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“A Disease Beyond Practice”: Shakespeare’s Debilitated Scotland Represented in Lady Macbeth

1. Introduction

Prompted by Lady Macbeth’s insomnia, night terrors, and raving speeches in act 5, scene 1, from *Macbeth—* the Scottish doctor’s assessment of the notorious villainess’ condition concludes with, “this disease is beyond my practice,” (5. 1. 49). This remark would imply that her condition requires divine healing, but to which of the lady’s conditions is he referring? Throughout the play, Shakespeare provides several physical conditions that plague the Scottish Queen: her femininity, her sterility, her unnaturally cruel depravity, and of course her spiral into madness. When the doctor makes his grim prognosis of her condition as being beyond his help, the diseased Lady Macbeth merely represents the individual person. However, Shakespeare’s characterization of Lady Macbeth offers his audience an allegory for independent Scotland: wild, barbaric, harsh, bloodthirsty, and most importantly, incapable of bringing forth life. Essentially, the Bard vilifies Scotland through his depiction of Macbeth’s scheming wife, and examining her character through the social constructionist form of disability theory demonstrates this. By reading Lady Macbeth as disabled— in terms of her female sex, her deviant “monstrous” femininity, and her connection to witchcraft— the audience gains a better understanding of how the perception and depiction of the physical body’s disability creates higher literary and cultural contextualization of the Anglicized Scottish monarch, James I, as a cure to disabled Scottish identity. By establishing framework for disability theory through the social constructionist perspective, and examining early modern conceptualizations of the body and it’s lack of ability, then subsequently reading Lady Macbeth as disabled establishes the first part of my argument. I will then analyze how this reading of her character as disabled allegorizes Scottish identity, then finally, I will examine how the king can either heal or harm his realm through his office as “pharmakon.” From all this, I argue that disability theory can operate as metaphor for examining the cultural “other” in the works of Shakespeare— thus facilitating discussion of intersectional identity politics in contemporary scholarly analysis of the Bard.

1. Disability Theory

When hearing the term “disability” a variety of physical, mental, or developmental impairments to the physical body may come to mind. Renowned modern literary critic and author Tobin Siebers, explained in his work *Disability Theory*, how society’s conceptualization of disability can help facilitate intersectional dialogue regarding identity politics. Disability has become associated with the fragility of the human condition, and the factors that may prevent the body’s agency, utility, and efficiency—as perceived by able bodied social norms (Siebers 5). That is, Siebers identifies the concept of disability as not limited to the physical state of one’s body, but moreso as being the result of the perceptions of a majority societal norm, “disability is not a physical or mental defect but a cultural and minority identity,” (Siebers 4). This working definition of disability demands awareness of this identity and then calls for a social change in attitudes towards people who are considered disabled[[1]](#footnote-0). And just like with any minority identity, ideas and social perceptions towards it become instrumental in shaping understanding of it; with disability theory, the forefront literary approach in discussing how to understand disability is social constructionism.

 Social constructionism as a whole, bears responsibility for the creation of all identities, specifically identities that are considered “minority” or those that deviate from the societal norm. “That identity is socially produced means in theory that minority groups like the disabled may challenge their own identities, allowing greater freedom and mobility in the social world,” (Siebers 73). However, the problem with this theory is that in practice, the concept of identity is a social categorization of a group of peoples implemented by an oppressive majority. But at the core of the social constructionist theorization of the body is the idea that “the body does not determine its own representation in any way because the sign precedes the body in the hierarchy of signification,” (Siebers 55). That is, the physical body is born into a set of societal and cultural standards that dictate what is considered normal, and what is abnormal— the signature predates the body. For example, the norms that a Scottish female born during Shakespeare's time would have been vastly different from the norms that an American female born today would be growing up with. Furthermore, institutions like political views or cultural perspectives have more power when they tether themselves to natural objects, like the body (Siebers, 55). Rather than the body being a tangible entity, for social constructionists, “bodies are linguistic effects driven, first by the order of representation of itself and, second, by the entire array of social ideologies dependent on this order,” (Siebers, 55). For the social constructionist, perceptions of the body are shaped by society, and society likewise becomes shaped by the body’s construction of it; social constructionism is more of a cyclical relationship with the body and society contingently depending upon the other for definition.[[2]](#footnote-1)

 While disability theory has been fleshed out through the social constructionist perception of body theory, this conceptualization is a product of contemporary models of the body. That is, disability theory itself would not have been articulated let alone considered by Shakespeare’s audiences, or by Shakespeare himself. Because of this, some scholars argue that applying a disability theoretical reading to Shakespeare’s works, creates an anachronistic interpretation. However, Shakespearean scholars David Houston Wood and Allison P. Hobgood argue, “human variation has always existed and, while they may have been redefined over time and according to variable cultural circumstances, even historical norms, standards, and schema generally depended on ability/disability paradigms that stigmatized uncharacteristic physical and mental embodiment,” (Hobgood and Wood, 7-16). The early modern conceptualization of the body was neither medicalized nor resembled anything like disability theory today; but because ability/disability was recognized as deviant from the social norms of the time, there is still merit in reading Shakespeare through a disability theoretical lens, as it provides a highly allegorical performance. However, in order to do so academically it is important to not simply apply modern analysis alone, but to also take into account the body theory prevalent during Shakespeare’s time. In so doing, the reader enters the realm of early modern disability discourse, which “develops from a flexible array of historicist and presentist methodologies and textual- and performance- related concerns that work together to examine difference, selfhood, and identity in the Renaissance,” (Hopgood and Wood, 190). Essentially, by applying a contemporary understanding of disability theory, while maintaining awareness of early modern conceptualizations of embodiment and ability, modern audiences can see how minority identity was often expressed through the performative body, and this creates a more complex and allegorical performance, as in *Macbeth*.

