather than an antidote to the ravages of the home.

Nowadays, such decay can be grasped in terms of a scientific language which specifies how diseases mutate and germs invade and atoms recombine; but even lacking such a vocabulary, early modern flesh still slowly rots, meat spoils, blood drains, and wounds sparkle. If cries and pain bring people together, the drab in a ditch in *Macbeth* seems as much a victim as the strangled baby beside her, the afterlife of her image portending no real future, either. In a 1630 woodcut (Figure 2) illustrating "Runaways Fleeing From the Plague," three skeletons encircle a group of townspeople fleeing the plague, the dead helpfully escorting the living out of the infected area. Like Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, there is nothing linking the living and the dead,

no shared touch or viewpoint, but there is nothing really separating them from each other either. The skeletons are prominent, not hidden or even lurking, and they are the same size and shape as living people, all of them equally denizens of the place. Appointed with an hourglass, one of the skeletons invites us to consider whether they are blocking the household or heralding the creation of a new setting. Decay happens, and this region has room for it.

Some early modern historians describe a "shift" from "epidemic to endemic" causes of death in an increasingly urbanised London, so that the end of life becomes inevitable rather than accidental or unpredictable, the result of living in a household, a necessary outcome which happens, as *No naturall Mother* explains, because animals are able to protect their young while humans sadly, miserably cannot. The increasing privacy of the family magnifies the contrast, allowing disease to be contained in and by separate households rather than spread across them, such that "everyday violence" might erupt within and be caused by domestic space.[13] Close ties become ones that strangle or starve, and intimate settings are ones that deplete and conceal. Even worse is what happens when someone is completely obscured by the household. "Truculent, truculent," the maid in *No naturall Mother* is more cruel than "Savage creatures" as well as an early and unmourned casualty. In contrast, the Midwife of Poplar has her own household and is only exposed when she goes outside.

A woodcut from 1655 entitled *Nine Images of the Plague in London* (Figure 3) discloses these new dimensions of London as a site of estrangement and evacuation. Nine panels detail the systematic replacement of the quick with the dead. The only apparent industry is carpentry to build coffins in which to place the dead as well as produce the many carriages and ships which transport the living away. Civil order is clear, but preoccupied with shutting down homes and streets, and carefully separating the living bodies from corpses. In some ways, the image describes the Golden Age Macbeth reminisces about, a world in which the dead can be safely and securely stowed; but the faces of the living are blank, hidden from us, and unimportant. There is no other reason for their living except to take care of the dead, and no motive for authority or use for power, except to guarantee that the dismissal, transport, and shut-down are neatly and completely accomplished.

A 1672 ballad entitled *Bloudy news from Germany* offers another account of the social engineering process whereby weak people are removed by the same process that

13 I draw on the term "everyday violence" from Nancy Scheper-Hughes' study of motherhood in Brazil. For an account of early modern conditions of everyday life, illness, and death, see Paul Griffiths et al.

eliminates the wicked. At the outset of *Bloudy news*, the audience is told that—unlike songs about love or war—the harms recounted here are deliberate, carefully planned, and genocidal. We first hear that a rich Clergy Man wants to convert the beggars who live in his town into fuel to generate "revennue" for him. "[N]ot worth a penny," he claims, these people are instead like "rats and Mice" who "[e]at up all my sustenance / and nothing give to me," so he collects them in a barnyard and burns them to death. Yet God hears the cries of "these harmless men" and afterwards afflicts the Clergy Man with vermin who infest his home and waste his stores; these rats and mice also act like ghosts "haunt[ing] all the rooms about / the Chamber where he lay." There results from this devastation no human justice or human knowledge, however, no new community, no vision, or restoration or renewal or drop of milky human kindness. That retribution is delivered by "vermin" merely suggests that the poor disdained as worthless recover some power but not their humanity in rising up to punish the Clergy Man. Converted first into "fewel" and then by God into lowly creatures, the beggars are neither rescued nor redeemed. There is no trace of human life at the end of the ballad. "[G]naw[ing] his Coat of arms," "and ever where they found his name / Of Letters" leaving "none," the rich Clergy Man's awful purpose is fulfilled, and poor people are eradicated.

