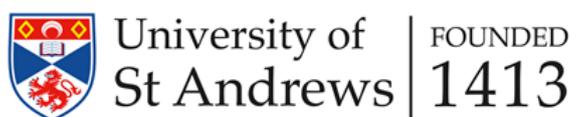


Before we sleep: Macbeth and the curtain lecture

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Before We Sleep: *Macbeth* and the Curtain Lecture

Macbeth has been described as Shakespeare's most topical play, engaging with recent events such as the Gunpowder Plot and reflecting upon issues close to King James himself, the official patron of Shakespeare's playing company.¹ This is to give the play a very public dimension, highlighting its historical and political concerns, and suiting it too to the large arena theatre in which it was first performed. Yet there are many aspects of *Macbeth* that work in a quite opposite way. Acted in daylight, it is nevertheless a play dominated by darkness and by the liminal territory between day and night. Though it was staged in the broad, open playing space of the Globe, some of its most memorable scenes take place in intensely private locations. Most crucially, and this is central to my concern in this essay, while the play charts the swift and murderous route to the throne of an ambitious individual, and the aftermath of this bid for power, it is a play which has at its dark heart an extraordinary intimacy between husband and wife. To say that the Macbeths are Shakespeare's closest couple is not in itself an original observation, but it is one that is usually made, as it were, in passing.² What I want to show here are some of the formal and linguistic means by which Shakespeare makes this intimacy central to our experience of the play, embedding the private and domestic world within its public and political superstructure.³

¹ See Stephen Greenblatt in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. 3rd edn. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2016), p. 2709; also James Shapiro, *1606: William Shakespeare and the Year of Lear* (London: Faber & Faber, 2015), especially pp. 150, 212-18, 242-4; Arthur F. Kinney, *Lies Like Truth: Shakespeare, Macbeth, and the Cultural Moment* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001). This kind of issue is the principal focus of essays in the first part of *Shakespeare Survey* 57 (2004), 'Macbeth and its Afterlife', though Carol Chillington Rutter, 'Remind Me: How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?' revisits a topic which is closer to the subject of my own concerns.

² See Ian McKellen and others cited in *Macbeth*, ed. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), p. 1; Jonathan Bate refers to the Macbeths as a married couple 'working together as partners' and to the 'moments of exceptional tenderness' between them in William Shakespeare, *Complete Works* (The RSC Shakespeare), ed. Jonathan Bate and Eric Rasmussen (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2007), p. 1861.

³ On the 'mutual imprinting of domestic and political spheres' in relation to the domestic tragedy genre, especially *Arden of Faversham*, see Lena Cowen Orlin, 'Domestic Tragedy: Private Life on the Public Stage' in *A New Companion to Renaissance Drama*, ed. Arthur F. Kinney and Thomas Warren Hopper (Oxford: Blackwell, 2017), pp. 388-402 at 394.

1.

We can begin with the matter of location. The F1 stage directions are not particularly helpful in establishing a specific sense of place, but it is clear that many of the play's most memorable scenes are set in private spaces within the Macbeths' castle. A. R. Braunmuller, in what is still the best edition of *Macbeth*, spells these out: in 1.5 we first see the couple together 'in some private room of their castle at Inverness'; for the soliloquy 'If it were done when 'tis done' in 1.7 'Macbeth has withdrawn from the off-stage ceremonial dinner ... to some more private place'; of 2.2, where the Macbeths confer immediately after the murder, Braunmuller notes that "[t]he setting is somewhere in Macbeth's castle that is private'; of 3.2, where they share their anxieties about Banquo, he suggests that '[t]he location is some private area of Macbeth's castle where intimate conversation (8ff.) is possible'; 5.1, the sleep-walking scene, 'occurs in Lady Macbeth's private rooms'.⁴ These are not Shakespeare's stage directions, but they are reliable guides as to how these scenes should be imagined or staged. Soliloquy is, of course, a characteristic feature of tragedy, but *Macbeth* is unusual in its focus on private conversations *a deux*, when the couple need to be in a place where they cannot be overheard.

What this means is that the play is constantly moving between public areas of various kinds and private domestic space; at various points we seem to be not so much in a castle as in a house. This may be a reflection of what W. G. Hoskins termed the 'Great Rebuilding' of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, but this is not to suggest that there would have been more private spaces in an ordinary domestic dwelling than in a castle.⁵ More significantly, for the purposes of the present article, it is the play's focus on marital intimacy that brings with it an accommodation to a more middling kind of household environment and a corresponding shift in social register. Emma Whipday has recently written about the

⁴ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 122, 131, 142, 169, 217. References to the text of the play are to this edition; references to other Shakespeare plays are to the *Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Greenblatt (2016).

