



**02**

---

**Barbara  
Bočkaj**

**‘Full of scorpions is my mind’:  
Trauma in *Macbeth***

## PROFESSIONAL PAPER

BARBARA BOČKAJ

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,  
University of Zagreb

# 'Full of scorpions is my mind': Trauma in *Macbeth*

One of Shakespeare's 'great four', *Macbeth* deals intensely with the notion of sovereignty. The titular character, a soldier turned tyrant, is most often discussed in terms of his bloodthirst and dependency on the supernatural. Looking to predictions and apparitions for stability, he gradually divests himself of agency. However, not all of the apparitions are the result of supernatural forces, but could rather be viewed as a direct consequence of his role as a soldier.

The paper first establishes Macbeth as a PTSD sufferer and looks at the effects combat trauma has on him. It then moves on to recast that experience using the Lacanian notion of trauma, by looking at combat trauma as the intrusion of the pre-symbolic real, continuing with an exploration of the fantasy employed to bridge the gap between the real and the symbolic. Finally, by referring to instances of ambiguity, the paper turns to post-symbolic trauma, pointing to the different ways in which the stability of the social structure is compromised.

By using combat trauma in conjunction with Lacanian trauma theory, this paper aims to present a basis for reading *Macbeth* as a trauma narrative, and ultimately (to) pose questions about further research into the perception of veterans and PTSD in Elizabethan drama.

### KEYWORDS

**combat trauma, PTSD, pre-symbolic real, post-symbolic real**

## INTRODUCTION

The banquet scene in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* could be read as the episode in which Macbeth begins his descent into madness. But his hallucination of Banquo and the reaction it elicits raise questions about both its nature and underlying cause. To reassure the thanes, Lady Macbeth says her husband is 'often thus, / And hath been from his youth' and that '[t]he fit is momentary' (Shakespeare 3.4.53-5). Later in the scene he himself testifies to suffering from a 'strange infirmity, which is nothing / To those that know [him]' (3.4.87-8), and Lady Macbeth again urges those present to '[t]hink on this ... / But as a thing of custom' (3.4.98). This is easily interpreted as an attempt at damage limitation, but it could also be understood as an explicit reference to his suffering from PTSD. PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder, is defined as 'a condition ... result[ing] from experiencing (or witnessing) life-threatening events that extend beyond one's coping capacity' (Paulson and Krippner 1), and includes symptoms such as flashbacks, hypervigilance, feelings of anxiety, guilt, and worthlessness (15). It can also lead to virtually complete alienation (15) and experiencing vivid nightmares and night terrors, which include episodes of sleepwalking (127). It is a phenomenon that has been known since classical antiquity (Hunt and Robins 57), with recognisable symptoms and a mechanism which remains unchanged.

The aim of this essay is to look at the textual evidence that points to Macbeth suffering from the effects of combat trauma, and to see how this idea can be expanded upon by using concepts central to Lacanian trauma theory to present a basis for reading *Macbeth* as a trauma narrative. The first section of this essay establishes Macbeth as a PTSD sufferer, while the second and third sections draw parallels between aspects of the play and some notions of Lacanian trauma. In the second section, combat trauma is presented as an intrusion of the pre-symbolic real, while the last section looks at the interaction of the traumatised subject and the symbolic system.

## A STRANGE INFIRMITY

On a purely biochemical level, 'PTSD is the result of hyperarousal, which destabilizes the amygdala and autonomic nervous system, resulting in exaggerated anxiety, inhibitions, and agitation' (6). Other than the amygdala, which is the 'region of the brain that detects threat and controls defensive responses' (Southwick et al. 29), another area of the brain integral for understanding the effects of PTSD is the prefrontal cortex, which 'regulates behavior, thought, and affect' and 'plays an important

role in planning, guiding, and organizing behavior' (31). Put differently, when in a situation of uncontrollable stress, the amygdala induces the production of hormones which allow it to function at an optimal level, while at the same time inhibiting the prefrontal cortex (33). In other words, when in potentially life-threatening situations, the body dispenses with rationalising and analysing, and simply does instinctively what it needs to in order to survive. An extreme example of this happening to Macbeth is the episode reported by the bloodied Captain in 1.2.:

For brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name –  
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel  
Which smoked with bloody execution,  
Like Valour's minion carved out his passage  
Till he faced the slave –  
Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to him,  
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chops,  
And fixed his head upon our battlements. (Shakespeare 1.2.16-23)

