Research Journal in Advanced Humanities

RJAH

https://doi.org/10.58256/ra7f8t74

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RESEARCH ARTICLE **Section:** *Literature, Linguistics & Criticism*

Reading power, violence, and gender anxiety in Shakespeare's Macbeth: Re-reading the play in a contemporary context

Rommel Mahmoud AlAli[1], Mohammad Ahmad Shehadeh Alomari[2], Aayesha Sagir Khan[3] & Ali Abdullatif[4]

[1]The National Research Center for Giftedness and Creativity, King Faisal University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

[2]Special Education Department, Faculty of Educational Sciences, Ajloun National University (ANU), Jordan

[3]Faculty of Languages and Translation, King Khalid University, KSA

[4]Department of Arabic Language, College of Arts, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia

*Correspondence: ralali@kfu.edu.sa

ABSTRACT

This manuscript argues that Macbeth is best understood not simply as a tragedy of vaulting ambition, but as a dense dramatic inquiry into the unstable relationship among sovereign power, spectacular violence, and gender anxiety. Through close reading and interdisciplinary synthesis, the essay shows that the play imagines kingship as a problem of legitimacy that is never fully separable from force. Duncan's rule depends upon military violence, Macbeth's rise converts publicly sanctioned violence into terroristic self-preservation, and Malcolm's restoration remains shadowed by the same structures of martial masculinity that enabled the usurpation in the first place. At the level of imagery and embodiment, Macbeth repeatedly stages wounded, violated, and threatened bodies: the bleeding captain, the floating dagger, the murdered sleepers, Banquo's ghost, Lady Macduff and her child, Macduff's "pretty chickens," and Lady Macbeth's compulsively washing hands. These bodies are not incidental. They are the means by which political order is made visible, contested, and internalized.

The essay further contends that gender anxiety is not a secondary theme but one of the principal motors of the tragedy. Lady Macbeth's prayer to be "unsexed," the witches' bearded bodies, the recurrent language of milk, gall, birth, and children, and the repeated testing of manhood all indicate that Macbeth locates political crisis in unstable fantasies about sex, gender, and reproduction. Masculinity in the play requires constant proof; femininity is idealized as nurture and simultaneously feared as a source of disorder; and reproductive futurity becomes a field of intense violence. A contemporary re-reading therefore reveals Macbeth as an uncannily durable drama of authoritarian desire, toxic masculinity, crisis rhetoric, charisma, media spectacle, and the destruction of intimate life by militarized politics.

To make that contemporary argument, the essay brings established Shakespeare criticism into conversation with broader theoretical work on sovereignty, trauma, affect, performativity, and adaptation, while also drawing on twenty sources from Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies as an interdisciplinary bridge to current debates on women's empowerment, media representation, digital democracy, marginalization, gendered labor, trauma, and collective violence. The conclusion is that Macbeth endures because it shows how power secured through violence produces not mastery but psychic disintegration, institutional fragility, and a permanently anxious theater of gender.

KEYWORDS: Macbeth, Shakespeare, power, violence, gender anxiety, sovereignty, toxic masculinity, witchcraft, adaptation, contemporary criticism

Research Journal in Advanced Humanities

Volume 7, Issue 2, 2026

ISSN: 2708-5945 (Print)

ISSN: 2708-5953 (Online)

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted: **20 December 2025**

Accepted: 20 **March 2026**

Published: 14 **April 2026**

HOW TO CITE

AlAli, R. M., Alomari, M. A. S., Sagir Khan, A., & Abdullatif, A. (2026). Reading power, violence, and gender anxiety in Shakespeare's Macbeth: Re-reading the play in a contemporary context. *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, *7*(2). https://doi.org/10.58256/ra7f8t74

Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Royallite Global, an imprint of Royallite Publishers Limited

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1. Introduction

Macbeth begins in a paradox. Before the protagonist appears on stage, he is already famous, but what makes him famous is not stable virtue, prudent judgment, or ceremonial legitimacy. It is a report of violence. The play's first substantial description of Macbeth presents him as a warrior who "unseam'd" his enemy "from the nave to th' chops" and fixed the traitor's head upon the battlements (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.2.22–23). That image is easy to domesticate as the brutal but necessary heroism of feudal war. Yet it also introduces the deepest anxiety of the tragedy: if public order depends upon bodies opened, severed, displayed, and disciplined, by what principle can legitimate sovereignty distinguish itself from murderous force? Macbeth does not begin as the negation of social order. He begins as one of its most efficient instruments. The action that follows therefore does not simply oppose rightful rule to violent usurpation. It stages the unnerving recognition that the violence used to preserve a kingdom can be redirected inward, naturalized as necessity, and rebranded as political reason.

That is why Macbeth remains one of Shakespeare's most contemporary tragedies. Readers return to it not because it yields a single timeless moral about ambition, but because it relentlessly exposes the unstable technologies through which power is won, narrated, gendered, embodied, and defended. Political legitimacy in the play depends upon language, prophecy, spectacle, and emotional management as much as upon arms. Violence does not merely occur in Macbeth; it circulates as a grammar of statecraft, intimacy, desire, and fear. Gender is not merely represented in that system; it is one of the forms through which the system secures obedience and produces crisis. The play's most famous lines—"unsex me here," "when you durst do it, then you were a man," "I dare do all that may become a man," "be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck," and "I must also feel it as a man"—show a world in which political action is continuously tested through unstable scripts of masculinity and femininity (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.5.40; 1.7.49; 1.7.46; 3.2.45; 4.3.221). The result is a tragedy in which the state cannot be understood apart from the household, and the household cannot be understood apart from militarized conceptions of gender.

A large body of criticism has illuminated these dynamics from different angles. Earlier criticism often emphasized Macbeth's imagination, conscience, and moral disintegration, reading the tragedy as an inward drama of temptation and guilt (Bradley, 2007; Rosenberg, 1978). Feminist and psychoanalytic critics then demonstrated that Macbeth's crisis is also a crisis of sexual difference, maternal power, and masculine identity (Adelman, 1987, 1992; Asp, 1981; Kimbrough, 1983; La Belle, 1980; Chamberlain, 2005). Historicist and cultural materialist work further repositioned the play within the political theology of kingship, early modern witchcraft discourse, and the coercive apparatuses of the state (Greenblatt, 1988; Dollimore, 2004; Sinfield, 1992; Clark, 1997; Sharpe, 1997; Sokol, 1996). More recent scholarship and adaptation studies have shown how modern stage and screen versions continue to renegotiate Lady Macbeth, the witches, and the play's visions of sovereignty for new audiences shaped by mass media, global violence, and debates about gender (Burnett, 2007; Kidnie, 2009; Sanders, 2006; Carroll, 2014; Nizam, 2015; Worthen, 2003).

The present essay builds on these traditions but insists on one additional claim: power, violence, and gender anxiety in Macbeth are not three parallel topics. They are mutually constitutive processes. The play does not first establish a political order and then add scenes of violence and commentary on gender. Rather, it imagines power as something stabilized through violence and interpreted through gender. Macbeth's authority must be made believable through performances of masculinity. Lady Macbeth imagines agency through a temporary disavowal of gendered nurture. The witches are disturbing not only because they prophesy, but because they blur embodied categories and expose how rule depends upon policing them. Banquo's descendants matter because kingship is inseparable from reproductive futurity. Macduff's grief matters because it reveals a model of manhood that refuses the disjunction between feeling and action. Even sleep itself becomes political because the murder of Duncan converts the most intimate form of bodily trust into a site of sovereign violation. To reread Macbeth in a contemporary context is not to flatten the early modern world into modern slogans. It is instead to recognize that Shakespeare's play provides an exceptionally rich archive for thinking about the present without denying historical difference. Contemporary publics remain preoccupied with charismatic power, authoritarian drift, security-state violence, political disinformation, reproductive control, femicide, sexual coercion, digital spectacle, and backlash against gender nonconformity. Interdisciplinary scholarship has increasingly examined those structures across law, media, sociology, psychology, gender studies, and political thought. In that spirit, this manuscript places Shakespeare criticism in conversation with twenty sources from

Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies. Those sources are not treated as direct Macbeth criticism. Rather, they operate as contemporary conceptual bridges: on toxic masculinity and collective sexual violence (Sethi & Sihag, 2025), women's empowerment and policy (Raja, 2024; Gupta & Chauhan, 2024), media representation and marginality (Verma, 2024; Singh, 2023), digital democracy and personality cult (Raghav & Malik, 2025; Singh et al., 2023), gender discrimination and labor (Mishra, 2024; Singh & Saini, 2025), trauma, silence, and mental health (Drosou, 2024; Gupta, 2025; Chidi et al., 2022), and questions of coercion and social legitimacy (Das, 2023; Arora & Singh, 2025). Used carefully, such work helps illuminate why Macbeth still feels uncannily near.