⁵ W. G. Hoskins, 'The Rebuilding of Rural England, 1570-1640', *Past and Present* 4 (1953), 44-59.

representation of the late sixteenth-century home as a castle.⁶ For *Macbeth* we might turn this around and say that here the castle is represented as a home. Image and idiom determine our sense of location. Our first impression of the Macbeths' castle is the very opposite of the hell-gate of the porter scene. When Duncan and his entourage arrive there, Banquo describes it as a nest and nursery, a place where '[t] the temple-haunting martlet [house-martin] ... /Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle' (1.6.4,8).⁷ Lady Macbeth is there to welcome them and it is in her role as hostess that she reacts to the news of Duncan's murder with the cry, 'Woe, alas./What, in our house?' (2.3.80-1). This has been seen both as banal (as in MacDuff's implicit rebuke, 'Too cruel, anywhere') and as an inspired piece of subterfuge, but it certainly sounds like the shock of the middle-class housewife at finding her domestic arrangements thrown into confusion.

That is for public display, but the terms of endearment which she and her husband exchange in private, and which help to create such a strong sense of their intimacy, also have a middle-class ring to them, suggesting a slight lowering of social register. He greets her as 'My dearest love' (1.5.57); 'My husband?' she says later (2.2.13), and tells him 'Get on your night-gown' (2.2.73). Before the banquet in 3.2 he calls her 'dear wife'; he responds to her encouragement with 'so shall I, love,/And so I pray be you' and then tells her 'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,/Till thou applaud the deed' (3.2. 45-6). The puritan preacher William Gouge, who was based in the theatre district of Blackfriars, warned his readers against the use of endearments in public in case a stranger should 'espie any matrimoniall familiaritie betwixt you'. He vetoed not just pet names such as '*Ducke, Chicke [and] Pigsnie*' but even "*Sweet-heart, Loue, Ioy [and] Deare*."⁸ Shakespeare's audience would have been alert to the 'matrimonial familiarity' of the exchanges between the Macbeths, as well as the

⁶ Emma Whipday, *Shakespeare's Domestic Tragedies: Violence in the Early Modern Home* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 8-13. Whipday's discussion of *Macbeth* focusses on 'neighbourhood' and 'boundary-crossing', pp. 156-202; the 'Great Rebuilding' is discussed in relation to *Othello*, pp. 112-28.

⁷ The subject of fertility, infertility, and the childless marriage is adjacent to my own concerns, but not one that I wish to pursue here; see especially Sarah Wintle and René Weis, 'Macbeth and the Barren Sceptre', *Essays in Criticism* 41.2 (1991), 128-46.

⁸ William Gouge, *Of Domesticall Dvties. Eight Treatises* (London, 1622), p. 283 [sig. T6r].

middle-class register of the term 'chuck' (Gouge's '*Chicke*').⁹ This intimacy is embodied by gesture. Rowe's 1709 addition of the stage direction 'Embracing him' at the point where Lady Macbeth greets her returning husband is echoed and underwritten by her final, fractured utterances in the sleep-walking scene: 'Come, come, come, come, give me your hand' (5.1.57).

The sense that tragic grandeur is reconfigured in the language of ordinary life, that there is a kind of downsizing in the play, is something that was recognised (though not necessarily appreciated) early on in the reception of *Macbeth*. Samuel Johnson addressed the subject of the 'new or noble sentiment delivered in low and vulgar language' in 1751, claiming that 'Every man, however profound or abstracted, perceives himself irresistibly alienated by low terms'. He illustrates the point by quoting Lady Macbeth's self-urging soliloquy in 1.5:

—Come, thick night!

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes;
Nor Heav'n peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, Hold, Hold!—

Johnson argues that the solemnity of 'the smoke of hell' is spoiled by a term that comes from the stable ('dunnest') and then complains about 'knife', which is 'the name of an instrument used by butchers and by cooks in the meanest employments'.¹⁰ He is even more scathing about the expression 'peep through the blanket of the dark', though 'peep' is a word used quite often by Shakespeare and suggests here both the starlit sky and (possibly) the image of a frightened child holding a blanket to her face.¹¹

⁹ See *Macbeth*, ed. Braunmuller, p. 243. 'Chick' is used twice in *Othello* as a term of endearment between husband and wife (3.4.49; 4.2.24); cf. also the expressions of the 'home-spun Lover' such as 'Dearest Duckling' and 'Chick' in Richard Brathwait, *Ar't Asleepe Husband? A Boulster Lecture* (London, 1640), pp. 31, 118 [sigs. C8r, I3v].

