

## Historical Nexus: Bewitching Nurses in Rupert Goold's Visual Medium of *Macbeth*

PAUL A. J. BEEHLER  
University of California, Riverside

This close reading and interpretation of the Early Modern concept of *beneficium* and *maleficium* explores the conflation of midwives and witches as it pertains to twenty-first century images in the PBS production of *Macbeth*. An exegesis of Rupert Goold's 2010 film *Macbeth* starring Patrick Stewart and Kate Fleetwood is at the centre of this analysis. Ultimately, Goold uses the image of the witch in the film to draw a close and historically accurate connection to midwives. More to the point, the image of the nurse as an expression of the seventeenth century midwife would have colored a seventeenth century audience's understanding of the witches' prophecy because of Macduff's close affiliation with midwives – he was 'untimely ripped' from his mother's womb. An historical appreciation of the role of midwives is aided by recognizing that midwives were almost exclusively present during live births involving Caesarean sections in the Early Modern period. Shakespeare's audience would have inherently understood this stark connection between the midwife and witch (as has been noted in recent scholarship). Goold's twenty-first century use of the nurse/midwife image, then, reasserts a historical subtext that further complicates the problematic nature of *Macbeth*. If Macduff is associated with the witches as Goold suggests, should an audience be satisfied with *Macbeth*'s fall at the hands of Macduff? Most audiences feel a sense of relief once the tyrant *Macbeth* is retired, but that emotional reaction might be misplaced. The question is a pivotal one that strikes at the heart of this problem play, though there are, of course, many unresolved problems and conflicts in *Macbeth*. This interpretation simply introduces one more complexity to consider.

Sometimes the genesis of historical movements can be distilled into a few powerful words from a seminal text. ‘Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live’ (Exodus 22: 18) states the *King James Bible*, or, perhaps closer to the source, ‘maleficos non patieris vivere’ (Exodus 22: 18) from the *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*. These four Latin words lay at the heart of an institutional movement against all manner of women who suffered the fate of being identified as witches, and the words could not have been far from the mind of the German Catholic clergyman Heinrich Kramer, when he penned the 1487 publication *Malleus Malificarum*.<sup>1</sup> This text from the early modern period gave rise to a powerful, charged, and highly visible articulation of several treatises that equated the midwife to a witch. Even though many of the early modern records that speak to the trials and proceedings surrounding witches and witchcraft are incomplete or simply missing, historians still broadly recognize that at least a thousand hangings of witches took place in England and, on continental Europe, perhaps as many as 100,000 witches were burned at the stake. Exactly how many midwives among these women were delivered to this fate is unclear, but what is clear is that Kramer’s text allowed for little ambiguity in naming midwives as witches when he titled chapter eleven in part one: ‘Quod obstetrices maleficae conceptus in vtere diuersis modis interimunt, aborsum procurant, et vbi hoc non faciunt, Dæmonibus natos infantes offerunt.’ The title of the chapter translated into English is startling because it tethers witches to midwives directly: ‘Because the witches who are midwives, of remote ways take away out of the midst the pregnancies in the uterus, and when they do not do this, they offer the live little children to devils.’ The most important words in this title for the purpose of my argument are *obstetrices* and *maleficae*. *Cassel’s Latin Dictionary* unambiguously translates the word *obstetrices* to the English word ‘midwives’. *Maleficae* is a more complicated word and has a number of nuanced translations, but the one word that gained traction from the inception of the *Malleus Malificarum* in the early modern period (and is noted in the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*) is ‘witches’. Kramer’s authoritative text was consulted throughout the fervour of the witchcraft trials and definitively established that midwives should not simply be looked upon with suspicion but should actively face the

<sup>1</sup> Heinrich [Kramer] Institoris and Jakob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487; rpt Nuremberg: Antony Koberger, 1494, etc.).

serious charges and penalties of witchcraft whenever appropriate.

While the very title of chapter eleven in part one of the *Malleus Malificarum* is jarring, the more provocative and deliberate connection forged between witches and midwives is made in the actual text: *sed ex hoc quòd maiora damna in his omnibus obstetrices Maleficæ procurant, prout Maleficæ poenitentes nobis et alijs, sæpius retulerunt, dicentes: Nemo fidei Catholicæ amplius nocet, quæ obstetrices. Vbi enim pueros nõ interimut, tunc quasi aliquid acturæ foris extra cameram infantes deferunt, et sursum in aëre eleuâtes, Dæmonibus offerunt.*<sup>2</sup>

A few key words and phrases in this longer excerpt from the *Malleus Malificarum* are especially poignant. That Kramer uses the nominative case for *obstetrices Maleficæ* is significant because the translation provides ‘midwives – witches’ as the subject of the clause. Midwives, then, are equated to witches, and both terms are given equal weight in the clause because of the application of the nominative case for both words. On a linguistic and cultural level, then, each term is synonymous with the other. In the *Malleus Malificarum*, ‘witch’ literally equals ‘midwife’. A most direct and powerful charge is then levelled specifically at midwives, *obstetrices*, with the line ‘*Nemo fidei Catholicæ amplius nocet*’ (‘No one does more harm to the Catholic faith’). A clearer attack on midwives, and the subsequent claim that midwives are witches, could not be asserted more powerfully or directly. Keeping in mind that the *Malleus Malificarum* was a pervasive text during the early modern period and arguably the authoritative text when investigating charges of witchcraft, one can reasonably infer that early modern spectators in Shakespeare’s audience would have been at least tangentially aware of the intense association between midwives and witches.

Perhaps, then, one should not be surprised when critics like Kristen J. Sollee continue to comment on this historically defined aspect of the midwife: ‘Because they dealt with the mysterious, liminal space between birth and death, sickness and health – and specialized in the needs of women – midwives were viewed as suspect not only by the church

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<sup>2</sup> ‘But besides this the midwives who are witches cause even greater damage, as repentant witches have often reported to us and to others, saying: “No-one does more harm to the Catholic faith than witches.” For when they do not destroy the children, then as an alternative they carry the babies out of the room, and lifting them up into the air, offer them to demons.’

and state, but also by patients and their families.<sup>3</sup> Recently, as Sollee concedes, some scholars have suggested that the characterizations in the *Malleus Malificarum* were not broadly circulated among the lower classes in England because the text had recognition only among the educated in the circles of law and medicine. Still, the punishment for witchcraft could carry the very public and dramatic death penalty of hanging in England and burning in continental Europe. In light of the public and very gruesome nature of the executions, even an illiterate population had to exercise a degree of awareness and caution when interacting with anyone who had uncommon knowledge, as was the clear case with midwives. These women, of course, often specialized in medicinal services for women, services that included abortions and birth control. They traded in the currency of forbidden reproductive knowledge.

Several sources within literary criticism further establish, fairly clearly, the close affiliation between witches and midwives during the early modern period, but no such association has been recognized in scholarship between the twenty-first century incarnation of the midwife, specifically the appropriated image of the twentieth-century nurse, and the witches in Rupert Goold's *Macbeth*. While absent in current criticism, such a consideration and close reading of Goold's film adaptation *Macbeth* can potentially help illuminate the position of the weird sisters in the text as well as the film. This article, then, is an attempt to address the absence in criticism by investigating Goold's significant decision to cast the witches as twentieth century nurses, thereby re-introducing an established historical relationship shared between practitioners of medicine and witchcraft.

Witches, of course, were frequently associated with the medical profession in early modern England. Caroline Bicks, for example, succinctly notes this connection when she observes that the 'Acte concernynge phisycyons and surgions' (1512) 'addressed the concerns of two major groups: church authorities who feared that midwives would use witchcraft and incantations while delivering newborns; and a growing male medical establishment invested in regulating its membership'.<sup>4</sup> Religious authorities were concerned enough

<sup>3</sup> *Witches Sluts Feminists: Conjuring the Sex Positive* (Berkeley, CA: ThreeL Media / Stone Bridge Press, 2017), pp. 39–40.

