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In dialogue with Banquo's ghost: how to really *find yourself* through the Scottish play

Abstract:

Identity shifts frequently in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, on both an individual and nationalistic level. Macbeth transforms from loyal thane to regicide, and Scotland enlists England's aid to end its civil war. The Macbeths switch roles during the banquet scene, his ruthlessness eclipsing hers. Eve Best's 2013 Globe *Macbeth* adds another dimension to this scene, allowing a moment of reconciliation between Macbeth and Banquo's ghost. It inspired my own allegorical response to *Macbeth* in my prose novel *The Green Fairy*, a modern meditation on identity, loss and redemption that forms the creative artefact of my PhD thesis. My creative dialogue with *Macbeth* is informed by Bakhtin's heteroglossia, where contemporary questions of identity are explored through the lens of the Scottish play's background voices. These include the historical Macbeths, and film and theatre representations of Shakespeare's couple. In this article I combine excerpts of my novel with exegetical commentary to address contested notions of identity in the Scottish play. Benefits of adapting *Macbeth* into a contemporary novel include the ability to dwell at length on the internal lives of characters, and tease out a particular moment in performance of the play, to explore the modern relevance of the problems posed within it.

Biographical note:

Pablo Muslera is a sessional academic staff member at the University of South Australia, where he recently received his doctorate in Languages and Linguistics. He teaches Shakespeare and creative writing, and coordinates the Honours program in the School of Communication, International Studies and Languages, where he is also the sessional staff representative. He has contributed to a paper in the *European Journal of Humour*, and presented at the 2016 World Shakespeare Congress in Stratford in August, as well as ANZSA 2014, and the 2013 AULLA and Britgrad conferences. He hopes to publish *The Green Fairy*, the creative artefact in his doctoral thesis, as a novel.

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Identifying with the cursed play

I had long been obsessed with the Scottish play, with its biblical language, crises of identity, and the 'curse' that seemed to cross over into actual misfortune, both within the playhouse and outside of it. Olivier's near-miss with a falling stage weight in his 1937 staging, his director's serious car accident, and Harold Norman (as Macbeth) being stabbed in the final scene (Dickson 2009: 217) are real-life examples of this. While these might be put down to bad luck, the greatest real-life tragedy associated with the Scottish play follows one of its major themes: the linking of personal identity with the national. The riot inspired by the play in 1849 outside the Astor Place Opera House in New York resulted in thirty-one people dead, and a hundred and fifty injured. This was a case of nationalistic identity embodied within individual actors. Competing versions of *Macbeth* – headed by 'English aristocrat' William Charles Macready (playing at the 'elite' Astor) and 'plebeian' American Edward Forrest (at the working man's Broadway Theatre) incited a class struggle. American nationalists believed that Shakespeare, 'playwright of the people', was being co-opted by the 'snobbery, aristocracy, decadence, and anti-Yankeeism' which the Astor as a venue, and Macready as an actor, represented (Davey and Wu, in Lynch 2008: 163).

The merging of individual identity with a nationalistic one, then, is one of the play's core themes. This is encapsulated in the king's moral state being reflected in the health of his land. *Macbeth* is a play that demands personal engagement through its very structure. Its first line throws out a challenge to the audience: 'when shall we three meet again?', and the rest of the play is full of questions that are never fully answered. Are the witches' prophecies self-fulfilling? Do they merely predict, or effect outcomes? What happened to the child mentioned by Lady Macbeth? How does a loyal thane turn regicide within the space of a single evening? There is also an unspoken question posed through the very intimacy of the Macbeths' soliloquies, where their crimes are confessed to a willing audience: are we chosen because on some level we too share their 'black and deep desires' (I.v.52)? For me, the final two questions beg an exploration of identity and self-perception: who we think we are at any given moment, and how this may shift in the next. My response to the Scottish play, then, is a highly personal one. As the basis of my PhD thesis, I decided to 'write back' to Shakespeare in my own allegory of *Macbeth*, focusing on shifting notions of selfhood, the relationship between the Macbeths, and relocating them to modern Edinburgh.

