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## The Politics of Sleepwalking: American Lady Macbeths

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# THE POLITICS OF SLEEPWALKING: AMERICAN LADY MACBETHS

KATHERINE ROWE

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More than any other aspect of Shakespeare's play, Lady Macbeth is understood in American discourse as impervious to change. The persistence and force of her character are illustrated especially well by the apparent distaste American audiences currently feel for innovation in her role. *The Wall Street Journal* reported several years ago, for example, on a failed attempt to revive the play for Hollywood. On 23 May 1996, the *Journal* described the frustrations of Scottish screenwriter Steven Simpson, then attempting to interest Hollywood in his new *Macbeth*, 'Throne of Destiny'. The screenplay dramatizes a Scottish nationalist *Macbeth*, in the mode of Rob Roy and William 'Braveheart' Wallace.<sup>1</sup> It inherits a cultural and nationalist revival that began in Scotland in the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> So it takes its history from George Buchanan, writing against the editorial revisions of Raphael Holinshed and Hector Boece that contributed to the 'imperial themes' of Shakespeare's play.<sup>3</sup> Simpson emphasizes the historical Macbeth's first ten years of peaceful rule and the proto-constitutionalism of the Scottish monarchy.<sup>4</sup> His Macbeth is obviously quite different from Shakespeare's ambitious usurper. In him, public action and the support of counselors overcome the bad rule of Buchanan's weaker King Duncan. This Macbeth restores the ancient liberties and rational political order that Duncan failed to maintain.

Given the success of contemporary films such as *Rob Roy* and *Braveheart* – which remake Scottish nationalist heroes into types of America's rebellious democratic character – Simpson's adaptation should have played well. However, as reporter

Daniel Pearl points out, 'not everyone is buying Macbeth's rehabilitation'. Whoever Macbeth was, American film producers have always preferred his evil side. Cromwell Productions, for one, was offered the pro-Macbeth script for its upcoming film but it used Shakespeare's play instead. It's free,

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel Pearl, 'Scots Toil and Trouble to Make *Macbeth* Into the Next Braveheart', *The Wall Street Journal*, 23 May 1996, B1. Since Scott's novel was adapted to the stage in 1818 (with William Charles Macready as Rob), *Rob Roy* and *Macbeth* have been perennial repertory pairings in Scotland. See James Diddin, *Annals of the Edinburgh Stage* (Edinburgh, 1888), p. 435.

<sup>2</sup> See the recent 'excavation, rediscovery and re-examination of Scottish history' inaugurated by T. C. Smout's *A History of the Scottish People: 1560–1830* (New York, 1969). See also Ian Brown, 'Plugged into History: The Sense of the Past in Scottish Theatre', *Scottish Theatre since the Seventies*, eds. Randall Stevenson and Gavin Wallace (Edinburgh, 1996), pp. 84–99.

<sup>3</sup> On the politics of different versions of the *Macbeth* history see Sally Mapstone, 'Shakespeare and Scottish Kingship: A Case History', in *The Rose and the Thistle: Essays on the Culture of Late Medieval and Renaissance Scotland*, ed. Sally Mapstone and Juliette Wood (East Lothian, 1998), pp. 158–89; Arthur Kinney, 'Scottish History, the Union of the Crowns and the Issue of Right Rule: The Case of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*', in *Renaissance Culture in Context: Theory and Practice*, ed. Jean R. Brink and William F. Gentrup (Brookfield, VT, 1993), pp. 18–53; and David Norbrook, 'Macbeth and the Politics of Historiography', in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth Century England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley, 1987), pp. 78–116.

<sup>4</sup> This revision is in keeping with recent experiments on the Edinburgh Stage: Ike Isakson's dramatic retelling of the Macbeth history in Gaelic and Scots in 1995, and rival Scots translations of Shakespeare's play, by R. L. C. Lorimer and David Purves, in 1992.

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easy to stage and time-tested, explains producer Bob Carruthers. Moreover, Mr. Simpson says, even producers who have no problem with Macbeth as a good king find it hard to swallow a kind Lady Macbeth.<sup>5</sup>

There have been a number of revisions of *Macbeth* on the stage and screen, from the devoted wife of nineteenth-century sentimental revivals, to the vamps of recent BBC imports. If we accept that Mr. Simpson is not inventing a reluctant Hollywood audience, why is it that Americans especially resist a kinder, gentler Lady Macbeth? Or more precisely, what do we resist about her? One way to answer this question might be to survey and sort allusions to the play in contemporary American discourse, seeking patterns in the ubiquitous references to ‘out, damned spot’ (5.1.33) and other familiar quotations. This anecdotal activity would range widely: from feminist artists such as Elizabeth Layton, with her housewifely Lady Macbeth attempting to bleach out her ‘damned spot’ with Clorox, to the popular epithet for American First Ladies, regularly labelled ‘Lady Macbeth’ by critics hostile to the prospect of a powerful political woman.<sup>6</sup> Even a brief sampling seems to suggest that the burden of these allusions is the sexual politics of the tragedy, spun in ways that reflect how we like our women, powerful or obedient. A more complex view can be earned from taking a longitudinal approach, looking to earlier versions of Lady Macbeth in American popular culture and tracking specific strains of resistance and attachment to her figure.