<sup>4</sup> *Midwiving Subjects in Shakespeare's England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), p. 12.

about the close affiliation between witches and midwives to initiate legislation designed to address this concern, and that legislation can best be described as commonplace.<sup>5</sup> Not all critics, of course, are in agreement. Laura Shamas notes that there is a ‘tremendous variance in the trio’s dramatic representations [that] began around Shakespeare’s death in 1616’ (2) rather than a clear and singular association between the witch and midwife. In her studies of archetypes and *Macbeth*, Shamas only tangentially mentions how Hecate may have been affiliated with midwives.<sup>6</sup> While only suggested in passing, the point is an important one that helps establish a deeper understanding of the role played by the witch in the early modern theatre. Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English’s *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* perhaps presents a more substantive, and sometimes contested, argument than either Bicks or Shamas by exploring the powerful and cultural conflation that occurred between witches and midwives. Eclipsing all of these scholars, however, are Deborah Willis’s *Malevolent Nurture: Witch Hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England* and Thomas Forbes’s *The Midwife and the Witch*. Both of these texts culturally align the sixteenth-century midwife conclusively with the witch.

Some recent critics have argued that this seemingly close alliance between the midwife and the witch – specifically the arguments put forth by Margaret Murray, Deirdre English, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Thomas Forbes – should be consigned to the dustbins of the discredited. Chief among these critics is David Harley, who even goes so far as to suggest that ‘Undergraduate textbooks on witchcraft cite Forbes or Ehrenreich and English while thoughtlessly repeating outmoded prejudices about the murderous character of early modern midwifery’.<sup>7</sup> Harley suggests that the association between midwives

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<sup>5</sup> Caroline Bicks devotes a full chapter, ‘Stealing the Seal: Baptizing Women and the Mark of Kingship’, to ‘the contentious discourses of baptism by women and acts of witchcraft at the time of the play’s (*Macbeth*) production’. Bicks is not the only scholar who considers the concept of the witch-midwife, but she is representative of some of the recent insight that has been dedicated to the witch-midwife.

<sup>6</sup> ‘We Three’: *The Mythology of Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 2, 55–56.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Historians as Demonologists: The Myth of the Midwife-witch’, in Brian P. Levack (ed.), *New Perspectives of Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology* (London: Routledge, 2001), 49–74 (p. 68).

and witches during the early modern period has been overstated, and a correction is overdue. Even if this point is broadly conceded, which it is not, one is still compelled in the interest of good scholarship to acknowledge clear and unassailable historical facts. First, midwives were frequently tried and executed in a very public manner on the charge of witchcraft during the early modern period as noted in Sigmund Riezler's surveys.<sup>8</sup> Second, major and influential texts like Sprenger and Kramer's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1487) as well as Johannes Nider's *Formicarius* (circa 1473) unambiguously tether the midwife to the witch.<sup>9</sup> Third, official court reports penned no later than 1579 noted 'panels of women searchers whose function it was to investigate the bodies of accused female witches for the witch's or Devil's mark' were constituted 'from the ranks of 'honest matrons', 'women of credit' or midwives'.<sup>10</sup> It stands to reason that such practices had to have been occurring on a less formal and unrecorded basis well before 1579, so the practice of attaching midwives directly or indirectly to the early modern witch was fairly common even if large numbers of midwives were not directly prosecuted and executed as witches, as has been contended by Harley. To suggest that the lower classes in seventeenth century England would be blissfully unaware of any connection between midwives and witches as Harley intimates seems unlikely, even unfathomable. The extensive and pervasive documentation that draws some association between midwives and witches is simply incontestable even if the exact relationship between the two groups remains in contention and under scrutiny.

All of these authors who address the midwife-witch, while making important scholarly contributions in their own right and challenging a number of assertions, consider and situate to varying degrees the wise women and cunning folk within the early modern period without fully recognizing A.R. Braunmuller's key argument that reflects upon the

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<sup>8</sup> *Geschichte der Hexenprozesse in Bayern im Lichte der allgemeinen Entwicklung* (Stuttgart: J.G. Cotta, 1896), pp. 145, 166.

<sup>9</sup> *Incipit prologus Formicarij iuxta edic[i]onem fratris Joh[ann]is Nyder sacre theologie p[ro]fessoris eximij : qui vitam tempore concilij consta[n]ciens[is] basiliensiq[ue] duxit in humanis felicit[er]* (Cologne: Ulrich Zel, 1473).

<sup>10</sup> C. R. Unsworth, 'Witchcraft Beliefs and Criminal Procedure in Early Modern England', in Levack (ed.), *New Perspectives of Witchcraft, Magic, and Demonology*, 1-28 (p. 22). [Please correct page range here and in bibliography – this page range refers to Harley it seems.]

relationship between the witches and a post modern audience: 'As the sisters have lost their unthreatening operatic and comic qualities, they have resumed imaginative powers more akin to what they might have held for an early modern audience'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, twenty-first-century audiences, at least through Goold's live action theatrical performance and his eventual film adaptation, are enjoying a return to the early modern conception of the witch that Braunmuller comments upon, and this return is grounded in its deep and traditional connection between the witch and the midwife, an image that can be seamlessly interchangeable with the specific, and perhaps more easily accessible, twentieth-century traditional figure of the nurse.

Beyond the immediate discussion of the witch in academic circles, as has been noted in part in this brief survey of criticism, the image of the witch, for general public consumption, has enjoyed a resurgence in popular culture. One need not look any farther than J.K. Rowling and the Harry Potter series to confirm such an observation on an international stage. *Time* magazine reported as of May of 2013 that 500 million copies of the series had been sold, possibly making it the greatest commercial success in the history of book sales. Some may argue that Rowland's work is not principally about witches, but it is helpful to remember that the protagonists all attend 'Hogwarts School of *Witchcraft* and Wizardry' (emphasis mine). All of this is to say that witches today are culturally present, recognized, and in vogue. This example of the witch in popular culture, while the most visible, is by no means an isolated one. *American Horror Story* dedicates not one but two seasons to the witch: 'Roanoke' in 2016 and 'Coven' in 2013–2014. Likewise, video games as a genre have also seen the rise of the witch. *Town of Salem*, originally released by Blank Media Games at the end of 2014, has enjoyed a strong following. Goold seems to be unique in re-introducing this historical connection between the witch and the midwife. Another recent film adaptation of the play directed by Justin Kurzel and starring Michael Fassbender, released in 2015, associates the witches with a child and infant but never makes an overt connection to midwives and childbirth. The current fascination of witches, and specifically the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, continues to capture twenty-first century imaginations, and one

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<sup>11</sup> 'Introduction', *Macbeth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 1–93 (p. 22).

need only consider the dozens of productions that were performed in 2017 and 2018 that foreground the role of the witch. A number of productions, like the San Jose Youth Shakespeare's 'Nine Witches of Macbeth', underscore in particularly dramatic fashion the sustained intrigue surrounding the witches.

Much of the argument presented in this article, from the perspective of history and Shakespeare's text, is considered in my companion piece 'Macduff's Amorphous Identity: Equivocation and Uncertainty as Defining Markers in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*' in which it is argued that 'Macduff's mother and that fictional history [of the witches' possible interaction as midwives in the birthing chamber of Macduff] remain an enigma. So too are the witches shrouded in mystery. As a result, we do not know who Macduff is.'<sup>12</sup> Both there and not there, the witch assumes an elusive role that stubbornly resists definition and articulation, but understanding the witches and the history of the witches on an individual and societal level is critical to understanding the uttered prophecies. Debapriya Sarkar notes as much in the following passage:

The different temporal and genealogical concentrations of the two prophecies [relating to the hailing of Macbeth and Banquo] create tensions between multiple possibilities and singular certainty and shape Macbeth's and Banquo's responses. The prophecies directed to Banquo are futuristic, while the witches' predictions for Macbeth are limited to and realized in moments of presentness.<sup>13</sup>

Sarkar, and a number of other scholars, correctly consider the temporal aspects of the play as they relate to the prophecies and identity; however, one of the most crucial variables is only tangentially considered in the argument: the past. Macbeth intuitively knows that a temporal context is essential to understanding the witches' utterances, and he presses the witches for context: 'Say from whence / You owe this strange intelligence' (1.3.75-76). The history of the witches and their possible, even likely, identity as midwives reaches out to a time

<sup>12</sup> Paul Beehler, 'Macduff's Amorphous Identity: Equivocation and Uncertainty as Defining Markers in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*', *Revista Alicanto* 2 (2009): 36-50 (p. 49).

<sup>13</sup> "'To crown my thoughts with act': Prophecy and Prescription in *Macbeth*', in Ann Thompson (ed.), *Macbeth: The State of Play* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 83-106 (p. 90).

before the tragedy begins and raises questions about how audiences should interpret Macduff's actions. Of course, no answer to Macbeth's question is forthcoming, so identity and context remain as elusive as it is critical to interpretation.