Why engage with this particular work? Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a troubling play. On one level, it is a straightforward tale of politics and morality, where the regicide gets his just desserts and Scotland's rightful ruler is returned at the end. On a personal level, we are asked to sympathise with the murderous Macbeth, through the intimacy of his soliloquies, and to accept his transformation from war hero to villain in the space of one evening. We are asked to believe that Lady Macbeth's seductive powers are great enough to inspire murder. We might mitigate our condemnation of Macbeth by weighing the effects of the Weird Sisters' loaded prophecies, but without the potent bond of intimacy between husband and wife, Macbeth may well have remained content as Thane of Cawdor. My own engagement with the play has never been with the political plot. In modern Australian society, with a stable political environment and relative peace compared to other parts of the world, the idea of killing in order to claim

a kingship is less relevant than it might have been in Shakespeare's time. Instead what has always drawn me to the play is the potency of the bond between the central couple, and the honesty of Macbeth's ruminations on his guilt and damnation. This is all bound up in the crisis of identity which I believe is central to the narrative. Macbeth's perception of himself as a loyal thane is challenged by his wife's vision of him as a king. I argue that the relationship between the Macbeths is at the core of the play, and drives the majority of the action.

Dramatically, the Scottish play has been described as a 'star vehicle' rather than an ensemble piece, 'that cannot work without a magnetic central pair' (Billington 1995). Sometimes this magnetism is not only acted: real-life couples who played the Macbeths include Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh, and Jon Finch and Francesca Annis. Braunmuller highlights the casting of Finch and Annis as invaluable to the success of Polanski's (1971) *Macbeth*: 'a young central couple … whose sexuality is an important dramatic element' ([ed.] 2003: 87). Kurzel's 2015 film of the play took this to a dramatic conclusion, with Cotillard's Lady Macbeth actually having sex with Fassbender's Macbeth in order to convince him to kill Duncan. Bhardwaj's *Maqbool* (2004) and Wright's *Underbelly* style Australian gangster *Macbeth* (2006) both focus on the potent sexual bond between the Macbeths to drive their plot. Wajda's (1962) *Fury is a Woman (The Siberian Lady Macbeth)* used its Lady Macbeth's desire for her new lover as a strong motivator for its tragedy. Dobson argues that the extent of Lady Macbeth's femininity is obvious in her need to have vile spirits unsex her, and that the 'close, confiding and mutual' nature of the Macbeths' relationship is unusual in the play's 'ritually bloodstained, all-male warrior world' (2013: 12).

So instead of focusing on the Scottish play's political plot, my rewriting of the play foregrounds the Macbeths' relationship, and how that drives the betrayal of Duncan and Banquo. I had always viewed Duncan's murder – violating the bond between guest and host – as the worse betrayal. Then I witnessed Eve Best 'writing back' to Shakespeare in her 2013 Globe *Macbeth,* with Billy Boyd as Banquo. The banquet scene included a moment where Boyd's ghost of Banquo takes the face of Joseph Millson's Macbeth gently in his hands, and just looks at him. Watching from the intimacy of the groundlings, for me Boyd's expression reflected 'How could you do this to me? We were mates.' That quiet reproach, void of vengeance or judgement, was the most powerful moment in the production, particularly from close range. Best's reading of the interaction between these two characters in her staging of the banquet scene – as one approaching understanding and possible reconciliation – was a strong influence on my own narrative. Below I include a scene from the prose novel that formed my PhD artefact, placing myself in my protagonist's place as witness to Best's production of *Macbeth*, and using it to foreshadow a later betrayal.

> But Banquo looked at him with a countenance more of sorrow, than anger. Macbeth scrambled across the feast table scattering trenchers and goblets; the spirit of Banquo sprang up light as the air and followed him onto the table, using a stool as his step. His pace was slow and sure and still he caught Macbeth as he fled around the room. Banquo cupped his friend's face with his hands. He looked as if he were an older brother chastising the younger.