1. The Early Modern Body and Disability

Body theory in early modern England stemmed largely from the Galenic model. The body was comprised of the four humors: black bile, yellow bile, blood, and phlegm. These humors were believed to have been “dispersed throughout the body by spirits, mediators between soul and body,” (Schoenfeldt, 2). The conceptualization of these humors and the spirits that controlled them reveals a more cosmological perception of the body’s experience within its environment; the four humors corresponded with the four elements, and the four seasons, the four winds, the planet earth itself, and even the zodiac (Schoenfeldt, 3). Health was all about the balance of the humors within the body itself, but also balance in one’s lifestyle choices— this extended to everything from food and alcohol consumption, to moral and spiritual habits and behaviors of the individual. Temperance was not only the physical medicine prescribed to maintain a healthy body physically, but it was also ethically imperative to live temperately as well. And because of this emphasis on temperance as the key to health, “illness was perceived as a symptom of immorality,” (Schoenfeldt 7), caused by intemperate living. If sickness was perceived to be a symptom of a greater moral shortcoming or failure, what then would be the early modern perspective of chronic illness or disability?

 Early modern conceptions of “disability” as Siebers has defined it were rather limited. Because of the Galenic model and humoral theory, most illnesses were assumed to be temporary, and remedied by restoring balance to the body’s humors by means of purgation (of the physical and spiritual nature). Even mental illness was considered to be a temporary phenomenon caused by humoral imbalance, and could be righted by restoring balance (this often required isolation, relaxation, and prayerful introspection). But some ailments were incurable; no amount of prayer, temperate living, or manipulation of the body’s humors would be able to “cure” someone born with a physical abnormality. Sadly, language referring to physical anomalies and abnormal conditions were not referred to with politically correct or even polite terms. Rather, words like “deformity”, “disfigurement”, or even “monstrous[ity]” were often used in reference to people born with obvious physical afflictions or handicaps. “Deformities” often revealed sins of the afflicted person, or if an infant was born with a defect, then the parents were being punished by God for their transgressions. The more monstrous the deformity, the more monstrous the transgression was presumed to be. (Hopgood, “Teeth Before Eyes”, 26). But curiously enough, this very exteriorizing of the interior character prevalent in early modern times, reveals exactly how disability operates in Shakespearean drama; the body itself becomes a metaphor for the nature of the character in question.

 Much the product of his time, Shakespeare did not use the word “disabled” often, but when he did, the temporary, and therefore curable, nature of the concept was implied, or it operated as metaphor for an inconvenience. For Shakespeare, “to be disabled is to experience a physical, moral, or economic slowdown, but the word is rarely used as a participle adjective or to connote a pre-existing or unchangeable, tragic condition; instead the verbal form clarifies it as a temporary state conferred upon one by actions of one’s own or another’s, or by prejudice,” (Iyengar, 9). With Shakespeare’s most famous disabled character, Richard III, the description of the villain’s body serves as metaphor for the evil nature of the character, thus paralleling the perceptions of the body at the time: the exterior reveals the interior. And in the case of Richard III, because his condition[[3]](#footnote-2) was perceived as incurable and permanent, his disabled body and deformed exterior become a metaphor for his wicked intentions and evil soul. If a physician could not heal or remedy Richard’s condition, then only the Divine could save him. Furthermore, understanding the metaphor of Shakespearean characterization in regards to the body, it is essential to remember that the Shakespearean body refers not just to the characters’ bodies, but to the bodies of the actors portraying them, the bodies of the audience and spectators, as well as the bodies of critique that respond to the works of Shakespeare (Iyengar, 1). It is with the understanding that Shakespeare perceived illness and disability as temporary (save in the case of a wicked soul), as well as utilized disability and disfigurement as metaphor, that I read Lady Macbeth as a disabled character as her impairments are incurable by any save the Divine, and more significantly, her lack of ability operates as metaphor for her minority identities.

1. Lady Macbeth as Disabled

Some of Lady Macbeth’s disabilities as perceived by her early modern audiences might have been considered temporary (her madness), while other aspects would not have been, namely her femininity. Her biologically female sex, operates as the fundamental basis on which her disability is perceptible, however as she is characterized as shockingly unfeminine, she becomes a monstrous “other”— neither strictly feminine (delicate, frail, and weak), but in spite of her ambitious cruelty, not male either. Lady Macbeth was deliberately created by Shakespeare to be the female scapegoat of all the misogynistic sentiments and anxieties prevalent at the time of James I’s ascension to the throne of England (more on this later), and this is demonstrated by her non-conformity into society gender roles and expectations. It is from her femininity that the rest of Lady Macbeth’s various handicaps stem, such as her sterility, her monstrous nature (both physically and spiritually), and her descent into madness— essentially these further distortions of the already disabled female identity, mark her specifically as incurable and unredeemable.