This image of the midwife/nurse/witch embodies an ambiguity that represents the core attributes of Rupert Goold's PBS adaptation. The figures remain true to Shakespeare's equivocal qualities of the play, emphasizing and re-emphasizing that the witches have created a place of equivocation wherein what is foul is fair and what is fair is foul. Throughout the film, the witches gingerly dance between the identities of real world nurses and supernatural agents in a manner that underscores the historic position of nurses during the early modern period. This is the very spirit of ambiguity Shakespeare establishes in *Macbeth* through the image and function of the witch.<sup>14</sup> Rebecca Lemon provides a potent insight into this very nature of the witches when she notes that 'the immaterial categories of truth and falsity lose their definition: the witches' speeches defy such rigid characterization, hovering between accurate prophecy and alluring deceit' (103).<sup>15</sup> This resistance to definition affects the interpretation of every facet of the witch in *Macbeth* and reflects the dualistic and vulnerable role of a marginalized, historical witch uncomfortably positioned between healer and weird sister.

*Macbeth*, notably a play that elevates the presence of the witch figure, is imbued with and perhaps even defined by questions.<sup>16</sup> Even

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<sup>14</sup> Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (New York: Methuen, 1987), is very direct in observing how even the basic aspects of the witches in terms of gender are blurred. Ambiguity at the level of gender interpretation can be extended to many aspects of the witches including their position in early modern society and their function in the play.

<sup>15</sup> *Treason by Words* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), p. 103.

<sup>16</sup> While many critics have considered *Macbeth* to be a problem play for many reasons, some of the more recent criticism considers the problems of politics, performance, structure, and religion. Interested scholars might consider some recent work on *Macbeth* and the multitude of problems, many of them unresolved, in the tragedy: Beatrice Batson (ed.) *Shakespeare's Christianity: The Protestant and Catholic Poetics of Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and Hamlet* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006), Donald Hedrick and Bryan Reynolds (eds), *Shakespeare without Class: Misappropriations of Cultural Capital* (New York: Palgrave, 2000), and Jan H. Bliss, *The Insufficiency of Virtue: Macbeth and the Natural Order* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996).

the opening lines of Shakespeare's tragedy begin with questions: 'When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?' (1.1.1-2). These questions, so carefully attached to the witches, yield to other, perhaps more pressing questions critics have had little choice but to consider as the play advances. What is the nature of the witches? Do they have supernatural powers? Are they merely marginalized women, as is the traditional historical conception of the widow or unmarried woman? The first scene, through rhetoric and image, ultimately gives rise to the fundamental ambiguity that is a defining quality of the tragedy. With little delay, it is the equivocal witch that speaks through an ambiguity that reflects her vital role: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air' (1.1.11-12). This double image that rests on the use of parallel structure conveys the generally opaque quality of the play that impedes clarity and vision throughout the drama as repeatedly manifested in the witches and their cryptic prophecies. Macbeth, of course, later suffers from this lack of transparency when he utters the line 'If chance will have me king, why, / chance may crown me / Without my stir.' (1.3.143-144). In this moment, the protagonist himself points out that he should not have to invoke agency if in fact fate in its unequivocal and unyielding state is omnipotent, for fate determines outcomes without compromise, yet the would-be king still remains unsure of the path before him, so in the full course of time, he does ultimately and ruefully choose to act. This kind of apparent progression that takes place in fits and starts becomes fertile ground for the lack of transparency that overcomes and defines the text.

Shakespeare reinforces and then broadens the general and defining concept of dissonant ambiguity, the tension between what should be and what actually is, in the Second Scene of Act One with the image of the messenger. Duncan asks, 'What bloody man is that?' At this point, basic identities are again in question, and these identities are of no small consequence considering what is at stake: key information on a hotly contested battlefield. Uncertainty is compounded in the second scene with lines that yield a description of an image impossible to discern: 'Doubtful it stood, / As two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art' (1.2.10-12). As was the case earlier with Macbeth's uncertainty about how to act, doubt remains a defining quality in the play's action and thought. Shakespeare presents the image of two inseparable swimmers that cling to each other, and the

individual identities are effaced in the moment. Shakespeare's image and language present questions that do not readily provide answers. Context is key: the battle itself involves civil war, a conflict that blurs lines between families and friends. Into this significant confusion that hinges on doubleness and becomes a foundational aspect of the drama, Shakespeare considers yet another concept of deception and ambiguity: the role of a traitor.

All of these images speak to the general quality of ambiguity and doubleness that ground the play, but civil wars are a particularly powerful image because they involve armies and supporters who share a common background and so cling together in a violent struggle. Traitors involved in such conflicts become even more entangled in the ambiguous, so Shakespeare's reliance on such a figure in the reported speech becomes an excellent vehicle to communicate, as fully as possible, the thoroughly inherent and ambiguous nature that permeates all spaces of the play, but most especially (as I argue here) the witches. Not only the king but also the audience must ask who supports King Duncan. Who sides with the rebellion? It is precisely into this space that Shakespeare then forges his protagonist Macbeth, who expressly voices his concern about being dressed in borrowed robes, introducing yet another powerful image of deceit and ambiguity. All of these images and the use of double language mentioned briefly here are found in just the first two scenes; however, they are, as such, representative of the fundamental problems and questions that course through the tragedy.

*Macbeth* eschews clarity and transparency to embrace questions, even in the opening line. In this world inhabit the witches, the primary focus of this article, who become just one more extension and exploration of the ambiguity that manifests itself in Goold's adaptation of Shakespeare's text. They may, however, be the most influential extension of ambiguity as audiences attempt to interpret actions and assign motives. Are the witches agents of stability? Instability? Good? Evil? With whom are they aligned? Goold capitalizes on the overarching aspect of ambiguity when he places emphasis on the question of the witches and their specific association with Macduff by casting them in the distinguishing garb of twentieth-century nurses.

This visual medium of the nurse/witch introduces an intimate relationship between Macduff and the witches, suggesting a possible, but not verified, role of Macduff as an intermediary for the witches.

Macbeth's *ersatz* ally performs an extraordinary action in Act Five in that, in a rare moment devoid of ambiguity, he delivers the decisive and violent blow to Macbeth. To understand the identity of Macduff, then, is arguably integral to understanding the denouement of the tragedy itself, but the drama, steeped as it is in ambiguity, resists a clear recognition of Macduff's identity or what his actions actually signify. Unsurprisingly, more questions about Macduff's identity linger. Does Macduff act to create a more stable society? Does Macduff confront tyranny? Is Macduff an instrument of the witches? Of tyranny itself? On the other hand, should Macbeth be read as aligned with the witches and even an instrument of them? One might be tempted to answer 'yes' to some or even all of these questions, but the character Macduff and his intimate connection to the witches' prophecy raises, inevitably, the disruptive element of ambiguity that stubbornly resists yielding a clear interpretation. A simple 'yes' to these questions, it seems, eludes the audience to some extent.

Understanding the witches is a prerequisite to understanding Macduff and all of his actions. Women, at least in England, accused of witchcraft in the early modern period were often thought to employ the aid of familiars, like cats or other animals. In essence, the witch was believed to be able to wield influence over other creatures. This quality of the early modern witch is particularly interesting when the potential proximity between Macduff, Shakespeare's putative stabilizing force, and the witches is considered. The weird sisters – again, because of their historical and cultural position in the profession of medicine – may wield influence over Macduff just as witches wielded influence over familiars because of the nebulous circumstances surrounding Macduff's birth. The opaque circumstances surrounding Macduff's birth, a caesarian section, dramatically underscore the required presence of medical personnel like midwives and barbers within the birthing chamber. Macduff, like other familiars, is possibly placed in the witches' presence at a very intimate moment, his birth. After all, Shakespeare does not introduce any other possible midwives into the text that could potentially and directly be situated in Macduff's sphere. Is such a connection directly stated? No. That being said, an early modern audience would still likely entertain the question of Macduff's birth and the role of the witches as midwives during that moment because Shakespeare, through the invocation of the prophecy – 'All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter' (1.3.50) – places such

weight on the role of the witches and, by proximity of action and deed, the role of Macduff.<sup>17</sup>