> The audience went quiet. Some of them had laughed at the part where Macbeth had peeked under the table for Banquo's ghost. But one of the groundlings stood transfixed, unable to look away from the intimacy of a murdered man communing with his killer.

I argue that a novelistic interpretation of the scene, as opposed to a play script, permits more scope to reflect on individual moments, and on a character's inner thought processes. The third-person perspective also allows for a wider view of the scene, encapsulating audience reaction and inner reflection: 'one of the groundlings stood transfixed, unable to look away from the intimacy of a murdered man communing with his killer'.

In one sense, Best's 'writing back' to the Scottish play as described in this scene from my novel is conventional: she shows the ghost of Banquo. It is a directorial decision whether to have Banquo's spirit appear on stage, as is the tone of its conduct. Muir argues that Banquo's ghost is 'clearly an hallucination', while admitting that the stage directions in the *First Folio* specifically prescribe its appearance (1981: 233). Best's interpretation of this part of the banquet scene contrasts against Polanski's 1971 film, which emphasised the gruesome horror of it with Martin Shaw's grinning, 'blood-boltered' (IV.i.122) spectre. By taking a scene of horror and injecting a moment of conciliation, Best grapples with the shifting of identity in Shakespeare's play, moving it in the opposite direction. Adding this moment of understanding, a silent dialogue between victim and murderer approaching forgiveness, is a powerful way of engaging with Shakespeare. Best seems to be saying: 'you've left a deliberate space here, this is how I'm filling it.' The space I attempt to fill in my creative artefact is similar: the dynamics of guilt and redemption between the Macbeths and their victims. In the following excerpt, my Macbeth analogue, Michael, voices his insight from viewing the banquet scene in Best's 2013 Globe *Macbeth*. The context is in a pub in Edinburgh, where Michael drinks with his fellow university students Collem and Justin. The discussion foreshadows Michael's later betrayal of Justin, the Banquo analogue in my novel.

> 'Right then. So here's my question: what's the worst crime?' Collem ran a hand through his shock of dark hair before he took a gulp of his Caffrey's. He had the spidery frame and twitchy fingers of an actor between parts, or meals. His eyes were as black and pupil-free as a cocaine enthusiast's.
>
> Michael took a sip, and waited for Justin to jump in.
>
> 'Obviously the worst crime for us, as well-educated young Scots with few responsibilities and fewer cares, is a serious breach of style.' Justin sipped his ale from a crook in his mouth, the pipe still safe in the other.
>
> ... 'No, I'm serious. Killin' someone?' Collem stabbed a finger at Justin.
>
> 'There's worse than that.' Michael turned his pint glass to unstick it from the table; Jake hadn't bothered putting out coasters for as long as he could remember. He moved his glass to a dry spot.
>
> 'Eh, what's worse than murder?' Collem's fingernail worried at a carving on the table that looked like the 'pi' character on an angle.

> Michael shook his head. 'Murder's a legal definition. You asked what was worse than killing someone—if someone attacks you and you kill them in self-defense, no bother. The aggressor gets their just desserts.'
>
> Collem nodded. 'So for you, eh, *aggression*'s the unforgivable sin.'
>
> Justin unclenched his teeth and jabbed his pipe at Michael. 'Aye, but if you're a serious introvert, someone addressing you in a loud voice might be considered an act of aggression—which gets back to my point. It all boils down to a question of style, and the first rule of that is *always match your approach to the context*.'
>
> Michael picked up the theatre program he'd left on the table. Glossy red lettering and a pair of bloody handprints stood out from a matt black background. His voice was quiet. 'Betrayal's the worst thing.'
>
> Collem exchanged a look with Justin. They both picked up their pints and leaned back in their seats. 'Cue the Scottish play, eh? So what, the betrayal that leads to killing your own king? Mac the knife, breaking the ancient code of hospitality?'
>
> 'Yeah, Duncan's murder is unforgivable, but there's one that's worse—Banquo's. Betraying a mate.' Michael leafed through the program. 'I've seen a dozen *Macbeths* before the Globe one, but I never really understood it before. I think it was Billy Boyd as Banquo; the way his ghost looks at Macbeth in the banquet scene. Not angry, just sorrowful. Like he's saying: "How could you do this? We were pals." Genius of casting; Billy played Merry in *Lord of the Rings*. His Banquo is a jolly companion you'd like at your side as you face battle. When Macbeth has him killed, it's doubly awful.'