This happens after new forces join Macdonald, possibly creating a feeling of being trapped. The reported event is clearly an episode of berserking. In the chapter dedicated to this phenomenon in his *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Jonathan Shay enumerates the triggers for this state, and alongside witnessing the death of a friend-in-arms, seeing bodies mutilated by the enemy, and being wounded, being surrounded or overrun features on the list. When berserking, a soldier is completely disconnected from their surroundings, killing indiscriminately, completely inattentive to their safety, devoid of fear and insensible to pain, or – in a word – frenzied. They might also see themselves, retrospectively of course, as godlike or beastlike. The situation the soldier is in gets narrowed down to a single aim, which is to cause as much destruction as possible. And that is precisely what Macbeth does when he '[l]ike Valour's minion carvels] out his passage' to face Macdonald. Berger cites one of the meanings of the word 'minion' as 'a piece of light artillery' (H. Berger 11), which would imply a certain dose of imprecision or haphazardness. Along with 'carving out a passage,' the phrase indicates a forceful charge through the crowd, irrespective of their affiliation. 'Disdaining Fortune', i.e. recklessly and without caring about any possible consequences, he charges through the battlefield until he meets Macdonald, does not honour military courtesy rituals (Shakespeare 97n21), and only stops after eviscerating and decapitating his opponent. His detachment and frenzy are commented on later by Ross when he references the fact that Macbeth was 'Inlothing afeard of what [he himself did] make / Strange images of death' (1.3.95-6). And yet, it is precisely these 'strange images of death' that come back to haunt Macbeth again and again.

Apart from being responsible for automatic reactions to stress, the amygdala also plays a significant role in 'encoding and consolidation of memory for events and stimuli that are arousing, stressful, or fear-provoking' (Southwick et al. 29). An important thing to note here is that the details perceived as the most dangerous are recalled more vividly, while the rest of the scene is 'less effectively bound together', resulting in a fragmentation of the event and effectively incomplete memory (Brewin 135). What is behind traumatic memories is the purely evolutionary mechanism that is supposed to increase one's chances of survival should one find oneself in a similar life-threatening situation (Hunt and Robbins 60). For that reason, the memories must be easily and quickly accessible and contain all the necessary details. The implication is that encoding the memories into verbal memory will slow down the retrieval considerably, which is why they are encoded into what is called implicit memory (Hunt and Robbins 59) or the situationally accessible memory system, i.e. SAM (Brewin 140). Therefore, a situation reminiscent of the original traumatic event, i.e. containing 'trauma cues', (135) triggers the activation of information stored in the SAM system, which includes not only images, but also sounds and the person's physical reaction to the traumatic event, such as their heart rate, changes in body temperature, and pain (140), effectively making them re-live it. It is no wonder then that Macbeth is so preoccupied with this particular symptom. The first example of it is his aside in 1.3., where he attempts to understand the nature of the Sisters' prophecy, and says that '[p]resent fears / Are less than horrible imaginings' (Shakespeare 1.3.136-7), juxtaposing the moment and action with time extended and thought (primarily visual – *imaginings*). The next notable instance are the following lines in his first soliloquy:

if the assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
With his surcease, success, that but this blow  
Might be the be-all and end-all – here ...

But in these cases  
We still have judgement here, that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return  
To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice  
Commends th'ingredients of our poisoned chalice  
To our own lips. (1.7.2-13)

Naturally, he is referring to the inevitable revenge that would follow should the king be murdered. However, given the wider context of the play, i.e. the prominence of the military aspect along with the killings that take place, the lines quoted above could well be understood as his reference

to PTSD. If there was nothing more to it than the single fatal hit, if the act of assassination could contain all effects in the here and now, he would 'jump the life to come' (1.7.7). However, he is conscious of the fact that judgement, the leveller, would use the 'bloody instructions' to 'plague' him. It should be noted that the verb 'to trammel up' implies hunting (Shakespeare 117n3). In the chapter on hunting in *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*, Lewis mentions Catherine Bates' analysis of 'hunting scenes in sixteenth-century literature as a sight [of] competing claims of masculine potency' (44). In light of this, it could be claimed that the ability to deal with PTSD symptoms is an indication of masculinity, and, consequently, that an inability to handle trauma could be understood as signs of effeminacy.