In early modern Britain, being a woman was a disability in and of itself. Much like the the views of the body from antiquity, the prevalent belief in early modern discourse was that there was only one canonical body, and that was male (Laqueur, 63). Known as the One Sex Model, the female body’s anatomical functioning and charting was understood insofar as it resembled the male’s. This conceptualization came from the understanding of female sex organs as inverted penises (Laqueur, 63-113). Furthermore, the One Sex model was upheld and argued by women’s menstruation as being evidence of being lesser formed, and weaker men (Laqueur, 25-45). Based on these perceptible deviations of the female body from the male body, the female was perceived as the defective body, and thus was subjected to sexist and patriarchal oppression and assumptions based on their defective male bodies; i.e. because the female body was not properly formed, her mental faculties are not as capable as a properly formed man, nor is her spirituality, since her physical body is ill-formed and out of humoral balance (menstruation and lactation as deviant from male fluids). So already Lady Macbeth, by the fact that she was female, is already disabled. However, even amongst women (an already disabled group), her specific embodiment of womanhood is disabled in two physical ways: sterility and monstrosity.

Perhaps the most obvious disability Lady Macbeth possesses aside from her femaleness, is her inability to create life. While females were already perceived as the weaker minority amongst men, an able-bodied woman would be able to reproduce. Lady Macbeth famously calls for the spirits to “make thick my blood, / Stop up th’access and passage to remorse, / That no compunctions visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose,” (1. 5. 41-44). Shakespeare scholar, Janet Adelman[[4]](#footnote-3) discusses the double entendre at work in this scene; Lady Macbeth calls to the spirits to strengthen her resolve to carry out her scheme, while simultaneously imploring that her menstrual cycles cease (Adelman, 137). This dark prayer of sorts to plural spirits becomes all the more sinister, as this scene immediately follows the reading of Macbeth’s letter to his wife, telling her of the prophetic witches he encountered. By making such a plea of these evil spirits, Lady Macbeth establishes herself as spiritually wicked and depraved. This plea to stop her menstrual cycles also distinguishes Lady Macbeth’s deviant femininity, as it was the sole purpose and goal for women to conceive and provide their husbands with children, and when she pleas to have her courses stop, it is so that she may be made full of cruelty, not full of blessed life.[[5]](#footnote-4) Lady Macbeth’s childlessness combined with her character’s eventual ascent to the Scottish throne would have resonated with Shakespeare’s audience, who had only just dealt with the reign of a childless female monarch— one whose childlessness caused England much anxiety regarding the succession of a worthy and able monarch.

Even though both England and Scotland had experienced the reigns of female monarchs, the popular consensus regarding female monarchs was that of anxiety, and distrust. During the reign of these queens (Mary Queen of Scots, and Elizabeth I), vocal opposition to female rule rampantly spread throughout both kingdoms. Criticism based on woman’s inability to govern and lead a country due to their physical disability, as well as their inherently wicked nature was strongly argued by the Scottish Presbyterian orator, John Knox:“[t]o promote a woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion or empire aboue any realme, nation, or citie, is repugnant to nature, contumelie to God, a thing most contrarious to his reueled will and approued ordinance, and finallie it is the subuersion of good order, of all equitie and iustice,” (Knox, “The Declamation”). Knox and many men who believed women to be inferior spiritually to men, based this argument on Eve’s responsibility in the Fall of Men narrative from Genesis. Knox even went so far as to call women “degenerate”. He supported this argument from the Pauline Epistles which established man as the head of the body— Knox claimed that women should be resigned to the role of obedient subjects that lack the capacity or spiritual temperance to behave in a wise and virtuous manner. In light of Knox’s declamation regarding female monarchs, Lady Macbeth then becomes symbolic of all these misogynistic misgivings and fears about female ambition and control; not only does Lady Macbeth dominate her husband, thus wickedly upsetting the natural and Christian order of things, but she then wields her power over him to attain control of Scotland itself, as its queen; “When you durst do it, then you were a man; and to be more than what you were, you would be so much more the man,” (1.7. 49-51). By robbing her husband of his masculinity, she baits him to kill Duncan and seizes control of Scotland through him. Lady Macbeth embodies early modern fear of women, and this becomes further demonstrated upon examining her connection with supernatural and wicked spirits.

The connection between Lady Macbeth and the witches in the play becomes subtly introduced when she addresses her “Unsex me here” speech to spirits “that tend on mortal thoughts,” (1. 5. 39), and further establishes Lady Macbeth as a monstrous deviation of an already disabled woman. In speaking to plural “spirits,” she clearly does not address the God of Christendom that her audience would have accepted as the one true God (the one true religion was an entirely different matter)[[6]](#footnote-5). Furthermore, Lady Macbeth’s prayer to such spirits would have indicated that they are of a dark and unnatural force— much like the witches that her husband had encountered in Act 1, Scene 3. Shortly after her disturbing prayer, Lady Macbeth convinces her husband to kill Duncan and take his power, thus acquiring “a power over Macbeth more absolute than any of the witches can achieve” (Adelman, 138). While the idea of Lady Macbeth as a disabled woman attaining power over her husband may seem contradictory, a fascinating dichotomy regarding the disabled body exists which would explain this discrepancy. While disability is often understood as an impairment or hindrance, many also feared the physically deformed or disabled because they believed that what they lacked in certain elements of their ability, they compensated for in other senses and abilities. In this way, disability becomes “mythologized as advantage,” (Siebers, 63), and the fear of the feminine demonstrates this— women as physically inferior and weaker, but also supernaturally powerful because of their believed connection to spiritual evil and the temptation they hold for men. The early modern fear of witches further demonstrates the duality of feminine disability/supernatural evil ability, and this is better understood through the era’s contextualization of witch lore.