Incorporating Best's interpretation of the banquet scene to shape my own narrative, and linking it to other texts partly inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (see Croft 2002), foregrounds the process by which one text may influence another through an intertextual dialogue. I argue that such intertextuality enriches the new narrative, as well as adding further context to the old. This is not a new technique: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* took inspiration from Holinshed's *Chronicles*, which in turn mythologised earlier accounts of the historical Macbeths. In the next section, I discuss how I use Bakhtin's idea of dialogism and heteroglossia, or background voices, to address this in my own writing back to Shakespeare. I discuss the possible benefits of such a dialogue.

Modern ghosts: using Macbeth's background voices to find your own

In deliberately engaging with elements of the Scottish play in a new creative work, I explore contemporary resonances to Shakespeare's play, and some of its sources and adaptations. In this section, I outline how I conscript two elements of the Scottish play: the interaction between Macbeth and Banquo's ghost, and the trochaic verse used to frame many of the Witches' speeches, in my prose novel to open up a Bakhtinian dialogue with the Scottish play. Bakhtin's *Discourse in the Novel* emphasises the dialogic nature of a new creative work, and how far it is embedded within an intertextual background:

> For the prose writer, the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived, and without which they "do not sound" (1994: 278).

One of the strongest 'background voices' in *Macbeth* is Banquo's. Though he's killed off mid-way through the play, he still manages to appear in nearly a third of the play's scenes, either as a living character or as a ghost. Banquo's attendance at the banquet has major consequences for both the Macbeths: Macbeth's reaction to Banquo's appearance at the feast is evidence of his guilt, and questions about his leadership arise. This scene has also been described as the axis upon which the Macbeths' power roles are reversed (Braunmuller [ed.] 2003: 66). Lady Macbeth's guilt over Duncan's murder consumes her sanity and leads to her suicide, while Macbeth turns from being coerced into regicide to routinely ordering the deaths of comrades, women and children. After seeing the wordless eloquence of Boyd's Banquo, I became interested in what Macbeth might really like to say to the companion he betrayed to murder, were he given some time and space. My artefact conflates the characters of Duncan and Banquo into one, Justin. In one sense I follow Milton's lead, who proposed his own version of *Macbeth*: 'The matter of Duncan may be expressed by the appearing of his ghost' (in Quiller-Couch 1914: 590).

My Macbeth analogue, Michael, is granted the dialogue he craves with Justin's spirit, in search of some sort of reparation for his betrayal. In my contemporary novel, the betrayal is not one of murder, but an infidelity with Justin's girlfriend Emily, my Lady Macbeth. As I have previously stated, my creative work is a loose allegory of *Macbeth*, rather than a faithful adaptation. I am interested in the emotional resonances of the consequences of betrayal, and meditations on conscience, that Shakespeare's work inspires. Rather than reproduce the political plot and repercussions of murder, I maintain a focus on the relationship between the Macbeths, and the personal fallout from their betrayal. In my artefact, Justin commits suicide after Emily dumps him, though he isn't told about the affair. As I have discussed in the previous section, I see the potent sexual bond between the Macbeths as the major motivating force in the play, and have foregrounded it in my artefact. In some respects, my method of writing back to Shakespeare has parallels with the notion of carnival in Bakhtin's *Rabelais and his World*: 'it belongs to the borderline between art and life ... it is life itself, but shaped to a certain pattern of play' (1968: 7). I have re-shaped the focus of the play to the intimate relationships between the Macbeths and their victims, rather than witches' prophecies or political struggles. To illustrate this point, I include a section of my novel below where Justin's ghost first haunts Michael. I expand on the wordless dialogue between Boyd's Banquo and Millson's Macbeth in Eve's Globe production, allegorising it into a longer exchange. The sections in italics are the verse dialogue spoken by Justin's spirit, to differentiate him from the mortal world.