If the chalice that is poisoned is taken to imply the 'cup used in the communion service' (Shakespeare 118n11), the lines quoted above point to yet another symptom – isolation. The bloody instructions turn into the poisonous content of the chalice in a perversion of transubstantiation, not only plaguing him physically, but also excluding him socially. The use of spiritual imagery could here be interpreted as emphasizing the importance that community, i.e. emotional support, has for trauma sufferers. An instance proving the significance social relationships have for him is Lady Macbeth's fretting about his 'nature / [which] is too full o'th' milk of human kindness' (1.5.15-6). With milk interpreted as a source of nourishment (H. Berger 26), and kindness evoking kin and kind besides warm-heartedness, the phrase could be unpacked to mean that Macbeth puts great stock in personal relationships. Another case in point is his saying that he would 'Inlot cast aside so soon' the golden opinions he bought 'from all sorts of people' (Shakespeare 1.7.32-5), implying that praise and acceptance play a significant role in his life.

There are a couple of examples of Macbeth's apartness. The first one is in 1.3., when he launches into a series of asides after hearing he has been made Thane of Cawdor. Whether the asides are understood as an internal monologue verbalised for the audience's sake or his speaking to himself, they testify to his tendency to get lost in thought and distance himself from those around him. The same thing happens immediately after Duncan's murder in 2.2, where Macbeth seems stuck on understanding his paralysis in the episode with Duncan's chamberlains, completely disregarding his wife's comments. An example of physical isolation is his 'keeping [himself] till supper-time alone' in 3.1. (likely also evoking the image of a keep, with all its impenetrableness and detachedness), which is later remarked on by Lady Macbeth in 3.2. But possibly the most convincing argument in favour of his isolation is the lack of understanding between the spouses. A telling example is the difference in their conceptualisation of taking a life. He finds the 'horrible imaginings'

so unsettling that the 'horrid image ... unfix[es his] hair,' 'makes [his] ... heart pound' and 'shake[s] ... [his] single state of man' (1.3.), the 'black and deep desires' make his eye afraid to look on what's done (1.4.), the 'assassination' and 'bloody instructions ... return[ing] / To plague' him are 'th'ingredience of [the] poisoned chalice,' a 'deep damnation' and a 'horrid deed' (1.7.), the 'filling of his] mind' (suggesting both defilement and a sharpness, a sensitivity to stimuli; 3.1.). She, on the other hand, perceives it as 'the nearest way,' 'mortal thoughts' and 'great business' (1.5.). The imagery he uses is much more visceral and focuses on the effect such an act would have on him, whereas she does not even touch on the consequences. But the difference is arguably most pronounced in their invocations. While Macbeth asks for cover of darkness so that '[t]he eye [would] wink at the hand' (1.4.53), Lady Macbeth needs the night so her 'keen knife [could] see not the wound it makes' (1.5.51). The displacement of agency in her case implies either that she does not understand the consequences of the act, or that she wishes to distance herself from the possible effects she is witnessing in her husband's character, without realising that the immediacy of the experience cannot be negotiated. A further example of the difference can be found in 2.2. when Macbeth comments on the fact that 'all great Neptune's ocean' (2.2.59) could not wash the blood off his hands, whereas she is convinced that '[a] little water clears [them] of this deed' (2.2.66). Another interesting aspect of their communication is the usage of 'you/thou,' with 'you' signalling a dose of formality and distance, and 'thou' familiarity and closeness. She appears to use 'thou' when she manipulates him emotionally, as in 'From this time, / Such I account thy love' (1.7.38-9), whereas he resorts to it in times of genuine distress like in 'Didst thou not hear a noise?' (2.2.15) immediately after the murder of Duncan, and when opening up about what is troubling him: 'O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife - / Thou know'st that Banquo and his Fleance lives' (3.2.39-40).

Returning to the scene featuring Banquo's ghost, Lady Macbeth tries to calm her husband by pointing to the fact that '[t]his is the very painting of [his] fear' (painting not only implying the image of what he fears, but also his fear making him see images), the same kind of vision that '[l]ed [him] to Duncan' (3.4.61; 63). The scene could be read as establishing PTSD as the phantasmatic elephant in the room (or alternatively raising questions about the discussion of PTSD in that society). Consider the following lines:

You make me strange  
Even to the disposition that I owe,  
When now I think you can behold such sights  
And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,  
When mine is blanched with fear. (3.4.113-7)