Many of these issues of identity and witchcraft subtly but pervasively permeate much of PBS's 2010 production of *Macbeth* starring Sir Patrick Stewart, so a close reading of the film can help unearth how the witches operate.<sup>18</sup> Director Rupert Goold demonstrates a keen sensitivity to the witches and their role in his PBS production in part because he begins the film *not* with the traditional scene of the witches contemplating their plans but with a series of images that lead to King Duncan's inquiry, 'What bloody man is that?' (1.2.1). This displacement of lines and action forces the audience to consider even further Goold's decisions regarding the witches and their vaguely defined presence in the adaptation. Critics like Jonathan Ivy Kidd acknowledge the powerful opening sequence and the seminal role of the witches, but these same critics tend to overlook Braunmuller's observations about important questions surrounding identity and the significant relationship between midwives and witches. Kidd specifically states that the production of '*Macbeth* opened within the confines of a dingy white-tiled hospital operating room that could just as easily be the electroshock chamber in an insane asylum. The Three Witches, posing as nurses, offer a tantalizing entrance into this revival of betrayal, murder, and desire.'<sup>19</sup> Kidd does articulate a rudimentary association between the witches and nurses, and he is absolutely correct that the entrance of the trio is tantalizing, but it is so for many

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<sup>17</sup> This article is a companion piece to 'Macduff's Amorphous Identity: Equivocation and Uncertainty as Defining Markers in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*' (2009), an essay that examines and questions Macduff's role in *Macbeth*. The argument therein suggests a possible connection between the witches and Macduff in Shakespeare's text. Rupert Goold's adaptation, as I suggest and explore here, seems to make manifest that interpretation, to some extent, through the powerful visual image of a witch that is appropriately conflated with a twentieth century image of a western nurse.

<sup>18</sup> Rupert Goold's production of *Macbeth* has a rich history that 'originated at the Chichester Festival Theatre in England before appearing before appearing at the Brooklyn Academy of Music and moving to Broadway in 2008' (Shattuck C.9). Eventually, the production was memorialized in the PBS filmic version that was released in 2010. While all of the productions appear to be fairly consistent and similar in their aesthetic presentation, this essay focuses exclusively on the images captured in the 2010 PBS production.

<sup>19</sup> 'Performance Review of *Macbeth*', *Theatre Journal* 60.4 (December 2008): 664–65 (p. 664).

more reasons than merely introducing a ‘revival of betrayal, murder, and desire’. To this point, Kidd falls short relative to the insight A.R. Braunmuller lends. The point is not likely to be overstated: the intrigue that swirls around the witches involves inherent questions about identity and function that speak directly to, and indeed emphasize, the elements that situate *Macbeth* so completely in ambiguity.

Other critics, like David Belcher, recognize the essential role of the hybridized nurse/witch in the production, but the historic connection still remains largely unappreciated. Belcher points out that ‘Macbeth both fears and trusts these prophetic nurses; what they say “cannot be ill, cannot be good”. As these three go from nurturing to nasty in three brutal hours, it grows clear why director Rupert Goold has appropriated nursing’s trustworthy image for his witches: for Shakespeare’s murderous king, the lines between good and evil have become hopelessly blurred.’<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the lines of good and evil are blurred – a point that is echoed in the work of Rebecca Lemon and Arthur F. Kinney when they consider different aspects of equivocation. Goold’s use of the nurse, however, is *not* as Belcher suggests, a singular and unequivocal appropriation of ‘nursing’s trustworthy image’. Quite to the contrary, the appropriation of the twentieth century nurse, as noted earlier, is a powerfully direct association with the early modern midwife. Belcher’s reading, while convenient from a twenty-first century perspective, may be historically myopic and dismissive by discounting and even contradicting the early modern position of the witch in society and the role the witch assumes in Goold’s adaptation.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> ‘Macbeth’s Witches Recast as Nurses’, *American Journal of Nursing* 108.5 (May 2008): 24.

<sup>21</sup> *Macbeth* is a play that, because of the consistently resonant ambiguity, resists any singular interpretation; in all of this, though, the witch remains a central part to understanding the play and is prominent in many, perhaps most, productions. Arthur F. Kinney directly comments on the phenomenon of the witch and its relationship to Michel Foucault’s ideas about competing narratives as they relate to the body, or in the case I posit here, the witch’s body: ‘Each playgoer attends the same performance of the same play, and each has sensible, accurate, but quite divergent views of what is being shown onstage, drawing on different if simultaneous cultural forces and ideas. Sensory data are ordered and colored by the imposition of additional attitudes and data (from Scripture, court practices, Holinshed) to isolate different kinds of signals and different neurological processes, registering quite different thoughts, answering differing needs, and charging images with differing meanings that render any single meaning of the play – and even any single dominant meaning of the play – untenable.’

The 2010 film is quick to equate the witches with the ambiguity that critics have commented upon. For example, even before the first line of Goold's production is delivered, a series of introductory images, some of which Kidd notes, quickly dart over the screen.<sup>22</sup> All of the images are brief, perhaps less than a second in duration. Interspersed between these rapid images is a unifying shot of a patient being transported through a chaotic corridor. These establishing shots, while ephemeral, are nevertheless essential because the audience is introduced even in the opening second of the film to what will ultimately be the ubiquitous image of the nurse and the close relationship that exists between early modern witches and an incipient medical field as signified by Goold's nurses.

The PBS production begins with a main title screen that reads 'Macbeth'. During the first few moments of the main title, disembodied light footfalls with accompanying echoes can be detected. The cadence of the walking is brisk and, much like a conductor sub-vocally counting out a rhythm before an orchestra springs to life, the pulse of the steps acts like a metronome to introduce the varied, but often fast paced, theme music for the film. One can quickly surmise that the beats of the footfalls belong to one of three disruptive nurses who deliver the lines reserved for the witches in Shakespeare's text. This detail is important because it underscores the fundamental importance of the witches' roles prior to the film's commencement. The actual sound

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*Lies Like Truth: Shakespeare, Macbeth, and the Cultural Moment* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2001), pp. 28–29. According to Kinney (and notably consistent with Stanley Fish), the witch in the play signifies different ideas to different people, and the presence of the witch dramatically touches upon any interpretation of the play. After all, a witch begins all action of the play with not a statement but a question: 'When shall we three meet again?' (I.1.1), and it is the concept of uncertainty intimated through the prism of the witch that helps inform an understanding of the tragedy.

<sup>22</sup> Stuart Hampton-Reeves astutely points out that 'the witches were there. They were not obvious at first in the frantic bustle of the opening, but Duncan signaled that the Captain should be left alone now that he had got crucial intelligence from him, and everyone left the stage except three nurses': 'Shakespeare in Performance and Film', in *The Shakespeare Handbook*, ed. Andrew Hiscock and Stephen Longstaffe (New York: Continuum, 2009), 112–28 (p. 125). Hampton-Reeves suggests that 'these were effective ways to disorientate an audience over-familiar with the play', but such a conclusion may be premature. An audience familiar with the role of the midwife and its conflation with the figure of a witch would likely appreciate Goold's choices and even praise his historic consideration.

of the physical footfalls provides a regularly clear and unmistakable musical anchor in the form of percussion that guides and directs the very music of the film. In this opening moment of the film, then, the witch conflates and figuratively assumes the roles of musical conductor and film director in the same moment, cueing the film and subsequent action; likewise, she is the creature that introduces life in the film and, as the audience quickly witnesses, takes life away with the assistance of her sisters. All of this is to suggest that, in Goold's production, the witch is affiliated with actual supernatural qualities and, more directly, the medical profession. Even while Goold elects to displace Shakespeare's lines from Act One, Scene One, he still opts to generate an omni-present aura about the witches that breaks the fourth wall of film. The directorial decisions mirror the questions that speak to the witches' powers and medical identities in the actual text of the play.<sup>23</sup> The presence of the disembodied footfalls is an important decision that suggests the necessary and ethereal role the witches adopt in the film. That which unifies the sundry, chaotic clips of different places and points of battle is the grimy corridor which houses the nurses. Goold's directorial decisions place an emphasis on the question of influence. As Goold continues his exploration of this aspect of the witches, the film delves into how the roles of the witches are representative of a multitude of equivocal and ambiguous aspects of the drama.