Who is blamed, who can heal, who can punish, and who gets rewarded are dramatically reconfigured when life and death assume new guises and different modes of activity. *Bloudy news* does not encourage the audience to think about the victims' names, their thoughts, or their surprises; but the vermin who replace the poor and haunt their killer after their deaths have moral authority and can enjoy success, even if they do not spread beyond the precincts or survive to reproduce themselves. They also have an important role to play as agents of the state, power rearing its head by creeping on the ground and scurrying behind the walls, weaponising pestilence and decay. The ballad makes no call for more food, better oversight, Christian charity, or perhaps a more attentive God who hears people before their deaths. Instead, *Bloudy news* imagines the state as employing the weak to punish the strong without envisioning a way to make the weak less so. That vermin are no longer evil (if still poisonous) is really the only transformation.

Fuzzy math accompanies fuzzy ontology, and the reclassifications at work in these ballads underscore the way that "questions of population were very much on the minds of people in the seventeenth century" (169–170), as Campbell notes. She also cites the reports which circulated in contemporary broadsides detailing

how growing swarms of people threatened order, health, and public safety. In one example we hear: "Our multitudes like too much blood in the body do infect our country with plague and poverty . . . our land hath brought forth, but it hath not milk sufficient in the breast thereof to nourish all those children which it hath brought forth" (174). Similar references to milk and blood in *Macbeth* echo these fears, just as the scriptural allusions in broadsides which Campbell explores can also be linked to Shakespeare's play, one of them even duplicating Malcolm's directions to his makeshift army: "If thou beest much people, get thee up to the woods and cut trees for thyself in the land of the Perezites and of the Giants" (175). The danger posed by the poor as well as their swelling numbers and disguised appearance are what convert the desperation of the masterless men whom Macbeth interviews into a credential; but the wastage sometimes provided political thinkers like John Gaunt and William Petty with reasons, in turn, to reconsider whether a large and growing population was a measure of a society's health or failure.[14] The way that dead things are immune and incorruptible—carriers of disease no longer subject to its ravages—reminds us that those things that make us human have little to do with keeping us alive.

The ballads under review here suggest that this state of rootlessness also characterises the narrow space between the living and the dead, as well as between the human and the inhuman, or the messy forces of pollution and the even hand of justice. A population of uncertain beings was expanding in the seventeenth century, and the numbers of the poor and homeless increasingly included apprentices, servants, prostitutes, and sailors; actually, according to Patricia Fumerton, the percentage of these people who comprised England's population might have been as high as fifty percent (xii–xiv). In Macbeth's interview with the hired men, we learn that the actions of these nameless agents appear random and motiveless, "reckless," and "spite[ful]" (3.1.108–110). Yet their restlessness constitutes a kind of strength, and they can successfully come together to deliver a blow.

At the same time, however, the home assumes a new purpose as a site of anonymity and segregation, a perfect place for discarding unwanted things or losing sight of orphaned creatures. Inside this space, the Midwife of Poplar almost escapes notice, and evidence of her cruelty merely piles up. Pelling's explorations of domestic

14 See Paul Slack, Margaret Pelling, and Graham Hammill, who explores how the state "uses the biological sciences to assert and maintain control of individual bodies, on the one hand, and entire populations, on the other" (86).

settings corroborate this picture, describing the seventeenth-century household as generating a "more precise definition of public areas and instituting separate spaces even under the same roof" (167).[15] The kind of social alienation produced by disease became something the individual household could easily channel or replicate. In another version of the Poplar story called *The Injured children*, the starving boy and girl are the ones crying rather than actively summoning help. The suffering is more widespread, and this ballad even begins with a panoramic condemnation of its audience: "OH! what a wicked Age is this / we Wretches do live in, / How prone we are to Wickedness, and to commit each Sin." The fairy tale figures of Hansel and Gretel do not have to leave home in this story in order to find redress or escape the wicked, but now there are six poor children's carcasses buried in the cellar, and the reason for their deaths is not neglect but a prior arrangement with parents who want to rid themselves of bastards. One of the babies, miraculously, is alive, but no one is there to retrieve it.