The first observation to make is a simple one: the reluctance of Hollywood producers aside, American audiences have not always understood Lady Macbeth in exclusively negative terms. Indeed, her figure was for a long time tied to a model of assertive American femininity, familiar from Henry James novels but exported most successfully by the nineteenth-century actress Charlotte Cushman. Cushman made her career playing Lady Macbeth in a way that capitalized on the character’s transgressive masculinity. Cushman’s interpretation borrowed something of the hen-pecking wives of early minstrel shows and burlesques. Indeed, she

was famous for bullying and cornering and ‘pitching into’ her husband onstage and was known to complain about the ‘little men’ she had to play opposite.<sup>7</sup> Edwin Booth, for one, is supposed to have felt like telling her when she urged him to the murder, ‘Why don’t you kill him? You’re a great deal bigger than I am.’<sup>8</sup> The roles of Macbeth and his Lady had already played an important part in the emerging culture of national celebrity and were instrumental in defining what it meant to be English or American.<sup>9</sup> When crossed with high Shakespearian art, the hen-pecking persona translated into a particularly American version of feminine sternness and resilience. Cushman revived the role throughout her career with tremendous success, in London as well as in the States. Her gender-bending brought equal acclaim in cross-dressed roles such as Romeo: glossed by contemporaries as a distinctively assertive, American femininity that reflected a successful vision of ‘unsexing’.<sup>10</sup>

Cushman’s interpretation popularized a version of Lady Macbeth as a woman whose exceptional virility finds effective uses. She made a lasting impression, to judge by the famous 1858 engraving of her in 2.2 (the scene Booth describes). Facing the audience with daggers in hand, she glares out of

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<sup>5</sup> Pearl, ‘Scots Toil’, p. B2

<sup>6</sup> Anne Fadiman, ‘Elizabeth Layton: Portrait of the Artist as an Old Woman’, *Life*, March 1987, pp. 21–4.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Falk, ‘Shakespeare in America: A Survey to 1900’, in *Shakespeare Survey 18* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 104; Charles Shattuck quoting contemporary actor and elocutionist George Vandenhoff, in *Shakespeare on the American Stage: From the Hallams to Edwin Booth* (Washington, 1976), p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Shattuck, quoting Booth, *American Stage*, p. 95.

<sup>9</sup> Cushman’s pioneering role followed the earlier pattern of Sarah Siddons who had used the role to establish the type of a dignified, loyal English wife. Concurrent productions starring Charles Macready and Edwin Forrest (rival English and American actors who defined a national Shakespearian style) helped spark the Astor Place Riots in New York City, in 1849.

<sup>10</sup> For Cushman’s success in exporting both the role and this version of assertive American femininity see Shattuck, *American Stage*, pp. 91–2 and Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman* (Ann Arbor, 1999), pp. 110–37.

the frame.<sup>11</sup> Yet for all the single-minded potency figured here, this scene in the play illustrates Lady Macbeth's complicity as much as her primacy in the crime. The paradox of the part, as critics since Coleridge have pointed out, is that by the close of the play Lady Macbeth famously fails to sustain the resilience of Acts 1 and 2. Repeated obsessively in the sleepwalking scene, 5.1, the moment with the daggers is reconfigured by the close of the play as the beginning of her destruction. (The two scenes appear to be the most frequently illustrated from the play.) Popular allusions to the character reflect this configuration, rarely straying far from the obsessive compulsion evoked by the phrase 'out, damned spot'. That line reminds us that while Lady Macbeth begins the play in Bradleyan terms, acting by 'sheer force of will', she ends in helpless perseveration.<sup>12</sup> What quotations of 'out, damned spot' code for, in other words, is a plot of inevitable regression: the transformation of an ambitious, persuasive and virile consort into a passive, guilty, self-divided and feminized sleepwalker. This plot has tremendous staying power in the theater. While dramatic interpretations of the role may change, few variations can be found in the imagination of Lady Macbeth's last scene. From the late eighteenth century on, sketches of her sleepwalking emphasize her trailing hair, and loose white gown, and blank face; these antedate Cushman's innovations and continue after her, reinforced by sentimental reincarnations of Lady Macbeth as a devoted wife.<sup>13</sup>

The figure of the independent American woman embodied by Lady Macbeth predates Cushman and continues long after. In its earliest versions that figure took a particular charge from the regressive arc of Lady Macbeth's plot. Her progress from potent ambition to feminine passivity is still, I want to hazard, what most resists reconstruction in American Lady Macbeths. It gains its force and persistence from late eighteenth-century debates about the nature and stability of the American republic. The play and Lady Macbeth in particular had a powerful claim on the imagination of pre- and post-revolutionary writers. It spoke to central problems in the construction of early American subjectivity, especially the notions of democratic consent and

electoral voice at the heart of the constitutionalist debates. Read in this context, the significance of Lady Macbeth's regression has less to do with sexual politics (how Americans like their women) than with fundamental fears about the degree to which we enter a destructive complicity we cannot control when we cast our votes.

*Macbeth* was one of the most frequently staged Shakespeare plays in American repertory during the eighteenth century, from Lewis Hallam's first revival in 1759 to the spectacular 1795 production in Philadelphia.<sup>14</sup> With its plot of regicide and new order, the play had a lively but equivocal role in contemporary political discourse: as when, for example, John Adams denounced Mother England in the *Boston Gazette*, in 1765, as a 'Lady Macbeth' to the Colonies – for her un-maternal behaviour in imposing the Stamp Act. Adams charges the Colonies outright with childish timidity and invokes the 'horror' of a mother 'deaf to the cries of her children',

Who 'had given suck, and knew'  
'How tender 'twas to love the Babe that milk'd her,'  
But yet, who could  
'Even while 'twas smiling in her Face,  
Have pluck'd her Nipple from the boneless Gums,  
And dash'd the Brains out.'<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> See the engraving of Cushman as Lady Macbeth, with daggers, from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare, carefully collated by Halliwell, Knight, Collier, and others, illustrated with steel engraved portraits of characters portrayed by the most distinguished American Actors* (Johnson, Fry and Company, 1858).