One critic, Stuart Hampton-Reeves, considers this opening sequence and comments how J.R. Brown 'rightly argues that Shakespeare's texts are and have always been "open" to alternative ways of the part performed and the audience's understanding of the play as a whole'.<sup>24</sup> Such seems to be the case in the 2010 film version

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<sup>23</sup> Some film critics have commented on the opening sequence. Stuart Hampton-Reeves, for example, notes that 'The permanent set suggested a wretched hospital basement, a morgue perhaps, a torture chamber maybe'. More to the point, however, 'In a keynote opening, the set took on the role of a wartime emergency hospital a role it never quite lost' ('Shakespeare in Performance and Film', 124). The witches as midwives are considered natural denizens to this medical world, one that is steeped in 'grimy, institutional sterility' (Ben Brantley in the *New York Times*, 15 February 2008) and holds 'out the possibility of cleanliness, of redemption, but the possibility would, of course, turn out to be an empty one' (Hampton-Reeves, 'Shakespeare in Performance and Film', 124).

<sup>24</sup> 'Shakespeare in Performance and Film', 117.

of *Macbeth* with regard to this scene and the accompanying footfalls. As alluded to earlier, Goold places the supernatural witches and their connection to the medical world in the consciousness of the audience before even the theme music is introduced. The witches, then, are associated with a supernatural existence that initiates and encompasses the film while simultaneously being affiliated with a medical profession that is inextricably woven into Macduff's origin and identity. This connection, then, suggests that the witches at least have the supernatural ability and access through the medical community, like midwives of the early modern period, to influence if not shape Macduff's fate.

Another example of the complicated identity of the witch in Rupert Goold's adaptation of *Macbeth* occurs shortly after the ghostly footfalls. Goold focuses the camera on a bloody and dirty hand that hangs slightly to the right of center in the frame. The hand itself is muted by minor and very limited grasping motions, a directorial choice that enables the brisk activity of a leg enshrined in a long, drab skirt in the background to compete for and possibly capture the audience's attention. Unfocused and located to the left-hand corner of the screen, the leg of the witch is marginalized in the frame, yet it still, because of the physically frantic ambulatory motion and matching musical tempo to the footfalls, continues its attempts to captivate the viewer's attention as assert a presence. Sound and sight work in concert to direct and manipulate the filmic space. The established role of the nurse/witch is one of control that, as has been suggested



earlier, is omnipresent and seems to blur lines by stretching beyond the bounds of the natural world and even the perceived filmic world.

Remaining faithful to the equivocal aspect of Shakespeare's harmful witch and healing midwife,<sup>25</sup> Goold's nurses busy themselves around the wounded captain, well within earshot of the conversation and military reports that describe Macbeth's valiant feats. During this frenetic moment, the hands of the nurses appear to be hopelessly entangled in the captain's body as King Duncan praises Macbeth's performance on the battlefield. Again, Goold provides an interpretation of the witches that emphasizes both at once a ubiquitous and ethereal quality. These witches seem to be privy to all of the sensitive communication among Duncan and his train. This particular scene is a series of medium shots with the nurses in almost every frame. Sometimes the nurse is positioned between the captain and Duncan while at other times it is the captain who stands between Duncan and the nurse. On more than one occasion, a nurse is looking directly at the camera where Duncan is positioned while the wounded captain relays presumably sensitive reports from the battlefield. The nurses are literally and figuratively in the middle of the conversation, yet they remain curiously unacknowledged when Duncan expresses his optimism for and enthusiastic assessment of Macbeth with the line 'O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman!' (1.2.24).

Also of particular note in this close reading is the moment that the nurses are directly addressed. In the exchange, a distinct distrust is subtly communicated and is evident when Paul Shelley, who plays Duncan, faces the witches and broadly gestures in a sweeping motion to wave off the nurses.

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<sup>25</sup> Equivocation is, of course, embedded in the text and has been noted by numerous critics. Shakespeare's attention to equivocation, for example, is at one point directly presented by the porter and his monologue the need to 'equivocate' in the third scene of Act Two. Arthur Kinney is quick to note that the porter's 'matter of equivocation condemns the Protestant cultural practice of an inner conversation with God, thereby undermining much of the cultural moment's religious language' (*Lies Like Truth*, 242). The greater and more overt expression of equivocation throughout the tragedy, however, rests in the prophecies that the witches produce. Here we see the dramatic and devastating effects of equivocation in practice, and the acts of equivocation directly result in Macbeth's demise. The witches, then, put into practice much of what the porter theorizes about.



This king does not want the nurses as midwives to attend his fallen soldier. In the same moment, with the camera behind Duncan so as to establish the king's perspective in the film, Shelley delivers the line 'Go get him surgeons' (1.2.44). A clear pause occurs between the word 'Go' and the phrase 'get him surgeons', so the combined line and gesture suggests that Duncan, expressing suspicion about the witches, wants the female midwives replaced with male surgeons. Once again, the film calls into sharp focus the historic role of the midwives in *Macbeth* and their specific influence over Macduff because of the questionable circumstances around Macduff's highly touted birth and the needling prophecy that 'none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth' (4.1.80–81). The pregnant pause in the film at this sensitive moment serves a second function: a subtle appreciation and further recollection of history by recalling the sixteenth century socio-economic battle that raged between midwives and surgeons over jurisdiction and duties, a struggle that ultimately resulted in the empowerment of male barbers. Goold's decision again encourages the audience to consider history and the circumstances surrounding Macduff's birthing chamber.

Male barbers and surgeons were often present in the birthing chamber but were far less likely to incur heavy fines or face down accusations of witchcraft, unlike their female counterparts, the midwives. This gendered historical sense of distrust assigned to midwives, then, is creatively and prominently established in Goold's 2010 film adaptation of *Macbeth*. Other questions spawn from this focus and distrust that further intensify the central tenet of ambiguity affiliated with the

identities of the witches and, by association, Macduff's role. All of the questions have the cumulative effect of training the audience's attention on Macduff and the circumstances surrounding his birth.

A continued close reading of Gould's adaptation raises even more questions about the role of the witches and the scope of their powers. The witches are not directly in the frame when Duncan delivers the line 'Go pronounce his present death / And with his former title greet Macbeth' (1.2.65–66), but Duncan distinctly looks to his right while uttering the command and gazes down a long, poorly lit corridor. The moment is framed in a medium shot so as to provide a perspective of the physical space and the many hidden areas within that space. Anyone could surreptitiously occupy almost any space in the poorly lit hallway. To punctuate this quality of the tenebrous space, the Thane of Ross, played by Tim Treloar, scurries down the darkened corridor after Duncan's lines are enunciated and quickly disappears. Shelley looks towards Treloar just before the thane departs and, as if calling after Ross, states 'What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won' (1.2.68). In almost this same moment, one of the nurses emerges from the dark corridor and walks briskly past Duncan and his entourage as though on a very specific and focused mission. The ambiguous nature of the midwife remains consistent, and the audience does not know whether or not the nurse strategically overheard the critical line because the lighting conveniently obscures any person who might be in the corridor. The hidden spaces in the film preserve the mystery of the witches and their roles in the adaptation. Are these natural creatures with access to sensitive information, or do the witches actually command supernatural powers and exert influence over the tumultuous world around them? The answers, of course, consistently remain shrouded in mystery.

The general scene is one of feverish action that introduces a number of uncontrolled variables, the witches among them. Notably, Hampton-Reeves is impressed that the scene is one 'full of energy and desperate panic'.<sup>26</sup> Anything is possible in these opening moments, and the frantic multifarious action cannot be fully absorbed by the audience. The witches' location and activities, as a result, are liberated through the chaos that pulses around them. The nurse who shuffles in and out of the scene, then, could very well have been in

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<sup>26</sup> 'Shakespeare in Performance and Film', 124.

close physical proximity to the full discussion regarding Macbeth's elevation; on the other hand, the nurse may have been far removed. Gould's creative decisions, which faithfully reflect the basic nature and role of the witches, simply do not permit any room for a conclusive determination and again banish the audience to a position of doubt because of the timing involved with the scene and the physical space dedicated to the set. The camera does, however, provide at least one moment of absolute clarity when a close up of Malcolm, played by Scott Handy, introduces an expression of anxiety (as signified by a prominently furrowed brow) upon seeing the witch emerge from the shadows, positioned in close physical proximity to the conversation steeped in politically sensitive information. Malcolm's unblinking eyes and slightly open mouth suggest a look of concern, even dismay, and a sense of impotence about the communication that just took place in an unsecured area; further, Handy turns his head just in time to watch one of the nurses pass behind him from shadow to shadow.