Methodologically, this essay is an exercise in close reading informed by political theory, feminist and queer theory, trauma studies, and adaptation studies. It proceeds in six stages. First, it reviews the critical field and clarifies how an interdisciplinary approach reshapes familiar debates. Second, it establishes a theoretical framework centered on sovereignty, performativity, and the body. Third, it reads Macbeth's political order as a crisis of legitimacy founded on the unstable conversion of martial valor into kingship. Fourth, it examines the play's saturated imagery of bodily violence. Fifth, it analyzes Lady Macbeth, the witches, and Macduff as figures through which gender anxiety organizes both public and private action. Finally, it re-reads the play in contemporary terms, arguing that Macbeth anticipates modern anxieties about authoritarian charisma, spectacular violence, the erosion of institutions, and the policing of gendered bodies.

The central argument can be stated simply. Macbeth dramatizes the truth that violence may seize a throne, but it cannot by itself secure durable political power; when sovereignty loses legitimacy and becomes dependent on escalating coercion, it turns upon bodies, language, memory, and domestic life. At the same time, the play shows that this coercive regime is sustained by fantasies of manhood, reproductive control, and female disorder. Macbeth thus remains indispensable not because it presents an archaic world of kings and witches, but because it reveals how political crisis is lived through ordinary organs of affect: desire, shame, fear, marriage, maternity, friendship, prophecy, rumor, and grief.

2. Literature Review: From Moral Tragedy to Interdisciplinary Re-reading

Macbeth has generated one of the richest critical traditions in Shakespeare studies precisely because the play seems, at first glance, to invite singular explanation and then continually defeats it. It has been read as a tragedy of moral imagination, a political fable about tyranny, a drama of demonic temptation, a study of marriage, an anatomy of witchcraft discourse, a theater of embodied guilt, a fantasy of maternal dread, and a script of masculine insecurity. Each of these approaches captures something essential. None is sufficient alone. A contemporary re-reading must therefore begin by mapping the major critical trajectories that have shaped the field and by asking what becomes visible when these trajectories are placed in dialogue rather than competition. One powerful line of criticism, especially influential in earlier twentieth-century scholarship, treated Macbeth as a tragedy of inwardness. In this tradition, Macbeth's moral downfall is inseparable from the extraordinary sensitivity of his imagination. Critics such as Bradley and, in a different register, Garber emphasized how the protagonist's visionary susceptibility turns possibility into psychic event before deed becomes action (Bradley, 2007; Garber, 2004). The "air-drawn dagger," the sleep that is murdered, the ghost visible only to Macbeth, and the "scorpions" in the mind all point to a subject who is not simply wicked, but imaginatively overexposed to the consequences of his own will (Shakespeare, 1997, 2.1.33–64; 2.2.35–43; 3.4.36–107; 3.2.36). Such readings remain valuable because they resist reducing the play to a thesis about evil ambition. Macbeth is terrifying precisely because he understands, often before anyone else, what he is becoming. Yet a purely psychological reading can make the tragedy appear excessively private, as though the problem were located in one exceptional conscience rather than in the political and gendered structures through which that conscience is formed.

A second major critical current shifts attention from the psyche to the state. Historicist and cultural materialist critics have insisted that Macbeth cannot be detached from early modern anxieties about kingship, rebellion, succession, equivocation, and the circulation of power in Jacobean political culture (Greenblatt, 1988; Dollimore, 2004; Sinfield, 1992; Howard, 1994). In this account, the play matters not because it dramatizes a merely personal fall, but because it stages the unstable relation between sovereignty and coercion. Kantorowicz's distinction between the king's natural body and political body, though developed for medieval political theology, remains suggestive for reading the sacrilegious force of Duncan's murder (Kantorowicz, 1957). Agamben and

Mbembe further sharpen this line of thought by showing how modern sovereignty reveals itself most brutally in the power to expose subjects to death (Agamben, 1998; Mbembe, 2003). Nicholas Dungey's reading of Macbeth through Hobbesian political order usefully underscores that the tragedy is not merely about tyranny in the abstract, but about the fragility of a polity in which fear becomes the principal instrument of rule (Dungey, 2012). This political scholarship is indispensable because it shows that Macbeth's violence is structural, not decorative. At the same time, some state-centered readings can underplay how decisively the play locates those structures within the intimate economies of gender, family, fertility, and embodiment.

That is where feminist, psychoanalytic, and gender-focused criticism transformed Macbeth studies. Carolyn Asp argued decades ago that the play's tragic action is inseparable from sexual stereotyping, especially in the way characters are compelled to negotiate rigid codes of masculine hardness and feminine passivity (Asp, 1981). Robert Kimbrough's influential phrase "the prisoner of gender" remains one of the most concise formulations of Macbeth's predicament: he is trapped not only by political circumstances but by a punitive script of manhood that equates action with violent self-overcoming (Kimbrough, 1983). Jarold Ramsey traced the "perversion of manliness" in the play, while James Greene showed how masculinity becomes indistinguishable from murder when power is measured by aggression rather than ethical limitation (Ramsey, 1973; Greene, 1984). William Liston, Coppélia Kahn, Lisa Jardine, Valerie Traub, and Dympna Callaghan broadened the question by situating sex and gender in Macbeth within larger early modern debates about patriarchy, representation, sexuality, and the performative instability of gendered identity (Liston, 1989; Kahn, 1981; Jardine, 1983; Traub, 1992; Callaghan, 2000).

Janet Adelman's work proved especially decisive by demonstrating that Macbeth is saturated with fantasies of maternal power and male vulnerability. Her essays on maternal origin and "born of woman" show that the play's violence cannot be understood apart from its deep anxieties about birth, wombs, milk, and dependence (Adelman, 1987, 1992). Stephanie Chamberlain extended this insight by placing Lady Macbeth's shocking infanticidal rhetoric in relation to early modern constructions of the "murdering mother," while Jenijoy La Belle's provocative discussion of amenorrhea helped uncover the physiological and symbolic force of Lady Macbeth's attempt to sever agency from reproductive embodiment (Chamberlain, 2005; La Belle, 1980). Velma Bourgeois Richmond, though writing from an earlier critical moment, likewise recognized that Lady Macbeth's trajectory registers a catastrophic distortion of expected feminine affect (Richmond, 1973). These studies do not simply ask whether Lady Macbeth is monstrous. They ask why the play imagines female ambition, maternal threat, and gender boundary-crossing as such potent sites of political dread.

A related body of scholarship has focused on witchcraft, embodiment, and the supernatural. Dennis Biggins's classic essay linked sexuality, witchcraft, and violence in Macbeth, showing that the weird sisters condense fears that are moral, political, and bodily all at once (Biggins, 1976). Brett Hirsch later demonstrated that the witches' beards were not a trivial stage oddity but a loaded cultural sign, tied to early modern anxieties about sex difference, monstrous bodies, and the legibility of social order (Hirsch, 2008). B. J. Sokol, Stuart Clark, Christina Larner, James Sharpe, Diane Purkiss, Deborah Willis, Frances Dolan, and Silvia Federici all contribute, from different perspectives, to a broader understanding of witchcraft discourse as a site where authority projects fears about unruly femininity, popular belief, household disorder, and the violence required to police them (Sokol, 1996; Clark, 1997; Larner, 1981; Sharpe, 1997; Purkiss, 1996; Willis, 1995; Dolan, 1994; Federici, 2004). Such work is essential because Macbeth's supernatural is never merely metaphysical. It is social. The witches embody a crisis in the taxonomy through which bodies, genders, and futures are regulated.

Another major cluster of criticism centers on the body, trauma, and affect. David Barron's classic reading of the play's organic imagery remains important for showing how Macbeth's violent world is structured by recurring images of blood, milk, growth, sickness, and mutilation (Barron, 1960). Elaine Scarry's account of pain as a force that unmakes the world, together with later trauma theory from Caruth, Herman, and LaCapra, offers a powerful vocabulary for understanding why Macbeth's bodies speak in fragments, stains, compulsions, and return effects rather than in fully coherent testimony (Scarry, 1985; Caruth, 1996; Herman, 1992; LaCapra, 2001). Sara Ahmed's work on the cultural politics of emotion deepens that account by showing how fear, disgust, grief, and attachment circulate socially rather than merely internally (Ahmed, 2004). In Macbeth, blood is not just a sign of guilt lodged inside the subject; it is a public affective technology that organizes what can be seen, feared, and remembered. The play's recurrent hand imagery, sleeplessness, ghosting, and compulsive

repetition can therefore be read not only as moral symptoms but as bodily archives of political catastrophe. Recent adaptation and performance studies have made another decisive intervention. Linda Hutcheon, Julie Sanders, Douglas Lanier, Margaret Jane Kidnie, W. B. Worthen, Mark Thornton Burnett, Russell Jackson, and Thomas Cartelli with Katherine Rowe have all insisted that Shakespeare's meanings are not sealed in a single authoritative text but continually renegotiated through performance, media, and historical circumstance (Hutcheon, 2013; Sanders, 2006; Lanier, 2002; Kidnie, 2009; Worthen, 2003; Burnett, 2007; Jackson, 2007; Cartelli & Rowe, 2007). In the case of Macbeth, that insight matters because Lady Macbeth, the witches, and the politics of tyranny are among the most persistently reimagined features of the play. William C. Carroll's recovery of Lady Macbeth in contemporary adaptations and Hamalna Nizam's reading of Polanski's film adaptation show how modern productions often displace the older stereotype of the "fiendlike queen" with more ambivalent portraits shaped by trauma, sexuality, and patriarchal violence (Carroll, 2014; Nizam, 2015). Filmic Macbeths by Roman Polanski, Justin Kurzel, and Joel Coen make different use of bleak landscapes, spectral vision, and psychological fragmentation, but all demonstrate the afterlife of the play in a world saturated by cameras, war imagery, and public spectacle (Polanski, 1971; Kurzel, 2015; Coen, 2021).