'Such sights' might be taken to mean experiencing an episode that could be recognised by other soldiers as having a flashback, i.e. experiencing a vivid hallucination. He is saying that their indifference makes him feel that having such life-like intrusive images is not normal, the implication being that even those that have shared his experience of war do not or cannot understand him. An argument in favour of PTSD being a well-known phenomenon is the comment made by Caithness in 5.2. about people calling Macbeth's madness 'valiant fury' (14). There is also Ross' reference to 'strange images of death,' implying that cases of berserking, with their characteristic and unusual ferocity, were a familiar occurrence (Ross was not present when the Captain delivered his report). Another slightly obscured reference could be the following lines delivered by Banquo: 'New honours come upon him / Like our strange garments cleave not to their mould / But with the aid of use' (1.3.145-7). With the intervention of two commas, embedding 'like our strange garments', the lines could be understood to mean the following: his new title will take some getting used to, much like our 'strange garments' did. This phrase, in turn, could be a direct reference to their role as soldiers. The adjective is used four times up until that point – twice to imply that something is unfathomable and curious ('strange intelligence' in 1.3.76 and 'tis strange' in line 123), and twice in contexts of battle (as when Lennox comments on Ross' appearance in 1.2.47 – he looks like a man '[t]hat seems to speak things strange', a man that then goes on to give a report on yet another bloody skirmish – and in the aforementioned 'strange images of death'). This context, in conjunction with the image of a mould (implying a negative space, a hollowness), and the necessity of an adjustment period, could refer to the fact that it takes time to learn to manage the innate responses stemming from the visceral physicality of war.

## **SINGLE STATE OF MAN**

In analysing trauma in *Macbeth*, one might also resort to employing certain aspects characteristic of the Lacanian notion of trauma. This section will look at the ways in which combat trauma could be interpreted as an intrusion of the pre-symbolic real.

In *Trauma, Ethics and the Political beyond PTSD: The Dislocations of the Real* Gregory Bistoien defines the pre-symbolic real as 'a domain of immediate experience' only reaching consciousness by 'being filtered through representation' such as memory (64). Before entering the process of signification, the body is 'the prime example of the pre-symbolic real' (66) by virtue of the fact that it is 'delivered to a multitude of bodily urges and sensations' resulting in a rise in sensory tension (67). In that case, trauma



is the resurfacing of something disruptive that fractures the constructed perception of the body (80). As the senses sharpen, the body is flooded with sensory information, both internal and external. It is this physicality of the pre-symbolic (if taken out of the context of developmental psychology – non-symbolic) real, a physicality so intense it is traumatising, that is also present in the experience of combat. A variety of innate and automatic fear responses such as 'freezing behaviors, alterations in heart rate and blood pressure, ... and release of stress hormones' (Southwick et al. 29) are set in motion, facilitating quick response. As has been noted, due to the fact that the ultimate objective is to survive the current event and any other that would be equally threatening, the body ensures that the information is stored in a format that would be quickly retrievable. It is encoded as implicit memory, with the most salient details coming to the fore at times of exposure to trauma cues. In other words, it is situationally accessible. The experience is re-lived in a barrage of images and physical sensations, i.e. it is not symbolised through language, with aspects of it remaining unsymbolisable (this characteristic is touched upon below). However, by virtue of this being a play, the characters have to tell us what they see and sense in order for us to understand the effect it has on them. A case in point and the first example in the play of *Macbeth* having an unsettling physical reaction is his assumption that the Sisters' prophecy is true. Yet the suggestion that he might be king – which in his mind implies murder if the 'murder of his thought' is taken as a parapraxis, accounting for the fact that the image is 'horrid' – 'doth unfix [his] hair / And make [his] seated heart knock at [his] ribs / Against the use of nature' and '[s]hakes ... his single state of man' to the point where he can do nothing else but focus on the image, i.e. 'what is not' (Shakespeare 1.3.136-8; 141; 143). As the situation grows in complexity, this initial reaction grows into anxiety, which is often also present in PTSD sufferers (Paulson and Krippner 7). Upon hearing that Fleance managed to escape he says that he would have been 'whole as the marble, founded as the rock, / As broad, and general, as the casing air' if the plan had worked, but that he is now 'cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears' (Shakespeare 3.4.22-5). The stability and freedom of movement implied in the first set of images is thrown into sharp relief by the second set packed with images of night on claustrophobic confinement. The notion of being bound in fears grows into the image of bear-baiting: 'They have tied me to a stake, I cannot fly, / But bear-like I must fight the course' (5.7.1-2), evoking not only feelings of being cornered, but also the potential for causing harm that Macbeth has (compare to the berserking episode).