A second nurse is then seen in the medium shot moving from the left part of the frame, advancing towards the camera and past a stunned Malcolm. The witches, because of their affiliation with medicine, have access to all parts of the bunker and are seemingly everywhere. Just as the medical credentials provide the nurses with access to the covert knowledge of battlefield reports, so too would the medical credentials and mysterious knowledge of historic midwives have provided access to the birthing chamber of Macduff. The PBS film continually

reinforces the powerful relationship shared between the nurse and the witch, constantly underscoring the significance of what conversations and events the nurses had access to because of their profession. Equivocation and ubiquity are blended to raise the very questions that swirl around the identity of the nurses/witches and their powers, and these questions are the same focal points of curiosity that arise with the place of the witch in Shakespeare's play. Historically, these same questions of identity and social position would be defining markers of sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century midwives. Goold encourages his audience, as would likely be the case with Shakespeare's audience, to consider how these weird sisters may or may not be affiliated with witchcraft and access to the supernatural.

The second nurse who then brushes past Duncan as he articulates how to reward Macbeth casually carries a surgeon's saw (though the image could also easily be identified as a utilitarian hacksaw) in her left hand, another signifier of the medical field.

The image of the saw is repeated throughout the adaptation as is evident when the witches are placed in Macbeth's kitchen surrounded by knives and cleavers. Once again, remaining true to the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century tradition of the midwife, the image of a nurse is fused to the role of the witch. To lend greater weight to this connection, the camera cuts to a close up of a pair of hands that are wiping a provocatively large knife. This image of a knife-wielding nurse appears throughout the film and in different contexts. The inherent relationship between the image of the knife and the witch is especially provocative because 'Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped' (5.8.14–15). In other words, postmodern audiences would be inclined to recognize that Macduff was the recipient of a caesarian section, a commonplace term. Perhaps keeping the etymological roots of the word 'caesarian' in mind can be particularly helpful when considering all that takes place in the text and the film. The word 'Caesar', derived from *caesum* or *caedo* in Latin, enjoys a primary definition of 'to cut'.<sup>27</sup> The massive knife that the nurse slowly and meticulously cleans is clearly used for cutting, hence,

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<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Caesar himself was thought to be the recipient of a Caesarian section and became, in fact, a basis for the etymological origin of a Caesarian section. I merely point out the history of the term here and do not suggest that most postmodern audiences would necessarily be aware of this particular history.

perhaps at some subconscious level, Goold in his twenty-first-century interpretation forges a connection, albeit remote and etymological in nature, with the twenty-first century audience between the nurse and the action of a caesarian section because of the visual act of cutting in relation to medical personnel. Again, the powerful and visual semiotic connection between the witch and the nurse is forged.

The shot is a lengthy one, and the hands belong to a woman apparently dressed in a nurse's garb – the white smock and drab skirt with a covering for the hair is identical to the clothing the witches wear in the first scene. Only slowly is the identity of the witch-midwife revealed, forcing the audience to think through the process of images much as one might attempt to unearth an answer to a mystery. In some ways, this process itself is a cutting away of the extraneous in an attempt to expose an essential kernel. Several images and several seconds are devoted to the action of cleaning the knife, so this presentation, on one hand, could not be deemed subtle – Goold prominently and unapologetically displays the image; on the other hand, though, subtlety is present in the scene and lies within the deep semiotic relationship between the knife, the medical profession, the prophecy involving Macduff being 'untimely ripped', and the medical procedure of caesarian sections. Here we find a nexus: the direction of the film mirrors the concept of equivocation in that the images are both painfully visible and invisible at the same moment. The forbidding knife, which certainly could be a means to violence, serves as a signifier of the healing medical profession and is wielded by the third witch whom Goold introduced earlier in the film. This moment is a seminal one in the adaptation, for Goold forges a lasting connection through the series of images that affixes the medical profession of the nurses to the roles of witches and, ultimately, the violence and chaos that can be unleashed based on this relationship.

Martin Turner, who plays Banquo in the PBS adaptation, further establishes the significance of an affiliation between the witches and the medical establishment when he delivers the line 'You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so' (1.3.45–47). Turner pauses after the word 'your' in order to place his fingers to his chin as a means of recognizing the surgical masks that the nurses don. The word 'beards' is then uttered at the same moment that Turner tugs at an imaginary surgical mask. This gesture suggests that another signifier of the medical profession, the surgical

mask, is that which impedes Banquo from identifying the creatures as women. Both the gesture and distinction are important because the creative decision suggests that the witches' primary identity, at least in this one seminal moment, is not based on some perceived supernatural feature like a 'choppy finger', 'skinny lips', or even 'beard' in a conventional sense. Instead, the women's source of power and ability to wreak mischief again originates from their association with nursing or, from a sixteenth-century perspective, midwifery. If, by extension, midwives in general cannot or should not be interpreted as traditional women because of their specialized medical knowledge, then are these creatures to be regarded with suspicion? They do, after all, violate some fundamental boundaries as they pertain to traditionally established gender roles.

If women threaten the male-dominated establishment in medicine (both in the early modern period and Goold's film), they might also threaten other spheres of masculine dominance like government and martial institutions. So much attention towards the end of the text is lavished upon the prophecy of Macduff and the circumstances surrounding his birth. The witch/midwife seems to control and direct the energy around the prophecy in the text as well as Goold's adaptation. Macduff obviously endured a traumatic birth, so, historically, either surgeons (that is, barbers) or midwives would have been present during the creation of Macduff. Again, fundamental questions without clear answers never seem far from either Shakespeare's text or Goold's film. Who, exactly, was in the birthing chamber? Why are the witches so entangled in Macduff's fate? True to the spirit of equivocation, Shakespeare and Goold provide no answers, and the questions never yield any definitive sense of clarity.

Sustained close readings of both the text and film reveal even more questions that speak to the disruptive role women adopt in *Macbeth*. For example, the potent exchange of dialogue that occurs in the third scene of Act One between the witches, Banquo, and Macbeth takes place in the literal shadow of a prop the witches constructed in Goold's film. The disturbing image includes a sports-coat, pair of glasses, surgical bag that appears to house a pint of blood, and, most importantly, a heart which the witches seemed to have removed from the captain who delivered the report of Macbeth to Duncan in the opening scene of the film. This gruesome talisman is present throughout many of the shots that give rise to the lines from Scene

Three of Act One. Of particular note, though, is Ross's line 'He bade me, from him, call thee Thane of Cawdor, / In which addition, hail, most worthy thane, / For it is thine' (1.3.105–07). Goold's adaptation remains true to the text, and the lines themselves again remind the audience of the witches' perceived role of witch-midwife. For example, the following exchange between Macbeth and Banquo is delivered without alteration in the slightest:

*Macbeth:* Your children shall be kings.

*Banquo:* You shall be king.

*Macbeth:* And Thane of Cawdor too. Went it not so?

*Banquo:* To th' selfsame tune and words. Who's here?

(1.3.86–88)

The dialogue, as it is written and delivered, forcefully reminds the audience about the witches and their presence in the play, but the extent of the witches' power is never conclusively revealed. Goold, at the end of the scene, again carefully preserves the text that recalls the position of the witches when Macbeth speaks to Banquo in an aside with the lines 'Think upon what hath chanced, and at more time, / The interim having weighed it, let us speak / Our free hearts each to other' (1.3.153–55). The director chooses to maintain, faithfully, that dialogue which secures the role of the witch during the moment of Macbeth's elevation to Thane of Cawdor. Shakespeare's language assures a prominent position for the witch during this critical moment, and Goold shapes the dialogue with the image of the talisman, an image that is derived from the witches' roles in the opening scenes as medical midwives. Goold, as he had earlier in the adaptation, forcefully and unequivocally pairs the identity of the witch with the identity of the midwife through the shared presence of the talisman whose heart is literally the remnant of a medical procedure the witches supervised and conducted. To some extent, one could argue that the image and action suggest that women can wield tremendous power and present formidable threats to a male-oriented hegemony when women assume some semblance of social authority, regardless of how marginalized that authority may be. On the other hand, perhaps the witches are simply marginalized women, as Deborah Willis points out, who only have the power to curse. Goold's King Duncan seems to privilege the possibility of potent women, supernatural or otherwise, when he waves off the witches in favor of male surgeons. If women

are not contained in Macbeth's society, then their subversive activities have the potential to unsheathe remarkable disruption even in a world men control and dominate.