The present study also draws on a deliberately interdisciplinary archive that includes twenty sources from Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies. This archive requires explanation. Most of these IJIS sources are not about Shakespeare directly, and they are not presented here as substitutes for literary criticism. Their value lies elsewhere: they illuminate the contemporary contexts in which Macbeth now circulates. For example, Priyanka Sethi and Neelam Sihag's study of collective power and toxic masculinity in sexual violence helps theorize how male bonding can become a mechanism of coercive domination rather than mutual ethical recognition (Sethi & Sihag, 2025). Swati Raja, Apoorva Gupta and Bhumija Chauhan, Sushma Nain and colleagues, Alka Seth and Suman, Ashu Saini and Lata Singh, and Shubhendu Mishra collectively contribute contemporary perspectives on women's empowerment, financial independence, socio-economic constraint, vocational formation, workplace stress, and gender discrimination (Raja, 2024; Gupta & Chauhan, 2024; Nain et al., 2025; Seth & Suman, 2024; Singh & Saini, 2025; Mishra, 2024). Shivani Verma and Swadesh Singh examine representation and marginality in media, helping clarify how public discourse can normalize some bodies while obscuring others (Verma, 2024; Singh, 2023).

Other IJIS sources help articulate the contemporary political conditions through which Macbeth is newly legible. Geetanjali Raghav and Pawan Singh Malik on digital democracy, Jyotsana Singh with Nitasha Joon and Namrata Joon on personality cult, and Rajni Arora with Sukhdev Singh on institutional unfaithfulness all illuminate the modern crisis of legitimacy, charisma, and mediated persuasion (Raghav & Malik, 2025; Singh et al., 2023; Arora & Singh, 2025). Abhilasha Sinha and Vimlesh Tanvar on social media influencer marketing may seem far from Shakespeare at first glance, but their work is useful for thinking about affective persuasion and the economy of credibility that allows appearances to shape decision-making before truth is verified (Sinha & Tanvar, 2025). Georgia Drosou on adolescent mental health, Nidhi Gupta on memory, trauma, and silence, and Chidi, Okeibunor, and Sabo on communication with conflict victims contribute contemporary vocabularies for reading how violence persists as psychic residue, delayed speech, and damaged social trust (Drosou, 2024; Gupta, 2025; Chidi et al., 2022). Ramakrishna Das's discussion of marital rape and the legal afterlife of coercion reminds us that the border between public violence and intimate domination remains politically urgent (Das, 2023). Sanjay Khan's work on centralization and regional autonomy is likewise instructive for understanding how political power consolidates itself by hollowing out distributed forms of belonging (Khan, 2024).

What emerges from this wide field is not critical chaos but a necessary composite image. Macbeth is simultaneously a tragedy of imagination, a study of sovereignty, a history of witchcraft anxiety, a grammar of traumatic embodiment, and a drama of gendered coercion. Any reading that privileges only one of these dimensions risks shrinking the play to a manageable thesis. The purpose of the present essay is not to reject prior approaches, but to synthesize them in order to show that Macbeth's political violence is always already gendered, and that its gendering is inseparable from the production of fear, legitimacy, and futurity. The next section develops the theoretical framework for that synthesis.

3. Theoretical Framework and Method

This manuscript uses an interdisciplinary framework organized around three conceptual clusters: sovereignty

and political legitimacy; gender performativity and hegemonic masculinity; and embodiment, trauma, and affect. The wager of this framework is that Macbeth becomes clearer when these clusters are read together. The play is not reducible to any one of them, but it repeatedly stages their mutual dependence. Sovereignty in Macbeth is embodied and gendered. Gender in Macbeth is political and affective. Violence in Macbeth is not only an event but a way of reorganizing bodies, feelings, futures, and public narratives.

The first conceptual cluster concerns power, violence, and sovereignty. Hannah Arendt famously distinguishes power from violence, arguing that power depends on collective authorization, whereas violence can destroy power but cannot generate it in a durable way (Arendt, 1970). Walter Benjamin complicates the question by tracing the relation between law-making and law-preserving violence, showing that political orders are often founded and maintained through forms of force that later appear natural or legitimate (Benjamin, 1978). Michel Foucault shifts the analysis from sovereign spectacular punishment toward the dispersed techniques through which bodies are disciplined and social subjects are produced (Foucault, 1977, 1978). Giorgio Agamben and Achille Mbembe bring the analysis back to sovereign exceptionalism by emphasizing the capacity of rule to decide whose lives are protected and whose are exposed to death (Agamben, 1998; Mbembe, 2003). Taken together, these thinkers help articulate a paradox central to Macbeth: the play begins with violence in service of order, but once order is ruptured, violence becomes the ruler's primary instrument, revealing that coercion alone cannot stabilize legitimacy. Macbeth can command obedience, but he cannot reconstitute the collective basis of power that Duncan, however imperfectly, still possessed. His kingdom becomes a space of anticipatory killing, surveillance, and exposed life.

This framework is especially useful because Macbeth repeatedly confuses sovereign power with the capacity to kill. The play's political language moves from honor and service to fear, secrecy, and extermination. The question is not merely whether Macbeth is a tyrant; it is how a polity organized through feudal loyalty and military renown slides into necropolitical logic, where security is imagined as the elimination of all possible rivals. Duncan's murder is thus not the whole problem. It is the inaugural act in a regime of exception where Banquo, Lady Macduff, Macduff's children, and eventually the whole nation become vulnerable to the ruler's fear. Greenblatt, Dollimore, Howard, Sinfield, and Dungey help situate this transition within broader debates about authority, theatricality, and political disorder (Greenblatt, 1988; Dollimore, 2004; Howard, 1994; Sinfield, 1992; Dungey, 2012). Kantorowicz's analysis of the king's two bodies remains helpful here because Macbeth's regicide attacks not just a person but the symbolic continuity of the polity (Kantorowicz, 1957). Yet Shakespeare's play is too skeptical to rest in a simple ideology of sacred kingship. It also shows that Duncan's own order was already dependent on the warrior violence that made Macbeth possible.

The second conceptual cluster concerns gender, sexuality, and performativity. Judith Butler's work on gender performativity is essential because Macbeth repeatedly presents gender not as essence but as a series of socially legible acts, refusals, and citations through which authority is claimed or denied (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004). R. W. Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity clarifies the hierarchical logic by which certain versions of masculinity become normative and demand continual proof through dominance, emotional restriction, and public recognition (Connell, 2005). Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of masculine domination reinforces this account by showing how gendered hierarchies become misrecognized as natural and therefore difficult to contest (Bourdieu, 2001). Eve Sedgwick, Bruce Smith, and Stephen Orgel further complicate the field by revealing the homosocial, theatrical, and unstable character of gender in early modern culture (Sedgwick, 1985; Smith, 1991; Orgel, 1996). Coppélia Kahn, Valerie Traub, Dympna Callaghan, Ania Loomba, Jean Howard and Phyllis Rackin, and Linda Woodbridge place those theoretical insights in specifically Shakespearean and early modern contexts, making clear that gender is inseparable from lineage, household authority, sexuality, and the state (Kahn, 1981; Traub, 1992; Callaghan, 2000; Loomba, 1989; Howard & Rackin, 1997; Woodbridge, 1984).
Applied to Macbeth, this cluster yields several advantages. First, it prevents Lady Macbeth's desire to be "unsexed" from being read merely as personal perversity; instead, it becomes legible as an attempt to access a form of agency coded as masculine within a violently patriarchal order (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.5.39–54). Second, it clarifies why Macbeth experiences inaction not simply as hesitation but as feminization and loss of status. Third, it helps interpret the witches' bearded bodies not as incidental grotesquerie but as a disturbance to the visual codes through which social categories are stabilized (Hirsch, 2008). Judith Halberstam's work on female masculinity is particularly provocative in this context because it allows us to see Lady Macbeth less as

an impossible anomaly and more as a figure who exposes the constructedness of masculinity itself (Halberstam, 1998). At the same time, a historically responsible reading must avoid collapsing early modern gender anxiety into contemporary identity categories. The point is not to anachronistically label Lady Macbeth or the witches, but to show how the play stages category-instability as politically consequential.