*Macbeth* includes several scenes with witches, and this was likely done to acknowledge or refer to the actual early modern preoccupation and fear of witches and their connection to elderly childless women. In his own work, *Daemonology,* James I of England (VI of Scotland) composes a Platonic type dialogue between Philomathes (the questioner) and Epistemon (who resembles James’ perspective) about the several different aspects and components of witchcraft. He begins by establishing that the majority of witches are female because of Eve’s sin; “that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil,” (James I, 326). Because of the sins of the first woman, all women are more susceptible to the powers of evil as Eve in her sin has established that women are spiritually weaker and less able than men. Writing from a more cynical position than James, Reginald Scot, who in his book *The Discovery of Witchcraft,* discredited witchcraft as “false and fabulous” (309). However, in spite of his obvious skepticism of the credibility of the paranoia regarding witchcraft, Scot does include a section describing popular conceptualization of what/how witches were identified:

 Witches are women which be commonly old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles; poor, sullen, superstitious, and papists; or such as know no religion: in whose drowsy minds the devil hath gotten a fine seat; so as, what mischief, mischance, calamity, or slaughter is brought to pass, they are easily persuaded the same is done by themselves; imprinting in their minds an earnest and constant imagination hereof. They are lean and deformed, showing melancholy[[7]](#footnote-6) in their faces, to the horror of all that see them… (308).

Other than conveying the clear misogyny prevalent during the time period, the popular association of witchcraft to older women would indicate that childless older women were often feared, or at the very least the most likely victims of early modern witch hunts. Furthermore, Scot also describes a variety of physical ailments: lameness, blindness, drowy minds, and specifically uses the word “deformed,” providing yet another correlation of femininity with disability and even more disturbingly, with spiritual depravity.

Lady Macbeth not only matches these descriptions as a disabled woman, but she also contacts spirits and calls for them to fill her with cruel resolve. She then inherits a position of power, and becomes the embodiment of early modern Christendom’s patriarchal fear of the feminine. Carol Thomas Neely[[8]](#footnote-7) explores this societal fear and explains it in *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture*. “The continuum of malevolence blurs the question of agency in the play as it blurs the question of the ontological status of ‘witches.’ It reproduces the period’s hovering between conflicting attributions of causality and agency: melancholy or the devil, mad-women or witches, castrating wives or ambitious tyrants,” (Thomas Neely, 59). Lady Macbeth encapsulates both the tangible resentment of feminine authority, and the wicked and unnatural feminine influence over men. Her influence over Macbeth proves just as compelling if not more so than the witches, and her pleas to be made full of “direst cruelty” (1. 5. 41) support Knox’s claims that women in power are unfit and unable to rule due to their naturally sinful and wicked nature. Lady Macbeth’s violent actions and desires in the play, support this perspective as well. Her spiritual depravity cripples the idea of a good Christian soul, thus transforming her from a weak and disabled female, to an evilly deformed monster; “and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, that my keen knife see not the wound it makes, nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,” (1.5. 49-51). Lady Macbeth herself acknowledges the darkness in her soul, and its separation from Heaven. From this point, after having witnessed her physical and spiritual deformities, her guilty conscience creates the means of her eventual mental disabling in the later acts of the play.

It is Lady Macbeth’s moral evil that leads to her madness, and by extension the loss of her mental facilities. Lady Macbeth’s condition deteriorates to the extent that she can no longer sleep at night and instead wanders about the castle in a manic state speaking wildly, “Out, damned spot; out I say” (5. 1. 30) and repeating the incantation to metaphorically “wash her hands” of her own guilt. Neely proposes that Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking juxtaposes sharply with the power-hungry and ambitious character from the early acts of the play, as she is presented now as an isolated, frail, and weakened creature (57). Neely elaborates that such erratic and strange behavior would have been attributed to an excess of melancholy (black bile), and or spiritual/moral distress, yet again emphasizing the early modern conceptualization of the body’s humors as determinant of bodily ability. Her guilty conscience has unhinged her mental faculties and has caused her to madly muse on her own crimes. As the doctor says after confining her to bed; “Unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles; infected minds / to their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets. / More needs she the divine than the physician,” (5. 1. 61-63). The physician here implies that because Lady Macbeth’s ailment is caused by spiritual torment, no amount of healing he could provide would cure her. However, Lady Macbeth is not the only patient in need of healing; the country of Scotland itself needs to be cured of its monstrous perversion and spiritual depravity, according to the British.