<sup>12</sup> A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth*, 2nd ed. (London, 1926), p. 367.

<sup>13</sup> See *Shakespeare's Unruly Women*, ed. Georgianna Ziegler, with Frances E. Dolan and Jeanne Addison Roberts (Washington, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> E. Elandt, 'Puritan and Quaker Opposition to Performances of Shakespeare', in *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia: An International Review of English Studies*, 16 (1983), p. 251; Shattuck, *American Stage*, p. 29.

<sup>15</sup> John Adams, 'A Dissertation on the Canon and the Feudal Law', *The Boston Gazette*, 12 August, 19 August, 30 September, 21 October 1765, from the 21 October issue. Thomas Paine develops the figure of a maturing America in similar terms. 'I have heard it asserted by some, that as America hath

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For all his resolute pragmatism, Adams's quotation is remarkably equivocal. If Mother England is Lady Macbeth and the colonies babes, silenced by our lack of representation, are we about to be plucked from her breast and dashed to the ground? Or are the Colonies Macbeth, urged to a reluctant regicide by her terrible insults? Then too, Adams plays Lady Macbeth, deploying the spectre of maternal infanticide to galvanize readers to action. Any of these readings introduces unwonted possibilities into the justification of Colonial independence. Either Americans are more helpless in our loss of European inheritance than Adams would allow, or we are guiltier of terrible transgression in making our new social institutions.<sup>16</sup> Adams's quotation epitomizes the mixed messages *Macbeth* delivered in this period. In this respect, the play seems to be exceptional. What we know about America's Shakespeare from Michael Bristol's work on the topic is that American writers tended to use Shakespeare to establish cultural continuity with the Old World. At the same time, they made him speak for the liberal individualism that required a political break with England.<sup>17</sup> The deep anxieties about prophetic voices and distributed agency in *Macbeth* work strongly against this trend. They undermine our confidence that Shakespearian texts (or any textual authorities we appeal to) can be made to speak in a predictable, instrumentalized way.

For this reason, *Macbeth* served, during and after the revolution, as a powerful resource for conservative warnings against the irrational foundations of consensual democracy and for arguments against a break with England. The most sustained and stinging of these warnings is delivered in 1798 by Charles Brockden Brown, in his gothic novel *Wieland; Or the Transformation: An American Tale*. *Wieland* was written during a particularly anxious moment in the federalist debates. Brown sent the novel to Thomas Jefferson, a gesture critics typically gloss as a warning or attempt to redirect those debates. Yet Brown's novel does more than attempt a topical intervention. It seeks to expose fundamental fractures within the expressive media – print, voice, public performance – which appear so stable

in the pragmatist hands of writers such as Adams and Paine. For Brown, Shakespearian texts stand as much for the generic instability of literary voice *per se* as they do for the particular concerns they dramatize.

*Macbeth* in particular seems to saturate Brown's imagination. In both *Wieland* and his other novels, the play's vocabulary, atmosphere, scenes and dramatic conflicts appear an inexhaustible resource. *Wieland* might easily be read as an exercise in adapting dramatic conventions to those of epistolary fiction. But the relations between the novel and the play seem at once more organic and more self-reflective than we tend to assume adaptation will be. *Wieland* is better understood as a generic experiment in the variety and politics of literary quotation, updating *Macbeth's* concerns, osmotically assimilating its structures, but also quoting it clunkily out of context in much the same mode as Adams. To understand the political claims behind these diverse modes of quotation, it is worth exploring the novel at some length.

The *Wieland* family, Brown's central figures, model the precarious 'condition of a nation' founded on the principles of public persuasion and reasoned consent.<sup>18</sup> The novel opens with a

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flourished under her former connexion with Great-Britain, that the same connexion is necessary towards her future happiness, and will always have the same effect. Nothing can be more fallacious than this kind of argument. We may as well assert that because a child has thrived upon milk, that it is never to have meat . . .', quoted in Thomas Paine, *Common Sense and Other Writings*, ed. Gordon Wood (New York, 2003), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Michael Bristol's discussion of Adams's use of Shakespeare, *Shakespeare's America, America's Shakespeare* (London and New York, 1990), p. 58 ff.

<sup>17</sup> Bristol, *Shakespeare's America*, p. 123. Post-revolutionary American references to *Macbeth* can sound more like the Tory Shakespeare of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England. See Nicola Watson on Walter Scott's use of Shakespeare Histories, 'Kemble, Scott and the Mantle of the Bard', in Jean Marsden, ed., *The Appropriation of Shakespeare: Post-Renaissance Reconstructions of the Works and the Myth* (New York, 1991), pp. 73–92.

<sup>18</sup> Quotations from the novel reference Charles Brockden Brown, *Wieland and Memoirs of Carwin the Biloquist*, ed. Jay Fliegelman (New York, 1991).