> Michael sat down on the bathroom floor and studied its black and white tiles. He counted a hundred and seventy three of them; he'd have to stand up in order to count the rest. The rubbing of the cotton towel grew louder – or was it a different sound? A chuckle echoed from somewhere in the flat.

> Justin sat down next to him. He was barefoot, and had rolled up the sleeves of his trousers as if he'd been wading by the shore. A skein of fine black sand skirted the side of his foot like a henna tattoo. The pipe was in his hand, but it was unlit as he chewed the stem. He clicked it against his teeth with a hollow sound.
>
> *May as well count leaves in autumn;*
> *All who fall, by long communion fix'd*
> *Earthbound where they are. Green or gold or scarlet, grey?*
> *'Tis no matter in the gen'ral way*
>
> Michael froze. His temples pounded until he remembered to breathe again. He folded his towel and pressed his hands against it until he could feel the pressure of the fingers against each other.
>
> Justin shook the pipe at Michael and gave him a sly smile.
>
> *In the spider's forest if you lose your way*
> *Take a care, companions made –*
> *She who loves today may dine tomorrow,*
> *On the bones of some forgotten sorrow.*
>
> Michael shook his head. 'It'll never be forgotten.'

In this extract, Justin's ghost has the power of speech (see italicised sections), unlike Banquo's. But it is not the same as mortal speech: it is irregular trochaic pentameter, and rhyming couplets. I use the trochaic emphasis in Justin's speech, a reversal of standard blank verse, in the same way Shakespeare does: to indicate an inversion of nature. *Macbeth*'s witches speak largely in trochaic tetrameter couplets, 'the fairy dialect of English Literature'; *Macbeth* has more scenes ending in rhyming couplets than any other Shakespearean play, both in proportion and absolute number (Braunmuller [ed.] 2003: 51-52). They are a linguistic equivalent of such metaphysical portents as horses eating each other, and night being unable to be told apart from day. This symbolises that although Justin appears in the mortal world, it is now as a linguistic outsider. Though not entirely an insensible one: Justin's talk of the 'spider's forest', and she who 'loves today' is a dual reference to Emily's betrayal of him, and Kurosawa's 1957 adaptation of the Scottish play, *Throne of blood*/ *Kumonosu-jo* (which literally translates to 'Spider-web castle'). Michael has just been watching Kurosawa's film as he awaits Emily's decision on whom she will choose upon Justin's return, and has been musing on the power in the stillness of Kurasawa's Noh-theatre-inspired Lady Macbeth. Thus Justin's speech is a topical reference, just as Shakespeare made reference to the Gunpowder plot and the King's Evil in his play. I borrow one of the Scottish play's stylistic tools for Justin's speech, and that of the topical reference for its content, as part of an intertextual response that grafts itself onto Shakespeare's work through a structural lattice. The 'background voice' is not just that of Banquo's ghost as a character, but also the characteristic verse of the play in which it resides, and how the play references contemporary events.

Michael is able to partly comprehend the riddling verse of Justin's ghost, and though separated by mortality, responds to it. When Justin warns Michael that 'She (Emily) who loves today may dine (ruminate) tomorrow' on ... a 'forgotten sorrow' (memories

of her betrayal of Justin), Michael misinterprets Justin's meaning, vowing that his own culpability in the affair 'will never be forgotten'. Michael is granted the dialogue he craves, but there's a catch: Justin responds in rhyming echo to his thoughts, reflecting them back at him. According to Bakhtin, in any dialogue it is 'the response' that promotes understanding:

> In the active life of speech, every concrete act of understanding is active: it assimilates the word to be understood into its own conceptual system filled with specific objects and emotional expressions, and is indissolubly merged with the response, with a motivated agreement or disagreement. To some extent, primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding, it prepares the ground for an active and engaged understanding. Understanding comes to fruition only in response (1994: 282).