In still another ballad version, this one called *The Bloody minded Midwife*, we hear more about the discovery of the victims and less about the awful conditions surrounding their deaths. Endowed with a "heart of stone" the audience's ignorance is again represented as a contributing factor: "Full three and Thirty Years ago, / the Midwife did begin, / And ever since, for ought we know, / she has been Murdering." This time, when the young boy and girl alert the neighbors that they are starving, "Officers and other Men/did open straight the door" to discover "six or seven more bodies" buried in the cellar. Neighbors register the shock rather than do families, and mothers merely hover briefly at the beginning of the ballad, their wombs places of birth and separation. Only the state—in the figures of "Officers" and "other Men"—weakly intervenes in processes of decomposition and recomposition. Yet, grouped together, these ballads also indicate how this state slowly evolves and spreads even as it neglects and punishes, uniting people through suffering rather than a shared history or common language. Perhaps these ballads have important consequences, too, helping to transform early modern thinking about

15 Pelling's work uncovers the beginnings of public health initiatives, where interests in recording the numbers of births and deaths are understood as ways of assessing the health of the social body, its ways of engineering growth, prosperity, hope, and the future (166–168). It is not an innocent face of the unborn child which stands for the future, but the Bills of Mortality and provisions for the dead and pictures of unburied things which have more predictive value.

what kind of future to expect from a community intent on uncovering shadows merely in order to spread them.

"Be Safely Thus"

A 1625 woodcut representing *The City as a maiden welcoming back the people who had deserted London during the plague* (Figure 4) seems like a happy counterweight to the pictures of urban decay, widespread loss, and deepening alienation we find in many contemporary ballads. Lady's Macbeth's murderous embrace can be displaced by the expansive caress imagined in this woodcut, the size of the woman in the illustration dwarfing her surroundings, her reach commanding enough to include all of the recovered. Yet this image also imagines London as a collection of gates and doorways, empty of families or neighborhoods, although accessible to all. Such a place has little to offer to those who return, except perhaps for the services of a single church. Like King Edward's touch in Act 4 of *Macbeth*—"Full of grace" and "strange virtue"—the woman's embrace is inviting, but not connective.

Many lowly things become visible and public in seventeenth-century ballads when they sicken or die, and so denying resources might be the most effective way for a town or home or kingdom to secure its borders and flex its values. The growth of a bureaucracy to manage this surveillance is accompanied by the increasingly narrowed focus of the nuclear family. Arthur Kinney makes a similar observation, noting that Macbeth's "cognitive composure" is achieved by sequestration and mathematics as well as by the establishment of borders and curtailment of attentions (26). "To be thus" is "nothing" "but to be safely thus" (3.9.47) when the project of sustaining life becomes aligned with the project of outlawing it, pushing out "derelict" versions.[16] Although the eradication of Macduff's family thus clears the way for a new setting for affiliation in England where King Edward's magic can regenerate an entire kingdom, the people Edward helps are kept alive without really being brought into existence. Rather than being bound together, they have simply been cured of disease: no blood is shared or spilled in this process, and the social body remains a dismembered and disordered thing, with no common language, no linked meanings, and no planned future. Individual subjects take shape in this world without being products of families or traditions; instead, they are collections

16 I take this term from Mitchell (xi).

of sympathies and ailments, bundles of concerns that run close to the surface, victims with needs and pains and fears that only go skin-deep. Only their sufferings are things they hold in common and, of course, the experience of being without. Like the ballad infants buried in the cellar, silent and fearsome, these people are only as alive as a bad dream.