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nostalgic family idyll, set between the French and Revolutionary wars. Clara, the central character, narrates the story in a long letter. She, her brother Theodore, her sister-in-law, and their friend Henry Pleyel live outside of Philadelphia, a community of siblings deracinated from their European connections. The shadow of their father's mysterious and occult death hangs over the family. Still, they confidently pursue a life of scholarly debates in which reasoned analysis appears to hold sway and all voices carry equal weight. This model Jeffersonian society is threatened by the arrival of a stranger named Carwin, a ventriloquist whose mysterious voice (perhaps inadvertently) leads Theodore to believe he hears divine commands to kill his family. Theodore obeys, in a terrible scene reminiscent of the murder of Lady Macduff and her son.

Writing three years after these events, in distress so deep she is certain she will die as soon as she lays down her pen, Clara cannot stop reliving the scenes she recounts. Her story unfolds with the kind of manic repetition compulsion one would expect to find in a narrative written by Lady Macbeth. The central problem figured in this obsessive remembering is also *Macbeth's* problem – a political and cultural one as well as a familial one – how to guarantee continuity when everyone who might pass on what needs to be known is dead or dying. The manic style and Brown's turn to theatrical texts (Shakespeare in particular) mount a specific challenge to the kind of expressive pragmatism found in Adams and Paine. For Brown, the loss of family history, of inherited political institutions, and of time-tested religious ceremony makes the Wielands vulnerable to Carwin's deceptions. These losses cannot be compensated by the rule of rational law and individual choice. To paraphrase Christopher Looby's reading, order that is sustained through argument and persuasion rather than by customary authority – as it is in the Wieland family, and was in the deeply contested republican debates of this period – makes the new democratic institutions especially vulnerable to verbal assault.<sup>19</sup> Carwin's dangerous ventriloquism challenges the foundations of American expressive individualism: the

efficacy of rational discourse and the essential tie between political intent and election figured in the metaphor of a popular voice. The novel systematically undermines the republican formula, *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* – the voice of the people is the voice of God.<sup>20</sup> And it challenges any stable connection between what one intends to say and the effects of one's speech. In this way, it questions the moral autonomy of individuals in a state (such as the emerging electoral state) in which one person speaks for another.<sup>21</sup>

More than this, however, the novel challenges some of the fundamental pragmatist assumptions of early republican print exchanges, assimilating prose – by way of its Shakespearian subtext – to the more equivocal arts of theatre. Capitalizing on the popularity of the play, Brown seems particularly interested in the theatrical model of moral complicity *Macbeth* offers, as it directs our attention to the psychological experiences that attend political choices. The exchange of bloody daggers after Duncan's murder, in 2.2, is (as with Cushman) the theatrical moment that best captures the shift from powerful autonomy to moral complicity which preoccupies Brown. Complicity is vividly conveyed, in this scene, by its central gestures and striking dialogue. In Shakespeare's version (and in David Garrick's, Brown's likely source text) the scene begins with a sequence of interlaced lines in which Lady Macbeth and Macbeth finish each other's fractured thoughts. The fractured thinking represented in stichomythic dialogue here is highly unusual in Shakespeare, rarely used before this play. It adumbrates the fragmented speech that marks later scenes, when Lady Macbeth sleepwalks and Macbeth approaches his phantom dagger.

The stichomythic lines in this scene offer Brown a verbal corollary, at the level of address, for the way

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<sup>19</sup> Christopher Looby, *Voicing America: Language, Literary Form, and the Origins of the United States* (Chicago and London, 1996), p. 147.

<sup>20</sup> Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language & the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993), p. xi.

<sup>21</sup> Looby, *Voicing America*, p. 147.

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one's mind can penetrate into and place thoughts, intentions and expectations in another. That he finds these resources in Shakespeare, in particular, is a point he wants us not to miss. The borrowings work at several levels, but in the interests of clarity it is helpful to begin with plot. For his main actions, particularly events that befall the narrator, Clara, Brown integrates this scene with the two others that bracket Lady Macbeth's action: the 'murdering ministers' soliloquy, in 1.5, and the sleepwalking scene, 5.1.<sup>22</sup> Brown brings these scenes together early in the novel, in an episode that offers a good example of the way Lady Macbeth's plot allegorizes the progress of a subject that is distinctly anti-Adamsian and anti-Jeffersonian. Resting on a bench after a long walk in the woods, Clara falls half-asleep, unwittingly preventing Carwin from keeping an assignation. In her phantasmagoric state, she dreams that she is sleepwalking. Carwin, hoping to wake her and scare her off, creeps up behind like a stalker and throws his voice out suddenly, shouting 'Hold! Hold!' (*Wieland*, p. 71). The phrase will be familiar to Shakespearians as Lady Macbeth's:

... Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark  
To cry 'Hold, hold!' (1.5.49–53)

In her half-waking state, Clara hears Carwin's call as a divine voice and imagines that it catches her at the brink of a terrible fall. She remembers vividly, she tells us, what she was dreaming at that moment. She dreamed she was walking towards her brother's estate. Carelessly ignorant of a pit in her path, she looked up to see her brother beckoning her across a terrible precipice:

I mended my pace, and one step more would have plunged me into this abyss, had not some one from behind caught suddenly my arm, and exclaimed, in a voice of eagerness and terror, 'Hold! hold!' The sound broke my sleep, and I found myself at the next moment, standing on my feet, and surrounded by the deepest darkness. Images so terrific and forcible disabled me, for a

time, from distinguishing between sleep and wakefulness, and withheld from me knowledge of my actual condition. (*Wieland*, pp. 71–2)

The pitfall Clara faces here is an excessive belief in her own powers of rational analysis and in the evidence of her senses. These are established early in the novel as the foundations of her sense of herself as a reasonable social agent. They are shaken even more seriously as the narrative continues. Like Lady Macbeth, Clara begins as a decisive, rational actor but ends in a state of helpless horror: unable to trust the evidence of her senses, certain only of her own complicity in her destruction. Like Lady Macbeth all she can do in this state of horror is manically replay the scene.