1. Scottish Identity as Disabled

English perceptions regarding Scottish identity at the time that Shakespeare composed *Macbeth* were somewhat mixed considering a Scottish man just ascended the throne, however, the vast majority of English society considered the Scots an inferior group of people. *Macbeth*’s first printed text appeared in the 1623 First Folio, but first performances of it have been dated around 1606— three years after the ascension of James Stuart to the throne of England (Greenblatt 835). James the VI of Scotland, inherited the English throne upon Elizabeth’s death, and Scotland and England were unified by a common monarch. Countries that for some time hence had been staunch rivals, with the Scots resenting the English greed and imperialism (harking back to the times of Edward the Longshanks and the fight for Scottish independence in eleventh century), and the English perceiving the Scots to be wild and barbaric “weasels” (Shakespeare, *Henry V,* 1. 2. 170)*,* were suddenly unified under the rule of one man. Although formal unification of the Scotland and England as Great Britain did not occur until 1707 (Rhodes, 37), this was the first step towards that unification, and these two countries each still maintained distinctive and separate identities— identities that are clearly reflected in the characterization at work in *Macbeth.* Interestingly enough, the parallel between English perceptions of Scottish identity and Shakespeare’s characterization of Lady Macbeth are clearly articulated in several historical documents on the Scots— both are depicted as wild, violent, and godless.

British anti-Scottish sentiment could supposedly be traced back to Saint Jerome and were repeated consistently throughout several sources on Scottish history.[[9]](#footnote-8) Jerome claimed that while he was in Gaul, he witnessed a Scottish youth feeding upon human flesh, “though cattle were abundant; and their dainties were the buttocks of shepherds, and the breasts of women,” (Craig, 383). Likewise, William Harrison in 1587 includes the standard English perspective of the Scots as “hard of constitution of body to bear off the cold blasts”, and “strong thieves which often spoil the country, and exercise much cruel slaughter upon such that inhabit there,” (Harrison, 25-27). This again alludes back to disability as advantageous— the hardened constitution of the Scots, resulting from their moral/spiritual disability. Furthermore, the English also believed Scotland to be land full of monsters and dark omens; “those that are given to the observations of rare and uncouth sights, believe that this beast is never seen but against some great trouble and mischief to come upon the realm of Scotland…” (Harrison, 25-27). Although the general anti-Scottish consensus in England included such accounts of Scottish savagery, violent tendencies, and its wild mysteries, it was the conceptualization of Scottish godlessness that solidified the land as debilitated.

 In *A Perfect Description of the People and Country of Scotland* (1617)*,* Sir Anthony Weldon claimed that “had Christ been betrayed in this country (as doubtless he should, had he come as a stranger), Judas had sooner found the grace of repentance, than a tree to hang himself on,” (Weldon, 293). Weldon went on to claim that the people of Scotland’s religion bared no true resemblance to Christianity; “their discourses are full of detraction, their sermons nothing but railing, and their conclusions nothing but heresies and treasons,” (Weldon, 294). He also complained that the Scots did not observe the sacraments properly, i.e. baptizing without the cross, conducting marriages without rings, receiving Eucharist and dying without formal reconciliation, and fail to observe any holy days other than those celebrating Saint Andrew. Perhaps most concerning of all, Weldon stated that the Scots did not pray because “they say it is needless; God knows their minds without prattling, and what He doth, He loves to do it freely,” (Weldon, 294-95). Being considered monstrous and savage did not help Scottish reputations, but being considered godless people was far worse. And while Weldon’s condemnation of the Scottish land and its people was scathing, his critique of Scottish women was even more so.

 In his anti-Scottish commentary, Weldon discusses Scottish women and mothers, and describes them as particularly monstrous, even amongst Scots. These descriptions, published around 1617, would have predated the first published manuscripts of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth,* and Weldon’s prejudiced and crude constitution of Scottish women closely resembles several lines from Lady Macbeth’s infamous soliloquy to the spirits. In describing the raising of Scottish youths Weldon stated, “for as soon as they fall from the breast of the beast their mother, their careful sire posts them away for France, which as they pass, the sea sucks from them that which they have sucked from their rude dams,” (Weldon, 295). By evoking the imagery of a nursing mother, Weldon’s bias closely resembles Shakespeare’s language in act 1, scene 5 of *Macbeth.* This crude depiction becomes reminiscent of Lady Macbeth describing breast feeding in a couple scenes, “come to my woman’s breasts, and take my milk for gall,” (1. 5. 45-6) and then later when she says “I have given suck, and know how tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me. I would….have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out,” (1. 7. 54-58). Both of these passages characterize her as a bestial and cruel monster, while simultaneously building upon this depiction, by relying on maternal language and imagery. When comparing these scenes to Weldon’s remarks, not only is the trope of Scottish savagery reiterated, but fear of a fertile Scottish nation and peoples becomes prominent. This becomes clearer when exploring Lady Macbeth as a potential mother figure.