The third conceptual cluster concerns the body, pain, trauma, and affect. Elaine Scarry's account of pain as world-destroying is useful for a play in which violence repeatedly dismembers speech, interrupts sleep, and turns the body into an involuntary witness (Scarry, 1985). Cathy Caruth and Dominick LaCapra help describe how traumatic events return belatedly, often in repetitive or displaced forms rather than direct narration (Caruth, 1996; LaCapra, 2001). Judith Herman's work adds an interpersonal and political dimension by emphasizing how trauma damages trust, temporality, and relation, not merely memory (Herman, 1992). Sara Ahmed's theory of affective circulation clarifies how fear, disgust, and grief move between bodies, attaching themselves to signs and figures within a social world (Ahmed, 2004). Julia Kristeva's account of abjection is useful for thinking about blood, filth, boundary collapse, and the horror of contaminated identity that pulses throughout Macbeth (Kristeva, 1982). These theorists help read the play's bodily imagery not as ornamental excess but as a structured archive of political and psychic violence.

In Macbeth, the body is where political contradiction becomes visible. The bleeding captain is both national witness and wounded text. Duncan's sleeping body marks the vulnerability of trust. Banquo's ghost returns as memory that refuses repression. Lady Macbeth's hands become a theater of compulsive repetition. Macduff's slaughtered family turns political rivalry into intimate devastation. Even the final revelation that Macduff was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped" makes birth itself the site of juridical exception (Shakespeare, 1997, 5.8.15). Psychoanalytic and feminist critics such as Adelman, Chamberlain, La Belle, Barron, and Richmond remain crucial here because they demonstrate how Macbeth's body imagery is saturated with maternal and reproductive anxiety (Adelman, 1987, 1992; Chamberlain, 2005; La Belle, 1980; Barron, 1960; Richmond, 1973). Witchcraft historians and feminist theorists such as Purkiss, Willis, Dolan, Clark, and Federici further show that early modern fears of female disorder were frequently organized around household, reproduction, and the vulnerable boundaries of the body (Purkiss, 1996; Willis, 1995; Dolan, 1994; Clark, 1997; Federici, 2004).

Methodologically, this essay combines close reading with contextual and theoretical interpretation. Close reading remains indispensable because Macbeth's meanings reside in compressed verbal exchanges, patterning of imagery, and dramatic reversals that broad theory alone cannot capture. Yet close reading without conceptual framing risks treating recurrent motifs—blood, sleep, milk, beards, children, prophecy, hands—as if they belonged only to an internally closed literary system. The present approach therefore moves back and forth between textual detail and broader arguments about political theology, gender ideology, embodiment, and adaptation. It also treats performance and adaptation not as supplementary afterthoughts but as constitutive of the play's contemporary life. Adaptation theory reminds us that Macbeth is continually remade through stage and screen conventions, and that modern audiences encounter its politics and gendering through those remediations as much as through the printed text (Hutcheon, 2013; Sanders, 2006; Kidnie, 2009; Lanier, 2002; Burnett, 2007; Jackson, 2007; Worthen, 2003).

Finally, the use of twenty IJIS sources provides an interdisciplinary bridge rather than a replacement for established Macbeth scholarship. Those sources help translate the play's structures into contemporary debates around toxic masculinity, media representation, personality cult, labor precarity, trauma, and women's empowerment. Such translation must remain analogical, not reductive. Macbeth is not a modern sociological case study. But contemporary interdisciplinary work can sharpen our sense of what the play reveals about how power enters intimate life, how public discourse frames vulnerable bodies, and how institutions exploit gendered scripts to secure obedience. The analytical sections that follow proceed with that caution in view.

4. Power as a Crisis of Legitimacy

If Macbeth is read through the lens of power, the first thing to notice is that the play refuses a sentimental distinction between order and violence. Duncan's kingdom is introduced in crisis, and that crisis is managed through warfare. The captain who narrates Macbeth's victory is himself "bloody," the emblem of a nation preserved by bodily injury (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.2.1). Macbeth's martial excellence earns him rewards because

feudal sovereignty depends upon the conversion of violence into honor. He kills on behalf of the king and is therefore celebrated as "brave Macbeth" and "Bellona's bridegroom" (1.2.16, 54). This language matters. It reveals that legitimate political order in the play is already theatrical and affective. Violence must be narrated as service, loyalty, and glory in order to sustain the symbolic authority of the crown. Benjamin's distinction between law-making and law-preserving violence helps illuminate this opening logic: the state ratifies some forms of violence as necessary for its preservation, but the same force may later appear criminal when it no longer serves authorized ends (Benjamin, 1978). Macbeth's tragedy begins when the weaponized subject discovers that the line between preserving power and seizing it is thinner than political ideology admits.

The witches do not create Macbeth's ambition out of nothing. They name a possibility that the political system has already taught him to value. Feudal honor, titles, and advancement are the currencies through which the king distributes recognition. When Macbeth hears himself hailed as future king, his imagination immediately outruns the present, but it does so within a preexisting economy of reward and distinction. The prophecy is effective because it speaks the language of accession. In this sense, the witches function like a dark mirror of political discourse: they amplify desire by appearing to confer knowledge of the future, while in fact they accelerate Macbeth's submission to a fantasy of sovereign certainty. The contemporary relevance of this mechanism is striking. Power often consolidates not merely through force, but through speculative narratives that make domination feel inevitable. The witches promise not a coherent plan, but a script in which Macbeth imagines himself already authorized.

What follows is a crisis of legitimacy rather than a simple transfer of office. Duncan's murder is so politically devastating because it collapses the distinction between the king's vulnerable natural body and the symbolic continuity of rule. Shakespeare stages this collapse through repeated imagery of breach: doors are forced, sleepers are violated, nature becomes disordered, and the body politic loses its orienting center (Shakespeare, 1997, 2.3.50–104). Kantorowicz helps clarify why regicide in such a frame appears monstrous; it attacks not only a person but the continuity of the state embodied in the king's office (Kantorowicz, 1957). Yet the play remains too alert to political contradiction to treat Duncan as pure transcendence. Duncan is a gracious ruler, but his authority also depends upon systems of punishment, reward, and delegated violence. Macbeth's act therefore exposes something latent in the order it destroys: kingship can never fully escape dependence on force, because its survival requires those who are trained to kill in its name.

Macbeth's immediate problem after the murder is not simply guilt; it is the impossibility of transforming seizure into legitimacy. Arendt's distinction is useful here. Violence may destroy an existing order, but power, in her sense, depends on a durable field of collective authorization (Arendt, 1970). Macbeth acquires the throne, but he cannot rebuild that field. He therefore becomes increasingly dependent on coercion, secrecy, and anticipatory violence. The movement of the play after Duncan's murder is a movement from singular crime to systemic terror. Banquo must die because he remembers too much and because his descendants represent a future Macbeth cannot possess. Fleance must die because political anxiety extends to unborn succession. Macduff's family must die because sovereign fear cannot tolerate even the appearance of alternative loyalty. Macbeth's rule is thus necropolitical in Mbembe's sense: the state becomes organized around the ruler's power to expose selected bodies to death as a means of preserving his precarious command (Mbembe, 2003).

This logic is visible in the language Macbeth adopts once crowned. He no longer speaks the idiom of reciprocal service but of threat management. Banquo's "royalty of nature," his "dauntless temper," and the "wisdom that doth guide his valor" all become intolerable to Macbeth because they represent another mode of authority—one grounded in character, reputation, and futurity rather than usurpation (Shakespeare, 1997, 3.1.49–57). Banquo does not need to act overtly to threaten Macbeth; his mere existence as a credible alternative already destabilizes the regime. Macbeth therefore internalizes a sovereign fantasy of preemptive elimination. He seeks safety not through consent or institutional repair but through the destruction of rivals, actual and potential. Agamben's language of exception is helpful here: once Macbeth places himself outside ordinary norms in order to found his reign, the exception becomes continuous. Every possible threat must be managed as though the state were permanently at the brink of annihilation (Agamben, 1998).

The banquet scene dramatizes the failure of such politics with extraordinary force. Public ceremony is the place where kingship ought to become visible and persuasive. But when Banquo's ghost appears, the spectacle of rule is interrupted by the return of what coercion cannot master. The ghost is not simply psychological guilt;

it is the dramatic form taken by illegitimate sovereignty's inability to stabilize itself before witnesses. Macbeth's body betrays him in public. The ruler who should embody order becomes the site of disorder. Greenblatt's concept of the circulation of social energy is useful here because the banquet shows authority as a performative exchange that depends on mutual recognition; Macbeth can command the seating plan, but he cannot control the meanings generated by his own collapse (Greenblatt, 1988). Lady Macbeth tries to repair the scene by managing interpretation—"Think of this, good peers, / But as a thing of custom"—yet the effort fails because political theater cannot indefinitely suppress what violence has made socially legible (Shakespeare, 1997, 3.4.95–96).