When Carwin explains his purpose in haunting Clara, he claims that his intentions were never evil, despite their results. And he justifies himself, weirdly, by claiming Shakespearian authority. He likes to use the phrase 'Hold, hold', he says, because 'The mode in which heaven is said by the poet to interfere for the prevention of crimes, was somewhat analogous to my province, and never failed to occur to me at seasons like this' (p. 232). At the bottom of this page, Brown footnotes the quotation, citing part of the line that precedes it in Lady Macbeth's soliloquy: ' – Peeps through the blanket of the dark, and cries Hold! Hold! – SHAKESPEARE.' By being so archly explicit here, Brown means to counter the kind of Shakespearian quotation that revolutionaries such as Adams were using to justify what were for him dangerous experiments. The quotation captures the essence of a conservative warning: stop, hold on, conserve, retain what you have. Yet peculiarly, this warning comes in the voice of the least reliable character in the novel. To make sense of this puzzle, we need to unravel the several voices and modes of address quoted in Lady Macbeth's phrase.

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<sup>22</sup> Brown used David Garrick's edition, followed here. There are no differences between Garrick's version of the soliloquy and F, only minor differences in 5.1.

What ‘peeps’ in Lady Macbeth’s speech is heaven, following the keen glance of her knife. By having Carwin gloss the quotation, Brown underlines the ironic and profane nature of Carwin’s pompous analogy between his own actions and divine intervention. The footnote emphasizes the loss of a real, governing, divinity in this community: Carwin fakes it, but there is no moral or spiritual principle animating his voice. Instead, Carwin’s analogy is the basis for his own self-deception, which lets him continue his terrible program. Notably, in footnoting Lady Macbeth’s speech, Brown expands Carwin’s quotation only slightly, stopping just short of pointing out the parallel deceptions. Indeed, he abbreviates the line so as to reverse its meaning, eliding Shakespeare’s negative subjunctive: ‘that my keen knife see *not* . . . nor heaven peep . . .’ (*Macbeth* 1.5.51–3). Any careful reader going back to the text (such as Theodore Wieland himself, whom we learn is a textual purist) will catch this decontextualization. What the footnote quotes, in other words, is not only Shakespeare’s play but the characteristic mode of breezy, pragmatist quotation, here translated into Carwin’s opportunistic, selective memory.

Tellingly, the negatives Brown drops out mark Lady Macbeth’s failure to internalize heaven’s voice, her active repression, rationalization and occulting of the ‘compunctious visitings’ of conscience. Her impious ‘inner voice’ exemplifies Brown’s particular unease with the adaptation of Puritan models of conscience to the new metaphor of popular voice. For Brown, the slippage from individual to collective, from inner to public voice invites profound self-deceit. This deception calls into question the key assumptions behind individual suffrage and rational consent: the notion that one can know one’s own intentions and, by speaking, bring those intentions to pass. Accordingly, the Shakespearian allusion thematizes so many internal displacements of divine warning that one cannot trace them to an originary voice. Brown quotes Shakespeare by way of Garrick; Carwin ventriloquizes the poet by way of Lady Macbeth, ventriloquizing the voice of God; she does so only in imagination, profanely, to evade or repress that voice. The voice of the people

in this tangle of attributions is very clearly not the voice of God. Moreover, any quoted authority – even and especially Shakespeare – appears here likely to be quoting someone else of uncertain authority, for occulted reasons, in infinite regression. Theodore Wieland, the novel’s literalist, may be ‘diligent in settling and restoring the purity of the text’, as we learn he is with Cicero; but textual scrupulousness helps him not at all in discerning true and dissembling voices of authority.<sup>23</sup>

Lady Macbeth personifies her knife in order to displace moral responsibility and prevent self-reflection. Her lines paradoxically call attention to this displacement. The attention alerted and deferred in this way is hers, ours, and heaven’s: and it is this simultaneous failure of internal, social and divine governance that draws Brown to these lines. For it is not just the heedlessness of his speakers – both Carwin and Clara, with her own epistolary ventriloquism – but their *wilful* heedlessness, that Lady Macbeth models. If she brought her intentions into line with their terrible consequences, to acknowledge the two as an ethical unit and see the wound she makes, she could not act. So she conjures intention and act, instrument and will apart.<sup>24</sup> Carwin’s apparently neutral arguments follow the same pattern: they hide a genuinely immoral self-interest that willfully refuses to calculate effects into its operation. His self-deceit echoes the self-deceptions into which he lures the Wielands. Over and over in the novel, Carwin repeats what he implies here: that he knows at some level his actions are wrong yet his addiction to the power of ventriloquism is such that he cannot stop using it, although he tries. The protestations capture the essence of the repetition compulsion in *Macbeth*; once you begin assuming the power of other voices you cannot stop. The terrible consequences of these vocal deceptions underline the weaknesses of the

<sup>23</sup> See Brown, *Wieland*, p. 27.