In this case, response can be taken several ways: Justin's literal verbal response, as well as his action of appearing when called for, as does Banquo's ghost. My response to the uncertainty left in Shakespeare's play is mediated through Best's directorial response on how to fill the space allowed for interpretation in the banquet scene, and Boyd's decision in how to act it. The physical space of the Globe stage is also part of the response, in the sense that the view from the groundlings allowed me to witness Boyd and Millson's expressions closely. Physical gesture and expression is obviously part of the 'conceptual system' shared by actor and audience, and has a richness beyond words on a page, or even the same drama that is filmed rather than experienced live. It reminds us that Shakespeare's plays were written for performance, and the physical space between the actors is significant. In my prose allegory, the confines of the bathroom prevent Michael's escape from an accounting with the friend he betrayed, just as Boyd's physical capture of Millson's Macbeth did in Best's production.

One of the advantages of adapting this theatrical scene into a novel is that the scene itself can be pored over, returned to, and examined at leisure on the page, as opposed to relying entirely on the memory of a live performance. It also allows the reader to focus on different forms of writing as they appear in the text: the verse spoken by Justin's ghost looks very different to the prose surrounding it. While it is of course possible to read a play script in a similar way, the long form of the novel is one where we can dwell at length on stylistic tics, such as a character speaking in verse. The novel as a form enables us to focus on detailed descriptions of brief moments (such as the nuance of expression in Boyd's ghost of Banquo as he confronts Millson's Macbeth), and perhaps gather greater meaning from such moments, as opposed to the enforced economy of structure contained in a play script, or two-hour performance. While the novel may not be able to mimic the wealth of meaning in a gesture or vocal intonantion on stage, it does allow greater length for interpretation, and leisure to return to the same passage, and so discover new elements from a fresh reading.

In the next section I return to an idea from the introduction of this article, *Macbeth*'s conflating of personal identity with the national, and how this has resonances beyond the text of the play. I discuss how my novel explores some of these resonances.

A question of self: identity politics

One of *Macbeth's* key themes is the reflection of the king's moral state in the health of his kingdom. Shakespeare's play includes passages where the health of the land suffers according to the sins of its ruler (*Macbeth* IV.iii.31.2-32; V.iii.52-57), as well as one where the power of a just king is able to heal the sick (IV.iii.141-156). An example of a contemporary linking of personal identity with the national is the modern focus on an individual politician's morality, and how this might affect their professional judgement in decisions with national consequences. I explore this idea by showing a parallel between *Macbeth* and the abdication of the Prince of Wales in 1936. The woman for whom he abdicated, Wallis Simpson, had been criticised for having an excess of power over the English king. A national crisis (which became an international one, on the brink of WWII) was perceived as resulting from a personal one. In this excerpt from my prose novel, Michael muses on Ernest Simpson's cuckolding by the Prince of Wales. The historical figure stands proxy for Michael, who is unable to scrutinise his own betrayal of Justin directly.

> Justin slotted the pipe in the inside pocket of his jacket. It was thick tweed, tailored close to his frame. The pattern was either new or such a classic that it was before Michael's time. Michael remembered the TV documentary about Edward VIII, Prince of Wales; how he had a suit cut from the same cloth as his own for Wallis Simpson's second husband[1]. Thus a pattern in cloth could trace the fate of a king. Maybe free will was simply a refusal to read the patterns in mundane things. How much freedom there is in blindness; the cuckold who does not know he is cozened, is none.
>
> Justin leaned back against the bathroom wall and looked at Michael's hands: they were marbled white and red. His eyebrows arched partway between quizzical and sceptical. He pushed the front of his quiff up into spikes, and got to his feet. His toes curled and flexed as if he were digging them into wet sand. He stood in the doorway, and knocked a couple of times on the frame. The sound was dull as bone on driftwood.
>
> *Time will tell what power words may hold –*
> *What remembrances will serve against the cold.*
>
> Then he was gone. Michael stood and ran the water to wash his hands again. After a while the doorbell rang.