Banquo's ghost also matters because it dramatizes a crucial truth about coercive power: it cannot conquer time. Macbeth's greatest anxiety is not only about rivals in the present but about the future he cannot inhabit. He has, as he says, filed his mind and put his "eternal jewel" at hazard only to "make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings" (3.1.66–69). The problem is dynastic and reproductive as much as political. Sovereignty in Macbeth is inseparable from succession. To rule without legitimate futurity is to occupy the throne as a temporal interruption, not a durable order. That is why the apparitions in 4.1 prove so devastatingly seductive. They offer Macbeth a counterfeit mastery of time, converting uncertainty into slogan: no man of woman born shall harm him; he will remain safe until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane (4.1.80–94). These promises do not eliminate risk; they convert risk into a reassuring narrative. In contemporary terms, they function like ideologically flattering data points: true enough to circulate, misleading enough to destroy judgment. Macbeth wants certainty more than truth.

The play's political intelligence also emerges in its treatment of Scotland as a suffering collectivity. Macduff, Ross, and Malcolm repeatedly describe the nation not as a neutral background but as a body subjected to predation. Under Macbeth, each day sees "new widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face" (4.3.4–5). Such language is not merely melodramatic. It restores to political analysis what tyrannical discourse suppresses: the distributed, ordinary, domestic cost of state violence. Howard and Rackin's feminist insistence that state formations are lived through household structures is particularly relevant here (Howard & Rackin, 1997). Macbeth's tyranny is measured not only by elite intrigue but by the multiplication of widows and orphans. The political is counted in domestic wounds. This is one reason Lady Macduff's scene is structurally indispensable. It interrupts the male traffic of war and strategy with a household that suffers because sovereign fear radiates outward into intimate life.

Malcolm's testing of Macduff in England offers a partial corrective to Macbeth's model of rule, but Shakespeare presents it with telling ambiguity. Malcolm rehearses a rhetoric of self-disqualification, presenting himself as lustful, greedy, and devoid of kingly virtues, only to reveal that this was a test of Macduff's loyalty (Shakespeare, 1997, 4.3.57–138). On one level, the scene reasserts that legitimate kingship requires moral criteria beyond force. Malcolm names justice, temperance, stability, bounty, perseverance, mercy, and devotion. On another level, however, the scene reminds us that political legitimacy is still mediated by performance, rhetoric, and suspicion. Even the rightful heir secures trust through managed disclosure. This does not collapse Malcolm into Macbeth, but it prevents the play from ending in naive restoration. Sovereignty remains theatrical, and theatricality remains vulnerable to manipulation.

The final movement of the play confirms that coercion without legitimacy breeds strategic blindness. Macbeth becomes increasingly trapped within his own system of violent reassurance. He believes in the invulnerability promised by equivocal prophecy because his regime has taught him to treat command as reality. Foucault's account of power as productive as well as repressive is relevant here: power does not merely silence; it manufactures fields of knowledge and ignorance (Foucault, 1977, 1978). Macbeth's court produces a knowledge environment in which truth is subordinated to the ruler's fear. By the time Birnam Wood appears to move, the revelation is less a supernatural trick than a political lesson: the sovereign who seeks total security becomes incapable of reading the world except through fantasies of immunity.

And yet Macbeth is not politically significant simply because tyranny fails. Shakespeare's deeper point is that tyranny fails in ways that expose what legitimate rule has never fully resolved. Duncan's order depended on warrior service; Malcolm's restoration will depend on military victory. The cycle of public violence is not magically abolished. What changes is the play's degree of visibility about its costs. Macbeth teaches that when power is severed from consent, justice, and a shared future, it collapses into compulsive violence. But it also teaches that even "legitimate" power remains answerable to the bodies it mobilizes and the households it

abandons. This tension is what gives the play its enduring force for contemporary readers living amid states that still claim security while multiplying fear.

5. Violence and the Saturated Body

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's bloodiest plays, but its violence is significant not merely because there is a high body count. What matters is the form the violence takes, the kinds of bodies it selects, and the symbolic work those bodies perform. From the opening battlefield to the final beheading, Macbeth repeatedly turns the body into a political text. Wounds testify, blood accuses, hands remember, children signify futurity, and ghosts return as embodied dissent. The effect is a dramatic world in which violence is never purely external. It invades perception, language, temporality, and selfhood.

The opening report of battle establishes the grammar. The captain's body is itself evidence: he speaks while bleeding, and the nation reads the conflict through his wound. Macbeth's celebrated act of cutting a rebel "from the nave to th' chops" is immediately followed by the display of the traitor's severed head on the battlements (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.2.22–23). Violence here is not hidden. It is public, exemplary, and pedagogical. The state demonstrates its capacity to survive by exhibiting what happens to enemies. Yet Shakespeare also emphasizes the bodily excess of this economy. The body is opened, interiority is exposed, and punishment becomes spectacle. Scarry's observation that pain both destroys language and produces forms of coercive display helps illuminate why Macbeth begins with a wounded witness whose speech is itself strained by injury (Scarry, 1985). The body speaks, but it does so under duress.

The murder of Duncan intensifies this grammar by relocating violence from battlefield to bedchamber. One of the play's most horrifying innovations is to move lethal force into the domain of sleep. Duncan is not killed in combat but while trusting the hospitality of his host. The violation is therefore spatial, ethical, and sensory all at once. Macbeth imagines the deed in terms that already register its assault on ordinary life: "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep" (Shakespeare, 1997, 2.2.34). Sleep here is more than bodily rest. It is the emblem of repair, innocence, and temporality restored. To murder a sleeping king is to declare that no body is safe in the most unguarded state of vulnerability. Herman's work on trauma is useful because it emphasizes the destruction of basic trust as one of violence's deepest effects (Herman, 1992). Duncan's death does not only remove a ruler. It corrupts the conditions under which subjects inhabit the world.

The imagery of blood that follows is equally important. Blood moves through Macbeth in multiple registers: as military honor, sacrificial stain, forensic evidence, hereditary line, and hallucinated contamination. Lady Macbeth initially treats blood pragmatically—"A little water clears us of this deed"—but the play steadily proves her wrong (Shakespeare, 1997, 2.2.67). Blood does not remain on surfaces; it enters consciousness, language, and repetition. Macbeth sees his own hands as though they could incarnadine the seas; Lady Macbeth later rubs invisible spots in a scene of compulsive return (2.2.78–79; 5.1.30–44). Kristeva's theory of abjection helps explain the peculiar force of this imagery. Blood in Macbeth is not merely fluid evidence of injury. It marks the collapse of boundaries between inside and outside, self and other, body and guilt (Kristeva, 1982). Once shed in the wrong place, it cannot be fully reintegrated into a stable symbolic order.

The banquet ghost scene demonstrates how bodily violence returns as memory that cannot be domesticated. Banquo's corpse is initially hidden from view; the hired murderers speak of wounds, blood, and "twenty trenched gashes" on his head, but the body is offstage (Shakespeare, 1997, 3.4.26–27). It returns, however, at the precise moment Macbeth seeks to stabilize public authority through ceremonial presence. The ghost occupies Macbeth's seat, an image of how the dead displace illegitimate sovereignty from within. Caruth's account of trauma as an event that returns belatedly and refuses full symbolic mastery helps clarify why Banquo's ghost is more than conscience theatricalized (Caruth, 1996). It is the impossible persistence of what the regime requires to remain buried. Violence has a temporality beyond command. The murdered body becomes the timepiece of political failure.

No scene demonstrates the widening radius of tyrannical violence more powerfully than the murder of Lady Macduff and her son. Up to this point, Macbeth has targeted politically significant men. Here, sovereign fear invades the domestic sphere directly. The scene is devastating because it includes a child capable of wit, curiosity, and affection. "What, you egg!" the murderer cries before killing him, reducing the child to fragile reproductive matter at the very moment of destruction (Shakespeare, 1997, 4.2.82). The line is grotesquely revealing. The

child is not only an innocent victim; he is futurity attacked in its most vulnerable form. Chamberlain's work on infanticidal fantasy and Adelman's emphasis on reproductive dread are crucial here (Chamberlain, 2005; Adelman, 1992). Macbeth's violent logic always exceeds present enemies to target the future they might generate. Lady Macduff's household thus becomes the negative image of the realm: a space where political terror reveals itself as anti-familial and anti-futural.

This scene also complicates the tendency to read Macbeth's violence primarily through male combat. Lady Macduff is not armed. Her child is not a political actor. Their deaths show that sovereign panic reorganizes categories of vulnerability and turns the household into an extension of military space. Frances Dolan's work on domestic crime is especially helpful because it emphasizes that early modern domesticity was never simply private; it was a site where social order, sexual regulation, and political fear converged (Dolan, 1994). The murderers' intrusion into the Macduff home exemplifies precisely such convergence. The household is violated because the regime has lost the capacity to distinguish between opposition and existence. Mere association becomes sufficient cause for extermination.

Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene offers a different register of bodily violence: violence turned inward as somatic memory. Unlike Macbeth, who responds to psychic strain by further external aggression, Lady Macbeth's body becomes the stage upon which the repressed returns. She rubs her hands, reenacts fragments of prior speech, and imagines smells and stains that others cannot perceive. What is striking here is not only guilt, but the brokenness of temporal order. Fragments of Duncan's murder, Banquo's death, and Lady Macduff's slaughter coexist in a single compulsive present. LaCapra's distinction between acting out and working through is useful: Lady Macbeth acts out traumatic memory because the conditions for symbolic integration have collapsed (LaCapra, 2001). Speech no longer communicates; it leaks. "What's done cannot be undone" is less a moral lesson than the exhausted recognition that the body carries what will not disappear (Shakespeare, 1997, 5.1.63).

The play's violent imaginary is also saturated with reproductive imagery. Lady Macbeth would dash out the brains of her nursing infant rather than break a sworn promise; Macbeth fears no man "of woman born"; Macduff defeats him because he was "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.7.56–58; 5.8.15–16). These lines are famous, but they are too often isolated as theatrical shocks rather than read as part of a larger pattern. Macbeth repeatedly reimagines the maternal body as a site of danger, exception, and violated continuity. Milk is converted into gall. Birth becomes the loophole in prophecy. Children are killed, imagined, or withheld. Willis and Federici are illuminating here because both emphasize how reproductive power becomes a major site of social fantasy and anxiety in cultures invested in patriarchal control (Willis, 1995; Federici, 2004). Macbeth dramatizes precisely such anxiety: sovereignty wants lineage, yet it fears the maternal matrix through which lineage must pass.

The final beheading of Macbeth closes the circle opened in the first battle report. Once again, a severed head is displayed as the sign of political restoration. The symmetry is important. The play does not end by abolishing spectacular violence; it ends by reinstalling it on behalf of a different ruler. This does not invalidate Malcolm's victory, but it preserves Shakespeare's political skepticism. Violence can remove tyranny, yet the means by which order is restored remain stained by the same bodily grammar with which the play began. What changes is the context of legibility. Macbeth's body, once the state's heroic weapon, becomes the traitor's spectacle. The reversal is both morally satisfying and structurally unsettling. It reminds us that bodies in this play are always vulnerable to being rewritten by power.

Macbeth's violence, then, is not simply cumulative. It is recursive, reproductive, and interpretive. It turns honor into stain, trust into violation, futurity into prey, and memory into bodily repetition. It shows that the body is where politics finally leaves its deepest signature—not as abstraction, but as wound, sleeplessness, compulsion, grief, and residue. This is one reason the play speaks so forcefully to modern readers and viewers. In an age likewise saturated by mediated violence, traumatized publics, and the translation of vulnerability into spectacle, Macbeth remains less a distant archive of blood than a continuing anatomy of how power enters flesh.

6. Gender Anxiety, Reproductive Fear, and the Fracture of Masculinity

Macbeth is often remembered for blood, prophecy, and ambition, but those elements are repeatedly organized

through gender anxiety. The play asks again and again what it means to be "a man," what kinds of action masculinity authorizes, what femininity must renounce to acquire power, and why reproductive embodiment becomes such a charged site of fear. Gender in Macbeth is neither a decorative theme nor a stable social backdrop. It is one of the play's principal engines of action. Characters persuade, shame, imagine, and destroy one another through gendered scripts they cannot fully master.

The most explicit instance is Lady Macbeth's invocation to be "unsexed." When she calls upon spirits to "take my milk for gall," she does not simply reject femininity in the abstract; she imagines agency as possible only through the evacuation of nurturance, pity, and permeability from the body (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.5.39–54). This speech is often misread as proof that Lady Macbeth is more "masculine" than Macbeth in any uncomplicated sense. A more careful reading shows something stranger. Lady Macbeth does not possess sovereign agency; she fantasizes about borrowing a version of it from the violent grammar of patriarchy. Butler's account of gender as citational practice is useful here because Lady Macbeth's speech demonstrates that the categories she invokes are already scripted. To become capable of the deed, she imagines herself not as liberated from gender but as re-coded within an available symbolic economy of hardness, cruelty, and non-nurture (Butler, 1990, 1993). Her prayer therefore exposes the political problem of the play: agency is imagined as masculine because power itself has been naturalized as domination.

At the same time, Lady Macbeth's speech remains haunted by the body it tries to refuse. The imagery of milk, blood, breasts, and spirits entering the body reveals that gender cannot be discarded as though it were a costume; it returns through precisely the organs she would transform. Adelman's work is indispensable here because it shows how deeply Macbeth imagines maternal power as both necessary and threatening (Adelman, 1987, 1992). Lady Macbeth's desire to exchange milk for gall dramatizes a fantasy of severing political action from dependence, nurture, and birth. But the play insists that such severance is impossible. Her later collapse suggests not a moral lesson about female ambition alone, but the psychic cost of trying to inhabit an anti-relational ideal of power.

Lady Macbeth's most effective rhetorical weapon is her manipulation of Macbeth's masculinity. "When you durst do it, then you were a man" is not simply an insult; it is an attempt to redefine manhood as the capacity to translate desire into violence without remainder (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.7.49). Connell's model of hegemonic masculinity helps explain why the line is so devastating. Masculinity in patriarchal systems often requires continual public proof, and the fear of not measuring up becomes a powerful mechanism of discipline (Connell, 2005). Macbeth is vulnerable to precisely this mechanism. He does not initially refuse Duncan's murder because he lacks desire; he refuses because he still recognizes limits—kinship, hospitality, loyalty, and moral consequence. Lady Macbeth therefore recasts ethical hesitation as gender failure. If he withdraws, he is not prudent or humane; he is "green and pale," a coward before the image of his own desire (1.7.37–41). Violence thus becomes the test through which masculine adequacy is policed.

Yet the play also resists equating masculinity with murder. Macbeth's reply is crucial: "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.46–47). This is one of the clearest ethical formulations in the tragedy. Macbeth briefly articulates a model of manhood grounded in measure, limit, and moral self-definition rather than compulsive proof. Greene, Ramsey, and Kimbrough all show, in different ways, how important this moment is: the tragedy unfolds as Macbeth abandons his own wiser account of masculinity and submits instead to the violent demand for demonstrative action (Greene, 1984; Ramsey, 1973; Kimbrough, 1983). The irony is severe. Macbeth falls not because he is insufficiently masculine, but because he accepts a destructive script of masculinity as authoritative.

The play returns repeatedly to this instability. After Duncan's murder, Macbeth becomes more rigid, secretive, and militarized, while Lady Macbeth loses access to the command she once seemed to possess. This reversal should not be understood as the play restoring "proper" gender roles. Rather, it reveals the unsustainability of the arrangement through which Lady Macbeth incited violence. Once Macbeth has internalized the script that equates kingship with hard control, he no longer requires her prompting. "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck," he tells her before arranging Banquo's murder (Shakespeare, 1997, 3.2.45). The term of endearment is patronizing, but more importantly it re-domesticates Lady Macbeth, excluding her from the violent sphere she helped inaugurate. Patriarchal power reasserts itself by absorbing her transgression and converting her into an object of managed ignorance. Callaghan, Jardine, and Neely help illuminate this dynamic: the woman who

temporarily accesses political agency within patriarchy remains structurally disposable once male power has reconstituted itself (Callaghan, 2000; Jardine, 1983; Neely, 1985, 2004).

Macbeth's masculinity, meanwhile, becomes increasingly compulsive. He seeks reassurance from the witches because his model of rule requires constant proof of invulnerability. He can never simply be king; he must continually defeat the possibility that he is not enough. Bourdieu's account of masculine domination as a fragile system dependent on repeated recognition clarifies why Macbeth's authority becomes so paranoid (Bourdieu, 2001). The problem is not only political insecurity but ontological insufficiency. Every rival threatens to expose the fact that masculinity, as he has come to inhabit it, has no stable ground beyond violence. This is why Banquo, Macduff, and even Fleance must be imagined as existential threats. They represent other futures of manhood and lineage that Macbeth cannot control.

Macduff offers the play's most powerful counter-model. When Malcolm urges him to "dispute it like a man" after the murder of his family, Macduff answers, "I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man" (Shakespeare, 1997, 4.3.220–221). The line is justly famous because it refuses the split between action and feeling upon which violent masculinity depends. Macduff neither abandons vengeance nor relinquishes grief. Instead, he redefines manhood as the capacity to mourn without surrendering political agency. This is perhaps the most radical gender statement in the play. It interrupts the logic by which emotional expression is feminized and violence masculinized. Ahmed's work on affective politics is useful here because Macduff's grief becomes public relation rather than private weakness (Ahmed, 2004). He feels as a man precisely by refusing the impoverished script that made Macbeth vulnerable to Lady Macbeth's taunts. The tragedy therefore does not simply diagnose gender anxiety; it stages an ethical alternative to it.