<sup>24</sup> On the humoral logic of this self-discipline see Katherine Rowe, ‘Minds in Company: Shakespearian Tragic Emotions’ in *A Blackwell Companion to Shakespeare’s Works Vol. 1*, ed. Richard Dutton and Jean Howard (Oxford, 2003), pp. 47–72.

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republican formula, *Vox Populi, Vox Dei*, as scholars such as Looby, Fliegelman and others observe.<sup>25</sup> However, Brown's scepticism about the instability of voice as an agent force in human activities goes beyond the concerns of his contemporary political scene. For the infinite regress of Carwin's quotation disables even the warning that the text itself delivers. Tellingly, the looming darkness and terrible events of the novel cannot (any more than in *Macbeth*) be attributed exclusively to Carwin or explained by his debunking.

Murky questions of agency tied in Shakespeare's play to the witches re-appear in Brown's novel not only as a gothic apparatus (a father dying by spontaneous combustion) but in its formal structures, particularly its relentless use of the passive voice. Passive voice stands as a kind of formal analogue, in address, for the fundamental detachment between voice and authority that Brown finds in a culture that deliberately deracinates itself. The passage immediately following the footnote to Shakespeare, in which Carwin glosses his actions, provides a typical example:

It was requisite to break your slumbers, and for this end I uttered the powerful monosyllable, 'hold! hold!' My purpose *was not prescribed* by duty, yet surely it was far from being atrocious and inexpiable. To effect it, I uttered what was false, but it was well suited to my purpose. Nothing less *was intended* than to injure you.

(*Wieland*, p. 233; my italics)

Such wilful false-consciousness is less frightening in Carwin, it turns out, than in Clara herself. Brown makes this clear at the end of the novel, in a scene that recalls Lady Macbeth's dagger more pointedly. Having murdered his wife and children, still inflamed by religious enthusiasm, Theodore returns to kill Clara as well. She calls for Carwin's help, and he speaks to Theodore in her defense: calling 'hold!' in his divine voice for the last time and then revealing himself. When she asks him to speak for her, Clara begins to collude with rather than resist Carwin's deceptions and this collusion clarifies Brown's concern about the electoral process. To ask or authorize another to speak for you, he fears, is never to be sure whose interests are expressed.

Worse, to speak for another or be spoken for makes it impossible to set limits on ones complicity in the inevitably violent results. When Theodore learns that his fantasies of divine inspiration are false, he despairs and kills himself. But it is Clara who provides him with the suicide weapon. Recounting their exchange of the knife, she describes a remarkable series of cognitive displacements. 'Having received the knife from his hand', she tells us, 'I held it loosely and without regard; but now it seized again my attention, and I grasped it with force' (p. 260). A few lines later Brown repeats the quiet allusion: 'my right hand, grasping the unseen knife, was still disengaged [by Theodore]. It was lifted to strike' (p. 261). The unseen knife that seizes her attention, before she wilfully grasps it, clearly takes its cue from Shakespeare's keen blade. It reverses the relation of agent and instrument so that its holder may not attend nor claim the wound it makes.

The self-deception figured by this knife connects the early, potent and murderous Lady Macbeth of 1.5 and the sleepwalking Queen. In this revision, a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth suffers the consequences of a self-deception – through 'willed submission to demonic powers' – that made her powerful.<sup>26</sup> In this extraordinary moment, Clara's and Theodore's thoughts interlace in the same fragmented, complicit way as in Shakespeare's 2.2. The slow buildup of their complicity is explored at some length in this scene. Reacting to the news that he was deceived, Theodore is seized by a 'spirit of tempestuous but undesigning activity':

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<sup>25</sup> Looby draws the connection between Carwin's mimicry and the raging contemporary debate about the validity of the electoral process: 'are the constituents making their delegate speak for them, or is the delegate making his constituents accept his speech as their own?' (172). For Brown, the problem with the electoral model is not which direction intention (and therefore responsibility) flows; as Looby points out, it must flow both ways. But the ambiguity that permits this flow also dissolves the connection between intent and ethical analysis.

<sup>26</sup> The phrase is W. Moelwyn Merchant's, 'His Fiend-Like Queen', *Shakespeare Survey 19* (Cambridge, 1966), pp. 75–81 (p. 80).

## KATHERINE ROWE

He rose from his place and strode across the floor, tottering and at random. His eyes were without moisture, and gleamed with the fire that consumed his vitals. The muscles of his face were agitated by convulsion. His lips moved, but no sound escaped him. That nature should long sustain this conflict was not to be believed. (p. 263)

Clara identifies closely with this internal conflict, falling into second-person address:

My state was little different from that of my brother. I entered, as it were, into his thought. My heart was visited and rent by his pangs – Oh that thy phrenzy had never been cured! that thy madness, with its blissful visions, would return! or, if that must not be, that thy scene would hasten to a close! that death would cover thee with his oblivion!

What can I wish for thee? Thou who hast vied with the great preacher of thy faith in sanctity of motives, and in elevation above sensual and selfish! Thou whom thy fate has changed into parricide and savage! Can I wish for the continuance of thy being? No. (p. 263)

As if sleepwalking, Theodore runs through a series of theatrical poses for overwhelming grief, wringing his hands like Lady Macbeth and clutching his head.