Knives, and sometimes the conspicuous absence of knives, continue to shape the expressed narrative in Goold's adaptation. Lady Macbeth's famous call to 'you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts' (1.5.39–40) is a direct request to those supernatural creatures that are affiliated with death. Specifically, Lady Macbeth calls out to 'you murth'ring ministers' (1.5.47), a name in such a context that helps recount the *Malleus Malificarum* and the murdering instincts of abortion and sacrifice that witches were accused of harbouring. Shakespeare, in this moment, invokes the imagery of childbirth through Lady Macbeth's request to 'Come to my woman's breasts, / And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers' (1.5.46–47). Breastmilk, of course, is intimately associated with childbirth, wet nurses, and the events that follow birth, all of which are intricately woven into the fabric of midwives. The image of the knife appears three lines later with the line 'That my keen knife see not the wound it makes' (1.5.52). Interestingly enough, Goold has no visual of a knife at this point, suggesting that Lady Macbeth, unlike Macduff, is not an extension of the witches even in the moments where the most powerful witch-like language and supernatural invocation is uttered. Lady Macbeth desperately presses her case with the spirits to 'unsex me here' (1.5.46), perhaps in an attempt to escape her ordinary and powerless existence of a woman by joining the ranks of the witches, who resist circumscription and social containment through the traditional signifiers of gender by relying on 'beards'. Such a plea on Lady Macbeth's part is futile. She and Macbeth will ultimately be exorcised by the witches' agent Macduff rather than perform the actions of the witches. As such, the visual of the knife, a signifier of agency relative to the witches' prophecy, remains absent in Goold's adaptation and, sadly, beyond Lady Macbeth's grasp.

Goold again relies on another key omission of the image of a knife in Act Two. Shakespeare's most infamous dagger is enshrined in the lines 'Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee: / I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.' (2.1.33–35). Here, not only is a physical knife missing, but Patrick Stewart amplifies the potent absence of this knife through several quick lunges into the air, lunges that are accompanied by a 'whooshing' sound that punctuates the emptiness of the air. To

be certain, Goold establishes early in the adaptation that he has no compunction about translating possible hallucinations in the tragedy into visible images. Such is the case with the bloody image of Banquo's ghost, an image that is physically represented in the film and one that no other character other than Macbeth acknowledges. Certainly, other adaptations of *Macbeth* have relied on the physical use of a knife during this monologue. Trevor Nunn's 1978 *Macbeth* with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench, for example, relies on the prop of a knife. Likewise, Roman Polanski's 1971 *Macbeth* with Jon Finch and Francesca Annis prominently displays a dagger. Even more recent adaptations like Justin Kurzel's 2015 *Macbeth* (starring Michael Fassbender and Marion Cotillard) or the 2016 Daniel Mays *Macbeth* both prominently display a visible dagger. In fact, a quick review of twentieth- and twenty-first-century YouTube clips of the dagger scene reveals that far more often than not, a physical dagger is used. Goold's deliberate decision to omit a physical dagger, like the omission of a knife with Lady Macbeth's 'unsex me here' speech, signals that the murderous couple are *not* extensions of the witches unlike the imagery attached to Macduff.

Indeed, the image of the knife and its association with the prophetic witches becomes very forceful in the penultimate scene, perhaps the most crucial moment that helps illuminate the prophecy as it entails Macduff and his role. In Scene Seven of Act Five, Goold begins to underscore the intimate relationship Macduff shares with the witch/midwife when Shakespeare's line 'either thou, Macbeth, / Or else my sword with an unbattered edge / I sheathe again undeeded' (5.7.18–20) is altered to 'thou, Macbeth, / Or else my *blade* with an unbattered edge / I sheath again undeeded' (emphasis mine). At the moment Macduff begins to utter Goold's altered line, he puts aside a rifle to pull out a dagger. Macduff is visually associated not with a 'sword', which is a specific instrument of warfare, but a 'blade'.<sup>28</sup> As I have argued here, an early modern audience would have intuitively understood

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<sup>28</sup> Certainly, Goold could have opted to present the traditional image of a sword fight rather than a fight with daggers, and there is clear precedence for such an interpretation. The 1971 Roman Polanski *Macbeth* has a three minute and fifty-six second sword fight, of which fifteen seconds are given to Macbeth brandishing a dagger. The 1978 Ian McKellen and Judi Dench *Macbeth* limit the scene wholly to a sword fight. Most productions rely exclusively on a sword fight, so the Goold production is extraordinary in its use of knives.

the powerful connection between Macduff and the witches, but this recognition may have been lost over the centuries. Goold bridges the historical divide and returns to the early modern interpretation by altering the word 'sword' and providing a visual of a knife to shepherd the postmodern audience back to Macduff's role as an extension of the witch/midwives. Shakespeare, and Goold's adaptation, underscores the illusion that Macbeth is the 'tyrant' (5.7.14) when, in fact, the text and historical position of midwives suggest Macduff is indeed doing the bidding of the disruptive witches. Even the names Macbeth and Macduff are so close in approximation – both beginning with 'Mac', both consisting of seven letters, and both comprising two syllables – as to suggest that they and their roles in the tragedy might be confused, misinterpreted, or interchanged. Such confusion might have been more easily recognized in the early productions of *Macbeth*.



Wasting no opportunity to foreground Macduff's affiliation with the witches, Goold cuts directly from Macduff to Scene Eight with an inebriated Macbeth pouring over the tortured question 'What was he that was not of woman born?' The line, of course, is not present in Scene Eight of Shakespeare's original text, so Goold again makes artistic decisions that call the audience's attention to the prophecy. Immediately, Macduff enters with an automatic weapon that he fires, and, after failing to strike down Macbeth, draws a dagger. Consistent with Scene Seven, Goold replaces the word 'sword' with 'blade'

throughout the scene, so instead of the line 'I have no words, my voice is in my sword' (5.8.6–7), Macduff delivers the line 'I have no words, my voice is in my blade'. The image of the blade is associated with a dagger, which returns the audience to the witches, which in turn directs the audience to the nurses/midwives and reaffirms the comprehensive control the witches asserted through the prophecy.

Macduff will not set free the time with the usurper's cursed head because Macduff and not Macbeth is the extension of the witches and social disruption. Macduff's voice, action, and presence are all represented in his 'blade'. Again, Patrick Stewart says, and erroneously believes, that it is his 'keen *blade*', or dagger/knife, and not his 'keen sword' (5.8.10) that will offer protection. In fact, the use of the word 'blade' directly positions the dialogue and imagery potentially around a medical instrument used in Macduff's birth. This event drives and defines the action and resolution of the plot.

With a bright light that washes over Patrick Stewart's head and four other prominently placed lights that bathe his body in the otherwise dimly lit room, Macbeth delivers the lines that signal his full recognition of the witches (line seventeen was omitted from the film):

Accursed be the tongue that tells me so,  
And be these juggling fiends no more believ'd,  
That palter with us in a double sense,  
That keep the word of promise to our ear,  
And break it to our hope.

5.8.16–22

The battle that ensues then involves neither rifles, pistols, nor swords though some of these instruments are employed with futility. Instead, the *melée* is one that keenly relies upon knives. The witches, their familiar (Macduff), and the signifier of the caesarian section (the knife) fully monopolize the attention of the audience.

Finally, just as Patrick Stewart is about to deliver the *coup de grace*, he pauses. The camera trains in on Patrick Stewart and then cuts to a shot that closes in on the witches, all of whom stand before the camera in full nurses' garb that includes surgical masks. In the dark room, the nurse/midwife/witch figures are placed in front of a light source just as Macbeth is bathed in light. The final intersection between

the prophecy, Macbeth, and Macduff is made manifest and literally illuminated. The scene then concludes with Macbeth's final word of acquiescence: 'enough!' – as if to suggest that the society has no option but to capitulate, tragically, to the witches and the problematic action of Macduff's victory.