When Lady Macbeth states, “I have given suck, and know how tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me,” (1. 7. 54-55), it would seem that she has had the experience of nursing a child, but then lost him/her, as there is no evidence in the play to suggest that she and Macbeth have living offspring. Provided the graphic and brutal declaration that follows the above statement, the audience clearly sees that this woman would not be a godly mother, so perhaps it is for the best she can not spread her gall and unnatural cruelty to additional generations. Lady Macbeth’s humoral imbalance, and disability prevents her from conceiving and sustaining life, but it is her disabled morality and cruel nature that demonstrates that even if she could reproduce, she would be an inhospitable mother; “the satiated and sleeping Duncan takes on the vulnerability that Lady Macbeth has just invoked in the image of the feeding, trusting infant,” (Adelman, 139). That is to say, if Lady Macbeth’s hosting ability is indicative of her maternal potential, in both counts she is unfit. When the Macbeths accept the King into their home, and then murder him in his sleep, the murder of the innocent parallels the infanticide that the villainess described to her husband, thus making Lady Macbeth an unfit mother due to her spiritual wickedness and cruelty. In keeping with the early modern understanding of the body, the correlation between immorality and physical disability as divine punishment, an evil woman such as Lady Macbeth would never be blessed with the ability to create life, when she so desperately craves and prays for the resolve and power to take and extinguish it. Likewise, the English perception of the Scots as a wickedly violent peoples would make them incapable of fruitful, peaceful, and nourishing self rule—thus making the English’s role akin to that of the physician and the Anglified Malcolm; both the English audiences and the English characters in the play, operate as the cure for the debilitated and diseased Scotland.

1. “The Divine Touch”: Anglicanization as Cure

Over the course of the act 4 scene 3, it is revealed that the English King has the ability to heal sick and afflicted subjects, because of his divinely ordained powers as a monarch. The English physician explains the king’s ability to Malcolm and Macduff, “there are a crew of wretched souls that stay his cure. Their malady convinces the great essay of his art, but at his touch, such sanctity hath Heaven given his hand, they presently amend,” (4.3.142-46). These “wretched souls” in need of a cure, parallel the English perception of the people of Scotland— wretched souls in need of saving from their godless ways. Even more convincingly, this prognosis comes to Malcolm and Macduff from a physician, who clearly accredits this supreme healing power and ability to his monarch, thus creating an image of the king as the ultimate healer and physician to his people. Upon the physician’s explanation, Macduff asks Malcolm, what disease the doctor is referring to (4.3. 148), to which Malcolm defines as “the evil” (4.3. 149), a term which also appears in William Tooker’s historical account of the healing abilities of Queen Elizabeth in 1597.

 Shakespeare’s inclusion of the idea of the divine touch of the monarch as well as those who are afflicted with “the evil”, implies that he would have read or encountered in some form “The Divine Power or Gift of Healing” by William Tooker. In this piece, Tooker describes the healing work of the queen:

Her most serene majesty lays her hands on each side of them that are sick and diseased with the evil, on the jaws, or the throat, or the affected part, and touches the sore places with her bare hands, and forthwith heals them….how often have I seen her with her exquisite hands, boldly and without disgust pressing their sores and ulcers and handling them to health….(227).

The evil to which both Tooker and Shakespeare allude is scrofula, also known as “the king’s evil,” which likely was caused by tuberculosis and caused severe swelling of the lymph nodes. It was thought to be cured by the touch of a monarch, and such is what Tooker describes. The connection between the monarch being endowed with grace and authority by God, became linked to this idea that, with such grace, also came powers of healing. Interestingly enough, following the physician’s explanation to Malcolm and Macduff, Malcolm further elaborates on the divine touch and how it combats “the evil”, and in wording closely resembling the way Tooker described Elizabeth.

 If the physician established the legitimacy of the divine touch, then Malcolm establishes the superiority of the specifically English divine touch, by implicitly creating a comparison of divinely ordained and healthy English monarchy, to the disease ridden and contagious Scottish monarchy. He begins, “a most miraculous work in this good King, which often since my here remain in England I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven himself best knows, but strangely visited people all swoll’n and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye, the mere despair of surgery he cures,” (4.3. 149-153). Immediately, Malcolm associates the miraculous works of the King to his being in England; this juxtaposes sharply with the chaotically violent and cursed state of Scotland that Macbeth has been leading during Malcolm’s stay abroad. Malcolm then elaborates on the types of conditions and maladies that the English king has been reputed to cure— those who are swollen, pitiful, full of despair and even requiring surgical procedures of some kind— all these having been described in very similar terms by Tooker in his work on Elizabeth, which emphasizes this connection between Englishness and the divine touch. Once again, a striking contrast is made between Malcolm’s experience in England and Macbeth’s experience in Scotland; Malcolm witnesses the healing power of a divinely ordained and gifted king, meanwhile Macbeth, the usurper and imposter king, cannot heal his afflicted and dying wife, and instead has to beg the inept Scottish physician to heal her;

 Cure her of that. canst thou not minister to a mind diseased, pluck from memory a rooted sorrow, raze out the written troubles of the brain and with some sweet oblivious antidote cleanse the fraught bosom of that perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart? (5. 3. 42-47).

If Macbeth were a divinely ordained monarch, he would have been able to heal his wife on his own. But since he stole the throne through murder, his reign is cursed and contaminated with moral evil, and as a wild and violent Scotsman he is unfit for self rule anyway.