Where does this lead us, and what does this have to do with the second part of the title of this paper, how to really *find yourself* through the Scottish play? Best's interpretation of the banquet scene crystallised for me the concept of the faint possibility of redemption for crimes from which there should be none. It reminded me that before witches' prophecies and the murder of a king, Banquo and Macbeth had been friends: and that a part of that must surely linger. In this sense, Best's theatrical adaptation of *Macbeth* allowed me to see new depths in Shakespeare's characters, and opened up creative possibilities to further engage with the shifting of identity within the play. Michael's journey is a slow one of coming to terms with his deeds, and attempting some sort of recompense for his initial betrayal. This is something that Macbeth, due to the multiplicity of his crimes, and the pace of Shakespeare's play, is never granted. The novel as a form allows greater time to explore a character's inner life than a play script; in the scene described above, Michael remembers a television show he has seen

describing the suit ordered for Wallis Simpson's then-husband, Ernest, by Edward VIII, the man who was sleeping with his wife. Michael's focus is on the personal betrayal of fidelity, not on the political fallout, because he can relate more closely to the personal. My own allegory of *Macbeth* conscripts political references only as tools to explore the fluidity of personal identity within the play, and meditate on the broader consequences of this.

Shakespeare's focus on Macbeth's shifting identity seems to serve an overtly more political purpose. His 'writing back' to Holinshed's *Chronicles* refashioned the historical Macbeth to dramatise his reign, and pointed to the legitimacy of his current king by emphasising his direct lineage from Banquo, the mythical Thane of Lochaber. Shakespeare understood the importance of identity, and our own perceptions of self.

Lucking observes that Macbeth is 'an individual who, not content with any of the names he is merely given, seeks to augment his status in the world by assuming a name on his own account' (2006: 416). Macbeth's third instance of murder, a futile attempt to perpetuate his line over Banquo's, is another desperate act to ensure the continuity of his post-regicidal 'self'. Omberg points out that apart from Macbeth, all of the main male characters in the play have sons, and that this highlights a gap in Macbeth's masculine identity (1996: 39). The contrast of Macbeth's view of himself as a loyal soldier and host, against the new 'self' promised by the Weird Sisters, is a clear identity crisis that is solved by the new identity destroying first the old, and then itself.

The play 'presents Macbeth's identity as a problem; the moment that identity is asserted is the moment [it] dissolves' (Wells 2008: 225). Lady Macbeth travels a similar trajectory of self-realisation, leading to abnegation. When she offers her women's breasts to be filled with gall (I.v.45-46), and vows that she would dash her baby's brains out in order to fulfil the murderous requirements of the Scottish throne (I.vii.56-58), she is sacrificing her maternal self to a refashioning that is no longer compatible with it. The Macbeths' new collective 'self' also destroys the 'new' Lady Macbeth. The irony is that upon achieving their mutual aim, Lady Macbeth is cast in a secondary individual role: 'be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck' (III.ii.45). The first to renounce her previous selfhood is cast out of the collective identity she instigated. But, as I argued previously, this one-dimensional view of character, fictional or historical, is too simple. In Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, she cannot remove the stain of Duncan's murder (V.i.34), and is rendered insensible by it (V.i.34); Macbeth wishes not to fight MacDuff in the final scene, as his 'soul is too much charged with blood of [his line] already' (V.vi.44-45.1). These uncertainties, shifts, tensions that cannot be released are what allow a creative response to staunch the wounds we may have inflicted upon others. Banquo's ghost forces Macbeth to look at the image of his crimes, but in writing back to Macbeth and following Best's conciliatory lead in this scene, there is an opportunity to explore unplumbed spaces hinting at understanding and redemption within ourselves.