The witches complicate the picture further. Banquo's bewildered question—"You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so"—shows that their unsettling power is inseparable from embodied ambiguity (Shakespeare, 1997, 1.3.45–47). Brett Hirsch's work on bearded women demonstrates how culturally charged this image would have been, linked to monstrosity, disorder, and the instability of visual classification (Hirsch, 2008). The witches do not simply predict; they disturb the categories through which prediction becomes socially legible. They are figures of liminality in multiple senses—between human and supernatural, female and male, inside and outside the polity. Early modern witchcraft discourse often projected social anxieties onto women imagined as disorderly, excessive, or beyond patriarchal control (Purkiss, 1996; Willis, 1995; Clark, 1997; Sharpe, 1997). Macbeth intensifies that dynamic by giving the witches bodies that both invite and frustrate taxonomy. Their gender ambiguity matters because political order in the play depends so heavily on stable scripts of sex, lineage, and inheritance.

This does not mean the witches are reducible to misogynistic projection. They also expose the artifice of those projections. Halberstam's account of female masculinity is suggestive here because it reminds us that gender nonconformity can reveal the contingency of dominant norms (Halberstam, 1998). The witches are frightening not simply because they deviate from order, but because they make visible that order's own instability. Their prophecies are effective partly because Macbeth and Banquo are already prepared to read bodies through anxious categories. The beards do not prevent interpretation; they provoke it. The witches therefore occupy a crucial place in the play's gender politics: they are both products of patriarchal fear and agents who exploit its blind spots.

Lady Macduff offers a contrasting feminine figure often neglected in readings centered exclusively on Lady Macbeth. She is witty, angry, practical, and painfully aware that political decisions made by men reverberate through domestic life. Her scene makes clear that "femininity" in the play is not exhausted by either nurturing ideality or monstrous ambition. Instead, Shakespeare offers multiple feminine positions, each differently exposed to patriarchal power. Lady Macduff's complaint that her husband has abandoned the family is not simply comic misunderstanding; it is a political diagnosis from below. War and honor leave others to bear the consequences. Mary Beth Rose's work on love and sexuality in Renaissance drama, together with feminist accounts of household politics, helps illuminate the significance of this scene (Rose, 1988; Howard & Rackin, 1997). Lady Macduff's vulnerability is not natural; it is produced by a system in which public masculinity is purchased at the cost of private insecurity.

The play's recurrent child imagery intensifies gender anxiety by binding power to reproduction. Macbeth has no visible children. Banquo's line will reign. Macduff loses his children to Macbeth's fear. Lady Macbeth

invokes a nursing infant only to imagine killing it. These patterns suggest that political legitimacy in Macbeth is inseparable from control over futurity. Traub and Loomba help us see how early modern gender systems were tied to lineage, inheritance, and social reproduction, not merely to individual identity (Traub, 1992; Loomba, 1989). Macbeth's crisis is therefore also a crisis of reproductive time. He can seize the present but not guarantee succession. The result is a politics of sterilized power, one that turns against children because it cannot secure continuity through them.

Read in this light, Lady Macbeth is neither simply an evil instigator nor a feminist heroine avant la lettre. She is a tragic figure produced by a world in which political agency is coded masculine and yet dependent upon fantasies of controlling the feminine body. Her language strips femininity of value in order to enter the sphere of action, but the play also shows how that sphere remains invested in feminized figures—wives, mothers, witches, children—as the sites where its deepest fears are projected. Macbeth's gender anxiety is thus not peripheral to its politics. It is the very means by which power is felt, distributed, and justified. The tragedy's enduring relevance lies partly in this insight: political violence is sustained not only by weapons and institutions, but by impoverished stories about what men and women must be.

7. Re-reading Macbeth in a Contemporary Context

To say that Macbeth speaks to the present is easy; to say exactly how it does so requires more care. The play does not offer modern policy analysis, and it should not be conscripted into simplistic allegory. What it offers instead is a dramatic model of how political crisis is experienced through rhetoric, embodiment, media, gendered expectation, and damaged intimacy. Contemporary readers recognize Macbeth not because Scotland in the play resembles any one modern state, but because the play shows how power becomes persuasive, how violence becomes normalized, and how gendered scripts make authoritarian desire emotionally intelligible.

One obvious point of contact is the contemporary crisis of legitimacy. Modern political cultures are repeatedly confronted by charismatic leadership, distrust of institutions, crisis-driven rhetoric, and the conversion of uncertainty into spectacle. Macbeth's rule is sustained by precisely these mechanisms. He cannot ground his authority in lawful succession, so he must produce an atmosphere in which command appears equivalent to necessity. Personality cult scholarship helps illuminate this logic. Jyotsana Singh, Nitasha Joon, and Namrata Joon show how leadership cults thrive through emotional investment, symbolic elevation, and the suppression of dissent, while Raghav and Malik's work on digital democracy highlights the reshaping of political legitimacy through mediated comparison, attention economies, and contested public trust (Singh et al., 2023; Raghav & Malik, 2025). Macbeth's Scotland is not a digital polity, but it is a polity in which authority depends on controlling the story through which events are interpreted. The witches' prophecies, the management of appearances after Duncan's murder, and the choreographed security of court ritual all anticipate political orders in which narrative dominance can outrun truth.

This is one reason the apparitions remain so haunting for modern readers. Their assurances resemble the forms of pseudo-certainty that circulate within contemporary information ecologies: slogans with just enough plausibility to govern action, comforting claims detached from ethical judgment, and predictive systems that flatter desire rather than discipline it. Arora and Singh's discussion of institutional unfaithfulness and Sinha with Tanvar's analysis of affective influence in digital persuasion, while emerging from different disciplinary concerns, help sharpen this point (Arora & Singh, 2025; Sinha & Tanvar, 2025). Macbeth trusts information not because it is reliable, but because it satisfies an emotional need for invulnerability. Contemporary politics too often rewards such trust. The result is a form of governance in which power becomes addicted to reassuring fictions about itself.

A second point of contact lies in the language of masculinity. Macbeth remains startlingly modern in its exposure of how gendered shame can translate insecurity into aggression. The play shows that manhood, when defined as domination, invites escalation. Macbeth kills Duncan in part because he accepts the proposition that hesitation is emasculation. He later kills Banquo and Macduff's family because the same logic has become political method. Sethi and Sihag's analysis of toxic masculinity and collective sexual violence is especially illuminating here, not because Macbeth depicts identical phenomena, but because it clarifies how masculinist cultures can turn recognition-seeking, group validation, and fear of weakness into coercive action (Sethi & Sihag, 2025). Modern societies continue to witness the catastrophic effects of such scripts in domestic abuse, sexual

violence, hate crimes, militarized policing, and political discourse that treats empathy as softness. Macbeth anatomizes the psychic machinery behind those outcomes.

The play is equally relevant to contemporary debates about coercion in intimate relations. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are not simply political conspirators; they are a married couple whose speech reveals subtle and explicit forms of pressure, seduction, humiliation, and asymmetrical power. It would be crude to collapse their marriage into modern legal categories, yet Ramakrishna Das's work on the contemporary discourse around marital rape and coercion is useful in reminding us that intimacy is never outside structures of power and consent (Das, 2023). What Macbeth dramatizes is not one-directional victimhood but a volatile economy of coercion in which each partner manipulates the other through gendered vulnerability. Lady Macbeth weaponizes shame; Macbeth later withholds knowledge and recenters command. The marriage becomes a laboratory for authoritarian power: secrets increase, speech narrows, and care gives way to instrumentalization. Modern readers recognize this pattern because political violence and intimate coercion still reinforce one another.

A third contemporary resonance concerns the place of women's agency within patriarchal systems. Lady Macbeth has often been read either as a misogynistic warning or as a figure of transgressive empowerment. Contemporary feminist discourse makes clear that neither frame is sufficient. Women's agency is structured by institutions, labor conditions, representational regimes, and unequal access to social power. Raja's evaluation of women's empowerment policies, Gupta and Chauhan's study of financial independence and empowerment, Nain and colleagues' work on rural women's socio-economic conditions, Seth and Suman's study of vocational orientation among girls, Mishra's discussion of gender discrimination and sexual harassment, and Singh and Saini's analysis of workplace stress all remind us that empowerment is not a simple matter of individual boldness (Raja, 2024; Gupta & Chauhan, 2024; Nain et al., 2025; Seth & Suman, 2024; Mishra, 2024; Singh & Saini, 2025). Read alongside such work, Lady Macbeth's ambition appears less as an isolated moral failing than as a tragic attempt to negotiate a structure in which authority itself is coded masculine. Her failure is not proof that women should avoid power; it is evidence that power organized through violence deforms everyone who seeks to inhabit it.