 The last element of Malcolm’s description of the divine touch, also becomes the most important because of what it means for the future of the monarchy, “to succeeding royalty he leaves the healing benediction. With this strange virtue he hath a heavenly gift of prophecy, and sundry blessings hang about his throne that speak him full of grace,” (4.3. 148-159). Malcolm states that this “strange virtue and heavenly gift of prophecy” extends to all those in the English king’s line, his successors, thus establishing a dynasty of divinely ordained rulers/healers. This implies that the “healing benediction” left to the English successors, secures a healthy, strong, and blessed future for England. Once more, this provides the audience with the stark contrast between England’s flourishing kingdom, to what can only be described as the disease ridden and evil reign of the Macbeths in Scotland. The phrasing of “heavenly gift of prophecy” also foils the dark prophetic powers of the witches, who encouraged Macbeth’s subconscious ambition (both in 1.3 and 4.1), and subsequently contaminate the Scottish monarchy with their evil. It is with this juxtaposition of the healthy English monarchy and the diseased Scottish one, that the idea of the monarch as pharmakon— which can be either cure or poison— helps explain the significance of the Divine Touch of the monarch.

The anglicized Scottish Malcolm proves to be the pharmakon for the land of Scotland. The term pharmakon, from the Greek *pharmakos,* refers to a substance that can operate as either remedy or poison. Louise Noble relies upon the conceptualization of pharmakon in her piece on Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, and argues that the tradition of Roman sacrifice and the theme of cannibalism in the infamous revenge tragedy operate as both the poison which incites the vicious revenge plot of the play, but also finally as purgative cure with the hope of order re-established at its conclusion.[[10]](#footnote-9) The similar concept operates in *Macbeth* with the office of the monarchy; a monarch can either contaminate or cure their realm. For the English, Scotland would be in need of a cure for its brutish godlessness. The Macbeths, and by extension, the godless Scots demonstrate pharmakon’s poisonous effects, while Malcolm as the English influenced Scottish monarch, demonstrates the curative powers of the monarch as pharmakon.

Even though Lady Macbeth is not the sovereign, she embodies pharmakon as poison by contaminating her husband, for without her urging and infecting of her husband with her own ambition and evil, Macbeth would have never killed Duncan. When Lady Macbeth pleas to be filled with direst cruelty she becomes the contagion of Scotland’s evil. From her, the depraved violence and ambition spreads to Macbeth, and once the throne of Scotland becomes diseased, so too does the realm of Scotland; “O Scotland, Scotland! Fit to govern? No, not to live, O nation miserable with an untitled tyrant bloody-sceptered, when shalt thou see thy wholesome days again?” (4. 3. 102-106) Macduff grieves the state of his country under Macbeth and looks to Duncan’s heir as hope for Scotland’s restoration. In contrast with the Macbeths, Malcolm functions as the curative property of pharmakon; upon the murder of his father, he flees to England where he is beyond the reach of the Macbeth’s evil. From England, Malcolm seeks counsel and aid from the English king, and encounters the power of the healing touch of a divinely ordained monarch. Finally when he returns to Scotland, he uses his divinely ordained gifts as the true king of Scotland, as well as his Anglican learned abilities to cure his realm and rid the land of the Macbeth’s evil; “let’s make us medicines of our great revenge to cure this deadly grief,” (4.3. 214-16). Not only does Malcolm directly refer to himself and his cause as medicinal, he also mentions revenge as a cure— much like Noble argued in her piece analyzing Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus.* In this way, revenge almost operates as curative pharmakon, as it in a sense restores the balance of order, like a physician would attempt to restore balance of the body’s humors. Thus, the Anglicized Malcolm not only restores order and health back to Scotland, but also cures it of its wickedness and evil; none of which can be done without the aid of the English. Likewise, James I operates as pharmakon for both Scotland and England with both his masculinity/able-bodiedness and his Anglicized ways.

Ultimately, reading Malcolm’s character as a direct parallel to James I, reveals the extent of anti-Scottish sentiment in spite of a Scottish king sitting upon the throne of England. James, like Malcolm, though both being Scottish born, relocated to England, essentially renouncing his barbaric ways, and instead desiring to Anglicize himself, or at the very least distance himself from his Scottishness; “I do wonder that so brave a prince as King James, should be born in so stinking a town as Edinburgh in lousy Scotland,” (Weldon, 295). James also operates as pharmakon for England with his masculinity, curing the realm of decades of disabled feminine rule[[11]](#footnote-10) with his able bodied maleness. In these two aspects of his personhood— his Scottishness and his masculinity— James becomes England’s real pharmakon, possessing both the potential to poison England with his Scottishness, or heal it with his masculinity after years of feminine poison. Likewise, Malcolm, the Anglicanized Scottish king heals his disabled land of its evil and establishes a secure and blessed order of kingship.[[12]](#footnote-11) Similarly, by focusing on the Anglicanized nature of the Scottish born James, as well as his masculinity, James too offers these newly united kingdom’s hope for healing after the reign of a feminine and questionably

legitimate[[13]](#footnote-12), albeit English queen. Malcolm cures Scotland of Lady Macbeth’s monstrous depravity, and James ushers in an era of able bodied and healthy masculine rule in the wake of the disabled female, Elizabeth.