Perhaps the broken twigs Malcolm amasses into an army in Act 5 of *Macbeth* provide a better example of this community, or at least a more positive one: any hole or gap in the arrangement can be easily repaired, after all, so that whatever pulls things apart does so only momentarily. If "an authentic politics" enforces what Roberto Esposito calls "a space of meaning" where "the production of life cannot be opened," nature reasserts itself in the marching mass Malcolm assembles, as Esposito also explains, arguing that "where the materiality of life unfolds," "something like political action can no longer emerge" (150).[17] Shakespeare also reminds us, however, that the "materiality of life" may not only *unfold*: it might crawl or stumble, hide in a corner, or turn itself into a ball. Macbeth's severed head is a rough icon, not a broken one, and babies can be revived so that they can be murdered again. The state that mortifies itself may finally come to resemble another *Dead Christ*, sprawled out in front of us, immune to our sufferings, safely undisturbed by our grief.

Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio. *State of Exception*. Trans. Kevin Attell. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Bloudy news from Germany or the peoples misery by fame. EBBA. University of California, n.d. Web. 3 Jan 2019. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/30183/citation

Butler, Judith. *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.

Campbell, Mildred. "Of People either too Few or too Many: The Conflict of Opinion on Population and its Relation to Emigration." In *Conflict in Stuart England: Essays in Honour of Wallace Notestein*. Eds. Aiken, William A., and Basil D. Henning. New York: New York University Press, 1960. 169–202.

17 Esposito's description of sovereign power seems equally apt: "He who has been freed from communal obligations or who enjoys an originary autonomy or successive freeing from a previously contracted debut enjoys the conditions of *immunitas*, a way of thinking about how we are not only constituted by our relations but dispossessed by them" (xi).

Cohen, Jeffrey Jerome. *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.

Cole, Lucinda. "Of Mice and Moisture: Rats, Witches, Miasma, and Early Modern Theories of Contagion." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 10.2 (2010): 65–84. <10.153/jem.2011/0007>

Dolan, Frances. *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England, 1550–1700*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994.

—. "Mopsa's Method: Truth Claims, Ballads, and Print." *The Huntington Library Quarterly* 79.2 (2016): 173–185.

Edelman, Lee. "Against Survival: Queerness in a Time That's Out of Joint." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 62.2 (2011): 148–169.

—. *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.

Esposito, Roberto. *Bios: Biopolitics and Philosophy*. Trans. Timothy Campbell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

Faust, Drew Gilpin. The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying." *Journal of Southern History* 67.1 (2001): 3–38.

Fumerton, Patricia. *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Gowing, Laura. "Secret Births and Infanticide in Seventeenth Century England." *Past and Present* 156 (1997): 87–115.

Griffiths, Paul, J. Landers, M. Pelling, and R. Tyson. "Population and Disease, Estrangement and Belonging, 1540–1700." In *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*. Ed. Clark, P. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000. 195–234.

Hammill, Graham. "Miracles and Plagues: Plague Discourse as Social Thought." *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*. 10.2 (2010): 85–104.

Hehmeyer, Paxton. "The Social Function of the Broadside Ballad; or, a New Medley of Readers." *EBBA*. University of California, n.d. Web. 23 Dec 2018. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/page/social-function-of-the-ballad>

Ichikawa, Mariko. "What To Do With a Corpse? Physical Reality and the Fictional World in Shakespearean Theatre." *Theatre Research International* 29.3 (2004): 201–215.

Jordan, Miriam. "Many Families Split at Border Went Untallied." *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 17 Jan 2019. Web. 18 January 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/17/us/family-separation-trump-administration-migrants.html>

Kinney, Arthur. "Macbeth's Knowledge." In *Shakespeare Survey.* Ed. Holland, P. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 11–26.

Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia.* Trans. Leon S. Rudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

Mallin, Eric S. *Inscribing the Time: Shakespeare and the End of Elizabethan England*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.

Mitchell, J. Allen. *Becoming Human: The Matter of the Medieval Child*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.

"No natural Mother, but a Monster." *EBBA*. University of California, n.d. Web. 3 Jan 2019. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/36049/xml>

O'Neill, Kevin Lewis. "There is No More Room: Cemeteries, Personhood, and Bare Death." *Ethnography* 13.4 (2012): 510–530.