Goold is fairly consistent in his treatment of the midwife/witch throughout these scenes, but a close reading of one more scene can be helpful in understanding how the witch powerfully intersects with the midwife. Scene Six of Act One takes place in a kitchen, and Goold provides a track back steady cam at the beginning of the scene as a means of revealing, gradually, the full extent of action. As the camera pulls back, a long table in the kitchen is revealed, and a number of servants are using the table to prepare a meal. At first, a close-up of the hands of two women savagely cutting into fish and animals is presented. Next, a close-up of the hands of two men chopping vegetables and pounding meat yield to a full shot of the men as they fill the screen. Finally, Goold frames a full shot of a male and female servant preparing food, working in tandem with each other across the table. When the track back is complete, a female servant passes the screen firmly grasping a meat cleaver, an instrument that helps the audience recall the earlier scene of the witches with the knives. At this point, the audience is gently guided to a recognition that the same actresses who played the witches from earlier shots are now doubling for the female servants in this shot from the kitchen. The signifier which Goold uses to establish this connection as directly as possible is the meat cleaver, and, later, a knife that is identical to the knives featured earlier in the film.

Instruments used for cutting that had been earlier associated with the medical profession of nurses now become the primary vehicle in a different setting, the kitchen, for establishing the identity of the weird sisters.<sup>29</sup> That Goold chooses to use the image of the knife instead

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<sup>29</sup> The association between witches and cooks is a topic of considerable interest in criticism, and much has been written about the cauldron and uses of recipes. Most recently, Geraldo U. de Sousa has argued that 'Cookery and witchcraft become intimately intertwined. Outdoors, associated with the witches, and the indoors, associated with the Macbeths, remain contiguous, invading and pervading each other's domain': 'Cookery and Witchcraft in Macbeth', in Thompson (ed.), *Macbeth: The State of Play*, 161–182 (p. 162). That Goold would seize upon this connection to reintroduce the image of the knife is consistent with the treatment of the witch.

of other qualities associated with the actresses is, again, significant because the medical image of the knife is, as was mentioned earlier, very closely related to the procedure of a caesarian section. The tactic is subtle, but effective. In the event that the connection is, perhaps, too subtle for Goold's audience, the director chooses to place one of the witches just to the right of centre in the frame. Lady Macbeth is placed in the centre, so the actions and gestures of the witch become more overt in the scene. The fates of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and Macduff all intersect in the midwife/witch's edge of the knife.



A second female servant who was enthusiastically plucking the feathers from a bird then crosses in front of the screen with a pair of rabbits she prepares for the meal. The images of the female servant are layered and threefold. First, she is seen frantically removing the feathers from the poultry. Next, she uses a string or perhaps a cord to tie together the rabbits. Finally, she wields a large knife to place a methodical incision into the body of the rabbit. These three images, when combined, suggest the concept of meticulous preparation and procedure, not entirely unlike one that might be observed in a medical setting. Certainly, some members of the audience would immediately recognize the actresses doubling as female servants and witches, but, for many, this instant identification may not be immediately forthcoming. The repeated image of the knife and cleaver in close association with the women, however, would telegraph the identity of the women in a more direct manner. The final lingering shot of

the three women then entirely removes all doubt of their identities even though they have filled non-speaking roles in this scene. All other speaking roles and actors are purged from the lingering shot to allow an extended and exclusive moment with the three women, an intimate moment shared with the audience that is imbued with ominous, discordant music.

The action of creating incisions in the rabbit is complete and reminiscent of a medical operation, one like a caesarian section even. The woman firmly grasps the highly visible knife and deliberately leans over the rabbit. The incisions that are made do not suggest a frantic slashing moment that lacks control; instead, the actions are delicate and precise, even refined and elegant – certainly tightly executed. While making a series of cuts into the meat, the witch bends over the rabbit so as to have a clear line of sight and control over the operation. This moment could easily be shot in an operating room even though it is ostensibly presented in a kitchen. The overlay of images, again, reinforces a close connection between the witches and the medical profession (and so, likely, helps the audience to recall Macduff's birthing chamber), and, in this case, the primary witch even appears to be engaging in a complex culinary operation just as a caesarian section is a delicate operation that involves cutting.

Ultimately, the many images of Goold's *Macbeth* capture the conflated image of the midwife/witch, an image that complicates an interpretation of the play because Macduff's role in Macbeth's demise becomes tainted by the question of the witches, their identities, and their actions. Shakespeare's early modern audience, unlike a postmodern audience, would have been predisposed to accept the presence of a midwife/witch and appreciate the significance of its potential presence at the moment Macduff was 'Untimely ripped' from his mother's womb. The Scottish Play underscores the ambiguous presence of the midwife/witch, and the resulting tangential connection between Macduff and the witches raises questions that resist definitive interpretations of the weird sisters. Critics like Robert S. Miola yearn for a 'clear moral vision of remorse in the final meeting with Macduff',<sup>30</sup> but this vision is impossible to achieve and impossible to defend in criticism, especially when one considers that Raphael Holinshed's

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<sup>30</sup> 'I Could Not Say "Amen": Prayer and Providence in *Macbeth*', in *Shakespeare's Christianity*, ed. Batson, 57–72 (p. 70).

*Chronicles* provided Shakespeare with a fairly clear account of the monarch Macbeth who, after legally being elected King, presided over ten years of peace in Scotland. In fact, one can argue that the historical Macduff and not Macbeth in the *Chronicles* commits the act of treason by disrupting society and civil harmony when he interfered with the construction of the castle at Dunsinane. This account and these events only further problematize the tragedy and the roles of the witches. What may be unequivocally concluded in the midst of such ambiguity is that the image of the midwife/witch should be given due consideration throughout the tragedy because this creature presses in on the roles Macbeth and, more importantly, Macduff assume in both Shakespeare's work and Goold's adaptation. Indeed, the more often Goold superimposes the semiotic image of the midwife/nurse onto the witch, the more complicated and problematized the tragedy becomes and the more Macduff's role in the tragedy assumes an elevated and disruptive position rather than a heroic force that returns the play to a position of social stability. All of this is to suggest that the definitive moment of Macbeth's demise at the hands of Macduff is not a restoration of government but perhaps an uncertain and ill-defined extension of the witches' influence. Rupert Goold relies on the witch/nurse/midwife to bridge a connection between his post modern audience and the early modern audience as he time and time again visually reinforces the conflation of witch/nurse/midwife, and this historical conflation helps to expose the equivocal and double nature of the full play, suggesting a heightened importance in Macduff's actions.

That *Macbeth* is a tragedy is without contention. The multifaceted complexities of Shakespeare's play, though, complicate how critics read the tragedy. Doubleness of language and illusion frustrate the characters as the drama unfolds. Clarity in the prophecies is a quality that remains stubbornly elusive and, as such, orchestrates the tragic elements. Macbeth realizes, with horror, and far too late that 'be these juggling fiends no more believ'd, / That palter with us in a double sense' (5.8.19–20). Shakespeare, and Rupert Goold's adaptation that visually binds the witches to nurses, offers another aspect of tragedy in *Macbeth*: unrecognized illusion. The doubleness of the roles of the witches as nurses/midwives paired with the ambiguity of the prophetic language they wield results in tragic consequences not just for Macbeth, but also for an audience who is inclined to feel some

erroneous sense of relief that the tyrant Macbeth is vanquished at the hands of Macduff, a possible familiar of the witches.

In some ways, Shakespeare and Goold's interpretation complicate the Aristotelean understanding of tragedy. In *Poetics*, Aristotle notes that

Every tragedy falls into two parts – Complication and Unraveling or Denouement. Incidents extraneous to the action are frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the Complication; the rest is the Unraveling. By the Complication I mean all that extends from the beginning of the action to the part which marks the turning-point to good or bad fortune. The Unraveling is that which extends from the beginning of the change to the end.<sup>31</sup>

The witches are not extraneous to the action proper, but their histories arguably are. Shakespeare complicates Aristotle's genre of tragedy by removing a clear turning point from good to bad fortune because the function of Macbeth and Macduff are in doubt. The witches are 'frequently combined with a portion of the action proper, to form the Complication', but the complication remains shrouded in ambiguity because of the identity, history, and role of the midwife/nurse/witch. Goold uses the medium of the film to re-introduce this complication and does so through a dramatic reliance on a series of visual images. Ultimately, the presence of the midwife/nurse/witch raises more questions about when in *Macbeth* a turning point presents itself and when the definitive Aristotelean tragic moment is revealed.

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<sup>31</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, Part XVIII, The Internet Classics Archive. 2009. Available URL: <http://Classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.2.2.html>, accessed 27 March 2019.

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