VII. Conclusion

In reading Lady Macbeth from the social constructionist form of disability theory, the correlation between the abstract and concrete factors of the physical environment upon the body and the character are demonstrated. Lady Macbeth reflects the social perceptions regarding women, as well as the detriments of her inhospitable, wild, and Scottish environment. Lady Macbeth’s wicked, violent, and fruitless existence allegorize the idea of an independent Scotland— perceived by the English to be wild and godless. The only means of escaping such a morally degenerate and disabled existence is either a violent, self destructive, and poisonous end like Lady Macbeth’s, or the cure of English influence and control, as Malcolm’s restoration to the throne indicates. As such, in order for Scotland to be cured, its independence must die in order to relinquish control to the more able bodied and healthy England; so when James I ascends the throne he effectively cures Scotland, by joining it with England. In this way, Lady Macbeth operates as metaphor for independent Scotland; it is weak, inferior, and godless without the English influence, much like women were perceived as weak, inferior, and godless without the influence of men. This exemplifies the intersectionality of identities, for Lady Macbeth is disabled not just physically with her sterility, but also through her sex, and her nationality. Reading Lady Macbeth as a disabled character demonstrates how disability in literature can allegorize cultural minority existence, unite readers from different identities and experiences, and consequently evoke sympathy, as well as provide political, cultural, and social commentary on minority existence— something that will prove to be just as timeless, moving, and revolutionary, as the works of William Shakespeare.

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1. Who is considered “disabled” is obviously a delicate issue; many scholars like Siebers argue that “disability” really is nothing more than society’s construction for those who deviate from the majority’s idea of the “normal” body. Siebers argues that in truth, society is divided by the presently “disabled” and the temporarily “abled-bodied”, since as the body ages, the vast majority of society will lose some aspect of their ability. However, this idea becomes controversial to some who claim that this diminishes the struggles that many presently disabled peoples face day to day. But for the sake of this paper, and my understanding of what disability is, the idea that there is a “norm” or standard for the body is erroneous and harmful to those who deviate from it, the body’s ability is best understood by considering it on a spectrum. For example; while I may appear to be abled bodied and I do claim that, I am actually considered legally blind without visual aid from correctional lenses, however my experience obviously would not be so severe compared to that of someone who suffers from cerebral palsy. However, this understanding of the body’s ability creates more sympathy and helps dismantle the idea that there is a norm for the body, but rather increases awareness that each body’s experience is different in some aspect or another, and in that we can better attempt to create heightened awareness and sensitivity towards the experiences of one another. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. There is another prevalent model of disability theory, and this is the realist construction, which is extremely useful in understanding the importance of disability theory for more social and political contexts, but ultimately since the realist conceptualization of disability would not apply to a fictional character, I did not include it in my argument. However, Siebers provides an excellent synthesis of the realist perspective in his book, *Disability Theory*, which I have already mentioned. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. In Shakespeare’s *Richard III*, the titular villain is often portrayed as having a limp, a withered arm, and sometimes a humped back. In his opening monologue he states; “I that am rudely stamped…..I that am curtailed of this fair proportion, cheated of feature by dissembling nature, deformed, unfinished, sent before my time into this breathing world scarce half made up.” (1. 1. 16-21). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Janet Adelman, a Shakespearean scholar and literary critic from Berkeley, wrote on maternity in Shakespearean drama in *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, Hamlet to the Tempest*. In her chapter on Lady Macbeth, she investigates the connection between motherhood, hospitality, and the specifically atypical marriage the Macbeths have. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. The performative aspect of Lady Macbeth’s lack of menses adds significance to the threat her femininity poses. In 1785, Lady Macbeth famously portrayed by the pregnant actress Sarah Siddons, provides a nuanced and more threatening depiction of the character (Phillips, 353), as a pregnant Lady Macbeth would create the threat of dynastic establishment. Still other, more modern productions of *Macbeth* portray Lady Macbeth as menopausal, or past child bearing years— and this portrayal would contribute to age as disability. Furthermore, a more aged and menopausal Lady Macbeth could more easily be staged/costumed as a more witch-like character (See Reginald Scot’s description of popular notions of witches). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
6. Shakespeare was writing in post Protestant Reformation era England, and this fragmentation of Christianity permeates his work. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
7. In referring to “melancholy”, this could also suggest a humoral imbalance according to the Galenic model [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
8. Carol Thomas Neely, in *Distracted Subjects: Madness and Gender in Shakespeare and Early Modern Culture,* discusses Lady Macbeth’s madness in terms of the early modern model of health; understanding madness as caused by humoral imbalance, but also discusses misogynistic perceptions of the female body and their connection to the idea of witchcraft. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
9. Accounts by John Major, John Leslie, and Boece/Harrison all include Jerome’s account of Scottish cannibalism [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
10. The piece in question, ‘“And make two pasties of your shameful heads”: Medicinal Cannibalism and Healing the Body Politic in *Titus Andronicus”* written by Louise Noble, draws from the idea of pharmakon in establishing her argument. In her explanation of the concept, she draws largely from Rene Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* (1979). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
11. Alluding back to anxiety and misgivings about the ability of women to rule, as articulated by John Knox earlier in the paper. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
12. This would be read as temporary order, as the Stuart line of kings was alleged to be descended from Fleance, Banquo’s son, and is discussed more in William Carroll’s collection of primary sources and essays titled; *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts,*  specifically in Chapter 1, “Representations of Macbeth,” (115-184). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
13. Here I allude to the questionable claim Elizabeth had to the throne. While undeniably a Tudor, because of the marriage of her father to her mother, Anne Boleyn several other European powers considered Elizabeth a bastard, thus making her unfit for the throne. In fact, many believed that Mary Stuart, former Queen of the Scots was the true Queen as she was of legitimate birth, of the Tudor line through Henry VIII’s sister, Margaret, and a Catholic. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)