At the close of my novel, Michael, Emily, and the spirit of Justin are brought together in a moment of reconciliation. Emily has been reading Michael's journal, a mystical tome which houses his subconscious sins and which compels him to write in it as he sleeps. In it, Michael confesses his motivation for betraying Justin, listing Justin's past

crimes and his concern for Emily's future. Justin's ghost speaks, as always, in verse (italicised sections).

> Michael looked up. Justin was nodding towards Emily.
>
> *Does she know herself, or like Mitsuko*
> *Take bewitchment for her muse?*
> *Blodeuedd born of flowers, Gruoch a widow-bride*
> *Are they not all Helen, Aphrodite?*
>
> Michael let the stylus touch the first groove of the record. Mitsuko Uchida's symphonic piece filled the dead air. Michael stood, and stole over to Justin's side. Together they looked down at Emily for a while. Her head was resting on her arm, and her eyes fluttered behind the lids.
>
> *Do they know their worth, our lovely arbiters?*
> *You and me are just the stuff they heap upon the balance.*
>
> Michael's voice broke as he faced Justin. 'She's everything,' he said.
>
> *Aye. All.*
>
> And Justin was gone. Michael took the bottle of Loch Lomond from the desk and poured himself a glass. He sat down in his recliner to drink it. Through the amber glass he watched Emily reach across the desk. The scratching of the pen came through the pauses in the symphony. Michael walked over. Emily had drawn some sort of emblem. It was a snake coiled around the stalk of a strawberry plant[2, 3].
>
> 
>
> He waited to see if any words would follow. Outside, there was the sound of thunder.

Justin's spirit departs in peace: having been confronted with his past sins, and Michael's admission that Emily is 'all' to him, Justin accepts Emily's decision as his final 'arbiter'. Justin places Emily in a continuum of 'muses' that represent Lady Macbeth's erotic potency, including figures of myth: 'Blodeuedd born of flowers, Helen, Aphrodite'; the historical Lady Macbeth (Gruoch); and contemporary concert pianist Mitsuko Uchida, his musical inspiration. My loose novelistic allegory of *Macbeth* ends with a graphical representation of one of Lady Macbeth's most memorable lines, 'look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it' (I.v.65). This is Emily's silent admission of her own betrayal (unable to speak it, she draws it instead). Thus, in a small way, each character is redeemed; be it through admissions of guilt, acceptance of

judgement, or some attempt at recompense for their crimes, though their actions cannot be undone.

In conclusion, this paper has addressed a possible way of entering into a creative dialogue with Shakespeare by 'writing back' to the Scottish play through allegorising it into a prose novel, and exploring some of the play's uncertainties in a contemporary setting. Best's 2013 Globe production of *Macbeth* highlights one of these uncertainties: the unspoken bond between Macbeth and Banquo, suggesting that a part of that might linger even after betrayal, and death. I argue that this reading is supported by the crisis of identity that is at the heart of the Scottish play. Responding to this idea in the long form of the novel has allowed me to dwell on the emotional resonances between characters that may exist beyond Shakespeare's immediate text, and develop the thread of conciliation suggested by Best's interpretation of the banquet scene. Writing back to *Macbeth* in this way is an opportunity to grapple with the Scottish play's personal contradictions in a contemporary form, presenting them to a modern audience in order to explore their continued relevance.

Endnotes

1. Other Ernest Simpson, for whom the Prince of Wales (in the early part of his affair with Wallis Simpson) had an overcoat made from the same brown and beige houndstooth material as his own, giving rise to the joke that 'Ernest was the only man to have sold his wife for a bolt of cloth' (Sebba 2011: 98)
2. This is a reproduction of Whitney's emblem 24, *Latet anguis in herba* (Barker et. al 1995).
3. The idea may be borrowed from Chaucer's 'Squire's Tale': 'just as a serpent hides itself in flowers' (Chaucer 1952: 427), probably ultimately derived from Virgil *Ecl*.iii.93: 'latet anguis in herba', written above a serpent coiled around a strawberry plant in Whitney's *Choice of Emblems* (1586) (Muir [ed.] 1962: 33).

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