For a time his movements seemed destitute of purpose. If he walked; if he turned; if his fingers were entwined with each other; if his hands were pressed against opposite sides of his head with a force sufficient to crush it into pieces; it was to tear his mind from self-contemplation; to waste his thoughts on external objects. (p. 264)

Finally, identifying with Theodore, knowing his thoughts by voicing them, Clara crosses the moral precipice that separated her from her brother in that first walking nightmare. Here, she participates in both his thoughts and his actions:

Speedily this train was broken. A beam appeared to be darted into his mind, which gave a purpose to his efforts. An avenue to escape presented itself; and now he eagerly gazed about him: when my thoughts became engaged by his demeanour, my fingers were stretched as by a mechanical force, and the knife, no longer heeded or of use, escaped from my grasp, and fell unperceived on the floor. His eye now lighted upon it, he seized it with the quickness of a thought. (p. 264)

The passive way her attention becomes ‘engaged’ here and the ‘unperceived’ release of the dagger are belied by the verbal echoes that tie Theodore’s intention with hers: the darting beam and his lighting eye, her thoughts and his grasp ‘with the quickness of a thought’. These implicit accusations are confirmed by the bloody hands and guilty impressions that obsess Clara, *pace* Lady Macbeth, ever after:

I shrieked aloud, but it was too late. He plunged it to the hilt in his neck; and his life instantly escaped with the stream that gushed from the wound. He was stretched at my feet; and my hands were sprinkled with his blood as he fell.

Such was thy last deed, my brother! For a spectacle like this was it my fate to be reserved! Thy eyes were closed – thy face ghastly with death – thy arms, and the spot where thou liedest, floated in thy life’s blood! These images have not, for a moment, forsaken me. Till I am breathless and cold, they must continue to hover in my sight. (p. 264)

Brown uses the passive voice throughout the novel as verbal parallel to the waking trance that increasingly overtakes his narrator. It is a great perturbation of nature, to receive at once the benefits of a sleeping conscience and do the murderous effects of watching. Thus, this final violent scene is explicitly theatrical and didactic – designed to communicate Clara’s state of horrified suspension and half-conscious action to the reader, projecting onto us the progressive, enervating feminization that overtakes this representative democratic subject. In contemporary productions of the play, as reviews suggest, the sleepwalking scene was often the most compelling dramatic moment, precisely for this combination of sensationalism and didacticism.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Analysing the physiology of fear in *Macbeth*, David Garrick writes in the *Essay on Acting* (1744) of the ‘spasmodic paralysis of the limbs as the spirits rush to the head’ when Macbeth sees the daggers. The actor ‘should at that time, be a moving statue, or indeed a petrified man; his eyes must speak, and his tongue be metaphorically silent; his ears must be sensible of imaginary noises, and deaf to the present and audible voice of his wife; . . . every member, at that instant should seem

## THE POLITICS OF SLEEPWALKING

Brown identifies Clara's willfully induced helplessness and self-division as a specifically feminine condition. The novel builds her reputation as a formidable and independent woman. But these qualities are directly contradicted by her attachment to the passive voice, which relays the self-division produced by trauma. Her initial vigour of mind, resoluteness, and rationality mirror her brother's tragic overconfidence. Indeed, these are the very qualities that entice Carwin, who begins his ventriloquist experiments explicitly to test her prodigious autonomy and self-possession. His interventions are meant to scare away an inconvenience but also to prove Clara's vulnerability and feminine emotions. Accordingly, he stages his faux threats in such a way that Clara will interpret them according to the familiar literary conventions (from novels like *Clarissa*) of a rape plot. Beyond scaring her off, however, Carwin has a clinical interest in testing her psychologically, and Brown frames this testing as a true, psychological rape, the results of which prove deeply traumatic. As scholars such as Fliegelman and Looby have noted, the narrative of rape and trauma allegorizes threats to the ethical and political safety of the citizen-subject, figured as a self-possessed American woman. As Clara's friend Pleyel tells her (too late, after the fact), Carwin's success will make 'you a confederate in your own destruction, to make your will the instrument by which he might bereave you of liberty and honor' (pp. 150–1).

We risk that confederacy, Brown claims, whenever we make the pragmatic assumption that true authority is constituted in its citation. Without the crucial help of right interpretations – learned, taught, handed down – we lose the educated scepticism that allows us to discriminate and interpret rightly, in a medium that is inherently unstable. The novel needs to quote the play not so much because it offers received wisdom in support of these claims but because Brown imagines literary fiction – and theatrical fictions in particular – as the expressive medium that can best expose the constructedness of voice. Yet having exposed the positivist pragmatism of the constitutional debates, the novel has no resources to answer its own deeply

conservative scepticism. How can we guarantee continuity when everyone who might provide it is dead? This intractable problem is also *Macbeth's*, of course. And in this respect the novel reads as a kind of repetition compulsion of the play, its claim on us still urgent precisely because it is not worked through.