In light of this, the dagger soliloquy could be read as an intrusion of one such vivid image. As Macbeth prepares to kill Duncan, his body enters a state of hyperarousal. He is himself aware of the fact that the 'fatal vision'

is a product of his 'heat-oppressed brain,' and yet it is 'in form as palpable' (i.e. is uncannily realistic) as the dagger he then proceeds to draw. As soon as the drops of blood appear on the blade, he is settled on the fact that it 'is the bloody business which informs / Thus to [his] eyes' (2.1.49-50) (the phrase is easily extended to mean killing in general, not simply killing Duncan). The episode also highlights the idea that he cannot fully rely on his senses: 'Mine eyes are made the fools o'th' other senses, / Or else worth all the rest' (2.1.45-6). It also testifies to the disorientation that this unreliability produces, as evidenced by the syntax of the central part, which is quite confusing, as embedded clauses make it difficult to follow the train of thought. Even the mention of 'Tarquin's ravishing strides' with which he moves 'towards his design' (2.1.56) references the physiology of the mounting tension and excitement over the execution of the act. The soliloquy deals intensely with perception and sensory overload typical of flashbacks. They are a type of implicit memory that can be triggered by a variety of situational trauma cues, external and internal alike (Brewin 140). What might explain the drops of blood is the fact that flashbacks are not a literal record but 'an imaginative extension' of the experience (135).

Another argument in favour of the fact that combat trauma is an 'immediate experience', that it is unsymbolisable as it were, i.e. that there are aspects of it that cannot be verbalized but can be recognized and understood, is the fact that veterans very often only talk openly about their combat experience with other veterans because "they are the only ones who 'understand'" (Hunt and Robbins 62). This impossibility of effective communication probably accounts for Lady Macbeth's lack of understanding, and taking his reactions (i.e. symptoms) for a sign of weakness.

In the mirror stage of psychological development, the 'fragmented experience of inner chaos [is transformed into] the experience of the body as a whole' (Bistoien 68), owing to the fact that the integrity of the body image is vital in a person's perception of themselves as 'a consistent and stable entity' (71). In light of the PTSD symptoms and the effects of traumatic experiences on the body that have been discussed above, it is no great stretch to claim that the state a PTSD sufferer is in is one of deep fracturing at the very least. The intuitive and unknowable, the jumble of urges and drives is pitted against the regulating rational other, with the added insecurity of sudden losses of control. In the mirror stage, the drives are regulated in the process of identification, where the image transforms the conflicting desires into an illusion of unity. Identification is therefore 'defense through misrecognition' whereby 'internal chaos [is actively denied] in favour of a (false) sense of mastery' (68). A parallel mechanism at work after the process of signification is a recourse to

various fantasies. In Macbeth's case the fantasy includes the male social role of a warrior.

## **FAIR IS FOUL, AND FOUL IS FAIR**

Due to the fact that the symbolic entails dependence on language, subject and reality alike are perceived as 'inherently instable structures' (59). In order to compensate for that, fantasies are employed as a mechanism that attempts to bridge the gap between the symbolic and the real, thereby promising wholeness and closure, allowing for a degree of consistency in reality (59; 66). Owing to the need to establish some sort of structure and order after the collapse of signification, 'the ideological narrative fetishes that permit the denial of symptoms' existence and power ... become ... the constitution of a new symbolic order' (J. Berger 566). Macbeth, in an attempt to bridle the effects of PTSD, resorts to the social and gender role of 'a man'. Throughout the play the word is used to imply courage and strength, as when Macbeth says 'I dare do all that may become a man' (Shakespeare 1.7.46), or the absence of those qualities, as in Lady Macbeth's trying to shame him into composure by asking: 'Are you a man?' (3.4.58). It is also clearly 'associated with violence made ... acceptable through the ritual of warfare' (Asp 154), and can thereby be understood to imply 'warrior'. Experiencing combat is a rite of passage, a condition to be met in order to qualify as 'a man,' as testified by the nameless 'unrough youths that even now / Protest their first of manhood' (Shakespeare 5.2.10-11), and young Seyward who 'only lived but till he was a man ... [and] like a man ... died' (5.7.70-3), like a soldier loyal to his legitimate sovereign. It is precisely as an emblem of 'manliness and soldiery that maintain[s] the cohesiveness of the tribe' (Asp 154) that Macbeth enters the scene. As a result, any sign of sensitivity in 'a man' is perceived as 'either degrading or counter-productive' (155). The fact that it is Macduff, however, who 'feel[s] ... like a man' (Shakespeare 4.3.221) that finally confronts and kills Macbeth points to the co-existence of two perceptions of the role. Macduff and Banquo, who is a threat because he 'hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour' (3.1.52), represent the balanced kind, 'integrat[ing] both feminine and masculine' (Asp 155), i.e. curbing the emotional and instinctive with the rational. Macbeth, on the other hand, seems to miss the importance of such a balance, taking the concept of valour as vital.