Parker, Dorothy. *Health, Civilization, and the State: A History of Public Health from Ancient to Modern Times.* New York: Routledge, 1999.

Pelling, Margaret. "Skirting the City? Disease, Social Change, and Divided Households in the Seventeenth-Century Metropolis." In *Londonopolis: Essays on the cultural and Social History of Early Modern London*. Eds. Griffiths, Paul, and Mark S. R. Jenner. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000. 154–175.

Scott, Caitlin. "Birth Control and Conceptions of Pregnancy in Seventeenth Century England." *Retrospectives* 2 (2013): 73–85.

Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. *Death Without Weeping: The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

Shakespeare, William. *The Norton Shakespeare.* Ed. Greenblatt, Stephen, Walter Cohen, Jean E. Howard, Katharine Eisaman Maus, Gordon McMullan, and Suzanne Gossett. 3rd ed. New York: Norton, 2015.

Shannon, Laurie. "The Eight Animals in Shakespeare; or, Before the Human." *PMLA* 124.2 (2009): 372–379.

Slack, Paul. *Plenty of People: Perceptions of Population in Early Modern England*. Stenton Lecture: University of Reading, 2011.

Sofer, Andrew. "'Take Up the Bodies': Shakespeare's Body Parts, Babies, and Corpses." *Theater Symposium* 18 (2010): 135–248.

Speigelman, Willard. "Mantegna's Singular Jesus." *The Wall Street Journal*. 10 Nov 2007. Web 6 Aug 2020. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB119464168208888257>

Traub, Valerie. "Jewels, Statues, and Corpses: Containment of Female Erotic Power in Shakespeare's Plays." *Shakespeare Studies* 20 (1988): 15–38.

The Bloudy minded Midwife. Containing an Account of the many Infants whom she Murthur'd. EBBA. University of California, n.d. Web. 3 Jan 2019. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/22227>

The Injured Children, OR, The Bloudy Midwife. EBBA. University of California, n.d. Web. 3 Jan 2019. <http://ebba.english.ucsb.edu/ballad/20808>

Zimmerman, Susan. *The Early Modern Corpse and Shakespeare's Theater*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007.

Figures

Figure 1. *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, ca. 1470–1478, by Andrea Mangtegna. Public Domain.

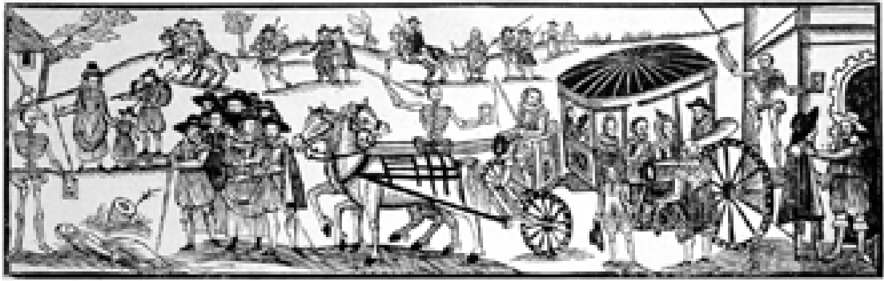

Figure 2. A woodcut from “A looking glasse for City and Countrey,” printed by H. Gosson in 1630 and sold by E. Wright. Credit: Wellcome Collection (CC BY 4.0) < https://wellcomecollection.org/works/wuhtpjqa>

Figure 3. Nine images of the plague in London, 17th century. Credit: Wellcome Collection (CC BY 4.0) < https://wellcomecollection.org/works/cjhjj46y>

Figure 4. "London welcomes home her runaways," taken from a woodcut in Henry Petowe's *The Countrie Ague* (1625). Credit:Wellcome Collection (CC BY 4.0) < https://wellcomecollection.org/works/myt22twu>

Contributor Details

Elizabeth Mazzola is a Professor of English at The City College of New York, where she teaches classes on medieval and early modern literature. She has written several essays on Shakespeare, Spenser, Sidney, and early modern women writers, and among her five books is *Women and Mobility on Shakespeare's Stage*, published by Routledge in 2017.