Because *Wieland* is usually read in the local context of early republican debates, the lasting resonance of the novel's repetitions of the play tend to be missed by Americanist scholars. Brown's vision of a narrator dreaming Lady Macbeth sleepwalking adumbrates an anxiety that will continue to haunt American politics: the fear that a dishonourable instrumentality lies at the heart of the Jeffersonian notion of consent and feminizes each democratic subject in disabling ways. This is the danger embodied in the transformation of Lady Macbeth from ambitious, self-possessed Queen to helpless sleepwalker. And it helps explain why later incarnations of Lady Macbeth continue to offer such compelling, resonantly ambivalent figures. They resist reconstruction in part because they recall this willful alienation of self so powerfully. They are most likely to do so, paradoxically, in the context of a reconstructed, nationalist *Macbeth* such as Steven Simpson's. By rights, Simpson's revisions ought to appeal to the Jeffersonian rebel in US audiences. Scottish nationalist revivals work in the US because we read back onto them our old anti-monarchical politics (even when, as in the case of *Rob Roy*, they are not in fact anti-monarchical). In keeping with this trend, Simpson's 'Throne of Destiny' apparently defends the "last king of a truly independent Scotland" who was *elected* to replace Duncan'. Yet

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separated from his body, and his body from his soul', quoted in Joseph Roach, *The Player's Passion: Studies in the Science of Acting* (Newark, 1985), p. 90. It seems likely, from the similarities between Garrick's theory of fear and *Wieland's* actions in his final scene that Brown was familiar with the *Essay*; in any case, the dramatic principles advanced here were certainly commonplace by the end of the eighteenth century. In his introduction Fliegelman notes Brown's deep suspicion of Garrick's theories of naturalistic acting, evident in his later novel, *Ormond* (1799) (pp. xxxiii–xxxiv).

it is precisely this republican subtext that fixes the figure of Lady Macbeth most firmly in place.

That something of the anxieties articulated in Brown's novel remain urgent and still to be worked through is suggested by the powerful hold Lady Macbeth's plot of transgressive virility and punitive feminization has on our democratic unconscious, at least as it pertains to American First Ladies. The label 'Lady Macbeth' has been applied to political wives with some regularity: Lady 'Macbird' Johnson, Nancy Reagan and Cora Masters Barry to name a few. The well-travelled epithet stuck particularly strongly to Hillary Clinton through the early 1990s. It was launched most recently by Daniel Wattenberg's 1992 essay in *The American Spectator*, 'The Lady Macbeth of Little Rock', speculating on the extent of Clinton's political influence over her husband.<sup>28</sup> Wattenberg's headline harks back to the hen-pecking wives of early American burlesques, as well as Charlotte Cushman's career-making, masculine, aggressive Queen. The epithet epitomized popular suspicion of Clinton's unwomanly ambition, something that surely contributed to the public conversion of her image in the second campaign. This progress from demonized consort to gentler spouse – bleaching the story of her own cuckolding in memoir – uncomfortably recalls Elizabeth Layton's vision of Lady Macbeth and eerily recapitulates Brown's. Yet, as with the anxieties articulated in Clara Wieland's story, the sexual politics of this conversion cover for other fundamental concerns. In running for her Senate seat, Clinton effectively ran against her own iconographic inertia as a figure that activates electoral scepticism about the efficacy of the popular voice. One early anxiety raised by Clinton's politically forceful presence was that she was not elected. The *vox populi* was not represented by her voice in the President's ear (Nancy Reagan kept *her* prompting *sotto voce*). The fantasy of pillow talk was all but dispelled by the Lewinsky scandal,<sup>29</sup> then put to rest by Clinton's own election to the US Senate. But these eventualities obscure in retrospect what made the epithet stick for so long: the fear that Lady Macbeth articulates for the American political imagination, that we deceive ourselves that we have that ear as we cast our votes. This fear

may have seemed a theoretical one in 1992. But it feels both more timely, and more urgent, after the US elections of 2000 in Florida. Those elections turned finally on the balance of only nine voices (on the Supreme Court) and exposed failed polling procedures that may have disenfranchised tens of thousands of voters. Such failures, still to redress in more states than Florida, put acute pressure on the national perception of an organic connection between the electoral college and the popular vote.

Reading *Macbeth* along the axis of a single thread in its reception history, as this essay does, reminds us to remember the play as a composite 'work': in Jerome McGann's definition, the sum of all its iterations, retellings, additions, revivals, adaptations and translations into multiple genres and media.<sup>30</sup> Defined widely, a history of reception can illuminate the ways dramatic fictions shape as well as reflect their contemporary political scenes. Reading Hillary Clinton's incarnation as Lady Macbeth in the light of Brown's adaptation, in this longitudinal way, we can understand them as part of a surprisingly persistent pattern of allusion. As 'Lady Macbeth', Clinton represented for a time a nightmare version of our own doubleness as democratic subjects. At once complicit and helpless, giving away our voices to be ventriloquized and quoted as absent authorities, made responsible for actions we cannot control and did not imagine we intended, she figures ourselves consenting to our own loss of consent.

<sup>28</sup> Daniel Wattenberg, 'The Lady Macbeth of Little Rock', *The American Spectator*, 25–8 August 1992, pp. 25–32.

<sup>29</sup> During and after the Lewinsky scandal, Shakespearian pastiches in the editorial sections of American newspapers typically allocated Lady Macbeth's taglines to Bill Clinton, rather than Hillary, drawing an off-colour connection between stained dresses and 'out, damned spot'. See for example, 'The Next Two Years', *The Christian Science Monitor*, 19 August 1998, p. 12 and John O'Sullivan, 'All's Well that Ends Ill', *The New York Times*, 19 September 1998, A15.

<sup>30</sup> Jerome McGann, 'The Case of The Ambassadors and the Textual Condition', in George Bornstein and Ralph G. Williams, eds., *Palimpsest: Editorial Theory in the Humanities* (Ann Arbor, 1993), pp. 151–66.