Even though the stereotypical male social role, with its ascribed modes of behaviour, serves as a scaffold, a crutch propping him up, the fantasy is shown to be easy to manipulate. After the 'If it were done when 'tis done' soliloquy, Macbeth decides not to go forward with regicide. '[W]

ith the valour of [her] tongue' (Shakespeare 1.5.26) Lady Macbeth then moves to subvert his male role (the phrase establishing a clear parallel between her skill as an orator and as a warrior). By introducing the idea of valour, the central concept he relies on, she ensures a reaction. She first calls him a coward, and then proceeds to say that he was a man when he dared kill Duncan, when neither the moment nor the place were fitting, but he was nevertheless bent on finding a way. Juxtaposing it with the present, when all circumstances present him with a perfect opportunity and he does nothing, she emphasizes the idea that time and place seem to have robbed him of his agency, thereby introducing a stereotypically female characteristic of passivity. The final nail in the coffin are the famous lines on her theoretical babe, where she effectively says that she would go against what is her natural duty as a mother (ensuring the infant's safety) if she had made a similarly binding oath. In other words, she compares his inability to do what his role as a man encompasses with her (hypothetically) doing what is diametrically opposite to her role, thereby emasculating him. But she tactfully focuses on herself so that it would not feel as a direct attack on him. During the banquet scene, however, she dispenses with the tact and openly compares him to a woman:

O these flaws and starts,  
Impostors to true fear, would well become  
A woman's story at a winter's fire,  
Authorizes by her grandam – shame itself,  
Why do you make such faces? (3.4.63-7)

As of yet unaware of the intensity of such 'flaws and starts', she accuses him of being overly dramatic, like a woman telling stories. This is the culmination of gradated imagery established in 2.2. when she chides him for not wanting to return to Duncan's chamber: 'the sleeping, and the dead, / Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil' (2.2.52-4). Along with the 'painting of [his] fear' that cause 'these flaws and starts', the imagery refers to a time when male and female children were still in the female sphere of influence, their gender not differentiated (Lamb 530).

Seeing as how the process of identification does not lead to the formation of a stable and final identity (Bistoën 70), the inconclusiveness drives it forward 'in an endless cycle' (70). This, in turn, results in a series of fantasies being formed (70). And it is the Weïrd Sisters that present Macbeth with a new one. With the uncertainty that comes with suffering from PTSD, the fantasy of occupying the position of king symbolically offers stability, given the fact that the position of a king is one of absolute authority and control, the topmost position in the social order. In light of

that, the perceived security that it implies is an *objet a*, which Bistoën defines as that which 'drives desire forward' (89), and what Macbeth refers to as his 'vaulting ambition' (Shakespeare 1.7.27). The act of regicide itself, however, is the traumatic event which 'pulls away the imaginary cover' (Bistoën 59), exposing the real behind the fantasy. At the heart of that role for Macbeth was the idea of valour, encompassing courage on the battlefield and the social standing and reputation it results in. The circumstances of the regicide, the fact that it was an assassination of a benevolent king, as opposed to, for example, killing a tyrant in hand-to-hand combat, point to a lack of valour, shattering the structure he depended on for stability. The severity of the consequences of regicide is obvious in the following lines: 'Better be with the dead, / Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, / Than on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy' (Shakespeare 3.2.21-4). The only other instance of the word 'ecstasy' being used in the play is in 4.3, when Ross comments on the state of affairs in Scotland, calling it their grave, a place '[w]here sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rend the air / Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems / A modern ecstasy' (4.3.168-170). The mass trauma resulting from Macbeth's reign could partly be explained by the fact that '[r]epeated reexposures [to traumatic events] may evolve into permanent neural pathways, consolidating behaviors ... that may become functionally independent of original stimuli' (Paulson and Krippner 6). In other words, feeling threatened in any way and responding violently may have become Macbeth's mode of functioning. His violence is 'a symptomatic and repetitive acting out,' as opposed to a 'therapeutic, narrative working through' (J. Berger 568). Working through does not seem like an option for him, given the fact that his wife (and society) might take any show of emotion as a sign of weakness, thereby further isolating him.