This perspective also throws Lady Macduff into sharper contemporary relief. Public conversations about conflict, authoritarianism, and social precarity repeatedly demonstrate that women often bear disproportionate costs when institutions fail: displacement, loss of livelihood, intensified caregiving burdens, and exposure to gendered violence. Macbeth does not theorize those issues in modern sociological language, but it dramatizes their structure. Lady Macduff's household is destroyed by decisions made elsewhere, by men pursuing legitimacy, honor, or revenge through militarized frameworks. Interdisciplinary work on women's labor, marginalization, and representation helps modern readers perceive how crucial this scene is. It insists that political disorder is never only a matter of elites. It is measured in homes, dependents, and interrupted care.

Media representation is another area where contemporary scholarship proves revealing. Shivani Verma's discussion of the indecent representation of women by media and Swadesh Singh's work on marginalized representation both underscore the politics of visibility: who gets framed as threatening, who is granted credibility, whose suffering becomes legible, and whose pain remains peripheral (Verma, 2024; Singh, 2023). Macbeth is saturated with this politics. Lady Macbeth's image is produced through male description, rumor, and later retrospective moralization. The witches are visually marked as strange and therefore interpretable as dangerous. Lady Macduff's suffering briefly comes into focus and then risks being subsumed by male revenge. Even Banquo's ghost is a crisis of visibility: one body is seen by one man and not by others. Contemporary screen cultures operate through similarly contested economies of appearance. What counts as evidence? Whose body is believed? Which figure becomes the symbolic carrier of social fear? Macbeth offers no technological answers, but it remains acutely aware that power is inseparable from regimes of representation.

The play's treatment of trauma also resonates strongly with contemporary discourse. Modern societies are increasingly fluent in the language of mental health, though often still inadequate in responding to collective injury. Drosou's work on mental health and social media, Nidhi Gupta's study of trauma, memory, and silence, and Chidi, Okeibunor, and Sabo's research on communicative support for conflict victims all emphasize that trauma is not only private suffering but a relational and communicative crisis (Drosou, 2024; Gupta, 2025; Chidi et al., 2022). Macbeth anticipates this insight. Trauma in the play returns as sleeplessness, compulsion, fragmented speech, hallucination, repetitive washing, and damaged trust. It also spreads socially. Ross hesitates

to tell Macduff the truth. Scotland becomes a nation of howling widows and crying orphans. Political violence thus creates not only dead bodies but impaired publics. Contemporary re-readings of the play can productively foreground this wider social trauma rather than limiting attention to Macbeth's guilty conscience.

Contemporary debates about gender nonconformity and queer temporality also open new interpretive possibilities. The witches' beards and Lady Macbeth's prayer to be "unsexed" have long invited anxious responses because they unsettle binary categories. Recent theory and cultural discussion enable more careful questions: what forms of time, embodiment, and social legibility emerge when normative gender scripts fail? Purva and Paliwal's study of queer temporalities, though focused on a very different text, is suggestive here because Macbeth itself is obsessed with nonlinear time—prophetic time, interrupted lineage, the return of the dead, the future-before-the-present, the child who should inherit but is murdered, the ruler who has a crown but no secure tomorrow (Purva & Paliwal, 2025). Gender anxiety in the play is inseparable from temporal anxiety. The bearded witches and the "unsexed" wife both fracture the reproductive time on which dynastic sovereignty depends. Contemporary readers attentive to queer and trans critique need not claim Macbeth as straightforwardly liberatory to see that the play exposes the violence through which normative gender order protects itself.

Adaptation history confirms the durability of these concerns. Roman Polanski's Macbeth intensifies the corporeal brutality and sexual menace of the play, registering a modern world in which violence is intimate, visible, and cyclical (Polanski, 1971; Nizam, 2015). Justin Kurzel's film emphasizes war trauma, child loss, and the exhausted bodies of combat, inviting viewers to see Macbeth less as isolated villain than as a subject already shaped by militarized culture (Kurzel, 2015). Joel Coen's The Tragedy of Macbeth strips the world down into stark architecture, shadows, and a radically stylized weirdness that foregrounds paranoia, age, and abstraction (Coen, 2021). Adaptation scholars have shown that these remediations do not merely update Shakespeare; they test which of the play's structures still organize feeling in new historical conditions (Hutcheon, 2013; Kidnie, 2009; Lanier, 2002; Burnett, 2007; Jackson, 2007; Carroll, 2014). Their persistence suggests that Macbeth remains one of the most flexible scripts for thinking about the entanglement of violence and legitimacy.

Even the figure of Lady Macbeth has been reinterpreted in contemporary ways that move beyond the old binary of demon and victim. Carroll demonstrates that modern adaptations often recover her complexity, vulnerability, or historical embeddedness, while Gupta and Kumar's comparative reading of Lady Macbeth with Clytemnestra underscores how female figures traditionally cast as destructive can also be read as exposing the contradictions of masculine power (Carroll, 2014; Gupta & Kumar, 2025). Such rereadings do not absolve Lady Macbeth. They refuse, instead, the convenience of making her the sole repository of the play's disorder. Contemporary gender critique teaches us to ask what systems require such repositories in the first place.

Ultimately, Macbeth remains contemporary because it refuses to isolate political catastrophe from everyday structures of feeling. It shows that tyrannies do not survive by force alone. They survive through stories about manhood, fantasies of purity and safety, manipulated visions of the future, the marginalization of vulnerable bodies, and the conversion of households into collateral space. Interdisciplinary work from literary criticism, political theory, gender studies, media studies, and the Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies makes this plain from different angles. A modern rereading of Macbeth therefore does more than discover analogies. It reactivates the play as a tool for diagnosing how power still enters language, bodies, and intimacy today.

8. Conclusion

Macbeth endures because it is a tragedy that understands political breakdown from the inside. It does not present power as an abstract constitutional problem, violence as a detachable event, or gender as a merely personal identity. Instead, it shows how power becomes unstable when it seeks legitimacy through coercion, how violence saturates both public and intimate worlds, and how gender anxiety gives those processes emotional force. Macbeth can seize the throne but cannot generate the collective authorization that makes sovereignty durable. He therefore governs through fear, preemption, and spectacular force. Yet the more he kills, the less secure he becomes. Violence can found a regime of terror; it cannot create a future.

The play is equally insistent that this political failure is lived through bodies. Duncan's sleeping body, Banquo's ghosted body, Lady Macduff's murdered child, Lady Macbeth's compulsively remembering body, and

Macbeth's own final decapitated body all testify that the state writes itself onto flesh. Shakespeare's tragedy is therefore never only about a bad ruler. It is about what happens to language, trust, sleep, kinship, and futurity when political order becomes dependent on exposed life. Trauma in Macbeth is not supplementary to politics. It is one of politics' afterlives.

Gender anxiety is the medium through which these political and bodily dramas are organized. Lady Macbeth's "unsex me" speech, the witches' bearded ambiguity, the repeated shaming of male hesitation, and Macduff's insistence that feeling is part of being a man together show that the tragedy is fundamentally concerned with the instability of gendered scripts. Macbeth falls not because masculinity is naturally violent, but because he accepts a culturally impoverished version of masculinity that equates worth with domination. Lady Macbeth collapses not because female agency is inherently monstrous, but because the only available model of efficacious power within her world is structured by cruelty, anti-nurture, and disavowed dependence. The witches remain disturbing because they reveal how much political order depends upon policing the boundaries of sex, body, and futurity.

A contemporary re-reading of Macbeth, then, does not modernize the play by force. It recognizes that Shakespeare already understood many of the structures that still define public life: charismatic rule without legitimacy, security politics driven by fear, the seductions of predictive certainty, the spectacularization of violence, the erosion of intimate trust, backlash around gender nonconformity, and the conversion of women's and children's vulnerability into collateral political matter. The interdisciplinary conversation with twenty sources from Ianna Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies helps translate those structures into present concerns around toxic masculinity, representation, digital democracy, empowerment, coercion, and social trauma. Such a bridge strengthens rather than weakens literary analysis because it clarifies why Macbeth continues to matter outside the classroom.

In the end, Macbeth is not simply a cautionary tale about ambition. It is a profound anatomy of what happens when a culture imagines that power belongs to those who can harden themselves against relation, grief, and limit. Shakespeare's answer is devastatingly clear: such hardening does not produce mastery. It produces haunted rulers, broken households, damaged publics, and a political world in which every guarantee becomes equivocation. That diagnosis remains contemporary because the temptation it describes has not disappeared.

Funding:

1- This work was supported by the Deanship of Scientific Research, Vice Presidency for Graduate Studies and Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia [Grant No. KFU261799]

2- The authors extend their appreciation to the Deanship of Scientific Research and Graduate Studies at King Khalid University for funding this work through a Large Research Group Project under Grant Number RGP.2/422/46

3- The authors extend their sincere thanks to Ajloun National University(ANU), represented by the Deanship of Scientific Research, for its generous support, which had a significant impact on the completion of this research.

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