When he ascends the throne he is faced with another difficulty – progeny. He becomes obsessed with the fact that he has no children, i.e. potential heirs. The case of revolt against Duncan shows just how unstable the system of tanistry is (naming Malcolm heir was arguably Duncan's attempt to introduce a dose of stability). Having no children would go against the central requirements of the role of king and would be, somewhat paradoxically, a manifestation of social instability, or in other words another *objet a*, which Bistoën also defines as a materialisation of the negativity, i.e. the lack, that the real implies (102). The absence of children, therefore, could be understood as an indication of the post-symbolic real, which is defined as a signal of the 'constitutive incompleteness of any symbolic structure' (81). Children, with no ascribed gender (until boys were 'breech'd' at the age of five – Lamb 530) and social role, can also be interpreted as ambiguity incarnate. It then makes perfect sense for Macbeth to stop talking about offspring after visiting the Sisters in 4.1,

as he is certain that he is not in danger. The scene also capitalizes on the fact that children are unmarked, so to speak, to further complicate the interpretation of the prophecy. The First Apparition, an armed head, is fairly straightforward when it tells him to 'beware Macduff, / Beware the Thane of Fife' (Shakespeare 4.1.85-6), whereas the other two are less explicit. The Second Apparition takes the form of a bloody child, while the last one appears as a crowned child, holding a tree. It is only in Act 5 that we understand what the prophecies meant, but the visual ambiguity of the children warns that their wording is not to be interpreted literally (unlike the prophecies from 1.3., or the one given by the First Apparition).

The prominent position given to the Weïrd Sisters should also be touched upon. They are the ones we see first, they set things in motion by promising Macbeth a change of social role, but other than that their attributes make them a dominant marker of the overarching idea of instability. They do not look 'like th'inhabitants o'th' earth' (1.3.41) but are on it, seem to hover between being fantastical (1.3.53), i.e. what 'man may question' (1.3.43), and that 'which outwardly [they] show' (1.3.54), and they exhibit both female and male characteristics – look like women, but have beards. They are human, but are associated with the spiritual world. They are also guilty of amphibology, 'the worst ... vice in rhetoric,' or to use a more familiar term, ambiguity – 'speaking or writing doubtfully, [so] that the sence [sic] may be taken in two ways' (Mullaney 36). A case in point is the famous 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (Shakespeare 1.1.11), which clearly denotes an elision of boundaries, a bleeding of one meaning into another, highlighting the symbolic as inherently unstable. The line is formally in grammatical present, but it is interesting to note that the previous lines referred to futurity. Therefore, we are left wondering about the deep structure of the utterance – is the situation already unstable, or will the instability be provoked (possibly by what we are about to see and hear)? Although their primary function is that of prophesying, knowing the future is only achieved through dark magic. '[T]he ingredients of [their] cauldron' (4.1.34), all coming together in a perversion of nature, testify to the unnaturalness of such knowledge. It is an unravelling of structure, presaging the societal effects it will have.

As such, their ambiguous characteristics and position of liminality serve to intimate the real. In that respect, Banquo's dream of them could be understood to signal his own suppressed desire, and by extension the inherent instability of the social system, seeing as how the meaning of dreams is an effect of the symbolic system (the Other), against which both the subject and reality are formed (Bistoën 77, 58-9). By mentioning the dream to Macbeth in 2.1. he draws attention to the fact that he too is preoccupied with who sits on the throne, establishing himself as a threat.



As soon as Macbeth ascends the throne and realises he cannot provide an heir, he starts eliminating all those who endanger his position.

When Banquo's 'ghost' comes back to haunt Macbeth, it is not just as a reflection of the blood spilt to ensure security. The 'fit' is brought on by hearing that Fleance escaped, which makes him feel anxious and cornered, setting off an intense physical reaction. He sees Banquo, 'the root and father / Of many kings' (Shakespeare 3.1.5-6), sitting on the throne, having unnaturally risen from his grave. The hallucination not only reminds him of what the Sisters prophesied to Banquo, but also stresses the precariousness of his position – a childless monarch is a dead man walking. What comes back to haunt Macbeth is the real.

## CONCLUSION

What is very often emphasized when it comes to *Macbeth* is the titular character's power of fantasy and the vividness of the imagery. Given the fact that Macbeth is primarily a soldier, the power of his fantasy could be pathological. The play provides us with a couple of telling episodes proving that he has suffered combat trauma. The episode of berserking when fighting Macdonald, after which he is lauded for his valour, shows him to be a man haunted by scenes from the battlefield, a reminder of the fragility of the body.

On account of the intensity of physical sensations experienced, combat trauma can also be understood as the intrusion of the pre-symbolic/non-symbolic real. In order for the person to function, an illusion of wholeness and stability needs to be maintained, which necessitates the employment of a series of fantasies upon entering the symbolic. In the case of Macbeth, initially it is the fantasy of his social role as a soldier, which is proven to be inherently unstable post-regicide as the act points to a lack of valour, a concept Macbeth finds central to this image. After his ascension to the throne, the real again asserts itself in the absence of heirs, signalling not just the inherent instability of the role, but the system at large.

Drawing on characteristics central to concepts of Lacanian trauma theory to expand combat trauma shows that *Macbeth* can be read as a trauma narrative. Although the mechanisms of PTSD were a mystery, the presence of symptoms in a context of civil war and warrior society points to the fact that the phenomenon was not altogether unknown in the early modern period. As 'madness' it might well have been subsumed under the umbrella term of 'melancholy', perceived as symptomatic of an excess of



black bile. The question that arises is whether those melancholics were in any way considered to be different, i.e. whether any allowances were made for the fact that they experienced combat. If so, re-interpreting characters such as Macbeth and Coriolanus, while keeping in mind the specificity of their mentality and interaction with their immediate environment, might shed new light on their contexts.

## WORKS CITED

- Asp, Carolyn. "Be Bloody, Bold and Resolute": Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in "Macbeth", *Studies in Philology*, vol. 78, no. 2, 1981, pp. 153-169. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/4174071](http://www.jstor.org/stable/4174071).
- Berger, James. 'Trauma Without Disability, Disability Without Trauma: A Disciplinary Divide,' Part 2: *Trauma and Rhetoric*, special issue of *JAC*, vol. 24, no. 3, 2004, pp. 563-582. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/20866643](http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866643).
- Berger, Harry, Jr. 'The Early Scenes of MacBeth: Preface to a New Interpretation,' *ELH*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1980, pp. 1-31. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2872436](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872436).
- Bistoën, Gregory. 'The Lacanian Concept of the Real and the Psychoanalytical Take on Trauma,' *Trauma, Ethics, and the Political beyond PTSD: The Dislocations of the Real*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 53-82.
- Bistoën, Gregory. 'The Lacanian Concept of the Real in Relation to the Ethics of Psychoanalysis,' *Trauma, Ethics, and the Political beyond PTSD: The Dislocations of the Real*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, pp. 83-103.
- Brewin, Chris R. 'Encoding and Retrieval of Traumatic Memories,' *Neuropsychology of PTSD: Biological, Cognitive, and Clinical Perspectives*, edited by Vasterling, Jennifer J., and Chris R. Brewin. The Guilford Press, 2005, pp. 131-150.
- Hunt, Nigel and Ian Robbins. 'Telling Stories of the War: Ageing Veterans Coping with Their Memories through Narrative,' *Oral History*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1998, pp. 57-64. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/40179522](http://www.jstor.org/stable/40179522).
- Lamb, Mary Ellen. 'Engendering the Narrative Act: Old Wives' Tales in "The Winter's Tale", "Macbeth", and "The Tempest",' *Criticism*, vol. 40, no. 4, 1998, pp. 529-553. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/23124315](http://www.jstor.org/stable/23124315).
- Lewis, Rhodri. 'Hamlet, Hunting, and the Nature of Things,' *Hamlet and the Vision of Darkness*, Princeton UP, 2017, pp. 43-111.
- Mullaney, Steven. 'Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation and Treason in Renaissance England,' *ELH*, vol. 47, no. 1, 1980, pp. 32-47. JSTOR, [www.jstor.org/stable/2872437](http://www.jstor.org/stable/2872437).

Paulson, Daryl S. and Stanley Krippner. *Haunted by Combat: Understanding PTSD in War Veterans Including Women, Reservists, and Those Coming Back from Iraq*. Praeger Security International, 2007.

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Nicholas Brooke, Oxford UP, 2008.

Shay, Jonathan. 'Berserk,' *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, Scribner, 1994, pp.77-102.

Southwick, Steven M. et al. 'Neurobiological and Neurocognitive Alterations in PTSD: A Focus on Norepinephrine, Serotonin, and the Hypothalamic–Pituitary–Adrenal Axis.' *Neuropsychology of PTSD: Biological, Cognitive, and Clinical Perspectives*, edited by Vasterling, Jennifer J., and Chris R. Brewin. The Guilford Press, 2005, pp. 27-58.