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson in *The Rambler* 168, 26 October 1751, 68-71. The issue was revisited more objectively in D. S. Bland, 'Shakespeare and the "Ordinary" Word', *Shakespeare Survey* 4 (1951), 49-55 and F. P. Wilson, 'Shakespeare and the Diction of Common Life' in *Shakespearian and Other Studies*, ed. Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 100-29.

¹¹ For a modernist reworking of the image as '[t] the old star-eaten blanket of the sky' see 'The Embankment' in *The Collected Writings of T. E. Hulme*, ed. Karen Csenger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 3. Clark and Wright found a similar 'homeliness of expression' in Drayton: 'In heauens black night-gowne couered from our sight' (*Mortimeriados* (1596), sig, C2r, and they also compare 'The

Johnson's strictures are rather weakened by the fact that he attributes the speech to Macbeth rather than to his wife; otherwise he might grudgingly have admitted the aptness of a woman using terminology drawn from the kitchen and the bedchamber. In another respect, however, that gendered reading is undone – and this helps to explain Johnson's mistake – by the fact that this kind of language is interchangeable between the couple. It is echoed by Macbeth immediately after the murder in the elegy on sleep, which lists the ordinary domestic comforts that their blood-soaked path to the throne will deny them:

Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more:
Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast. (2.2.38-43)

Macbeth evokes the daily grind of work and its relaxing aftermath: 'bath' means a soothing liquid, so it is quite similar to the modern term, and it is followed by the main course of the evening meal. Even more striking (and even less aristocratic) is the image of darning the frayed sleeve of a woollen coat, suggesting the dutiful housewife at the same time as it points forward to the unravelling of everything that Macbeth and his partner had hoped for. This is all very much more specific than the generalised apostrophes to sleep in Ovid and Seneca, which are probably the closest analogues to the passage.¹² Here, Shakespeare's couple speak in the shared language of the home. Both these speeches show how the interior world of Macbeth is filled with what George Herbert called 'household-stuffe', and both take us into the most private space of all, in either castle or domestic dwelling – not so much the bed chamber, as the bed itself.¹³

2.

sullen night in mistie rugge is wrapp'd' in the same poem, sig. F1v; see Shakespeare, *Select Plays: Macbeth*, ed. W. G. Clark and W. A. Wright (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869), p. 94.

¹² Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 11.624-5; Seneca, *Hercules Furens*, l. 1068f; see *Macbeth*, ed. Clark and Wright, p. 107.

¹³ George Herbert, 'Affliction (I)' in *The English Poems of George Herbert*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 162.

The bed is the item of household furniture which is always present in *Macbeth*, but (probably) never actually there. The tester bed, popularly known as the 'four-poster bed', was something that increasing numbers of the middling sort expected to be able to acquire for their homes in the last decades of the sixteenth century.¹⁴ It was a large and elaborate structure, with four posts supporting a canopy from which curtains hung, drawn when the couple retired to shut out the light and create a completely private space. There are many scenes in early modern drama that call for a bed to appear on stage, but there is no reason to assume that this is the case with *Macbeth*.¹⁵ F1 is the earliest text of the play that we have, and the only hint of the bedchamber provided by the stage directions there is the reference to the 'taper' carried by Lady Macbeth in 5.1. Yet the vestigial presence of the bed was built into the stage itself, as its posts and canopy echoed the pillars and 'heavens' of the large arena theatre.¹⁶ In a domestic setting this echo would have confirmed the sense of the home as a little commonwealth, presided over by the patriarch and his wife. It is a context where the rather well-worn term 'status symbol' has a quite precise application. In the theatre the stage architecture reminds us that such beds would come to be called 'state beds.'¹⁷ This cross-over between the public and the private is reflected principally in the language of the play, but it

¹⁴ See Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson, *A Day at Home in Early Modern England: Material Culture and Domestic Life, 1500-1700* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 239. Hamling and Richardson also note that in the second half of the sixteenth century there was a substantial increase in dedicated bedchambers, located on the upper floors, in the homes of the middling sort (p. 30). For a closely documented account of the significance of beds and other household goods in relation to early modern tragedy see Catherine Richardson, *Domestic Life and Domestic Tragedy in Early Modern England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), pp. 65-95.

¹⁵ For a detailed survey of the subject see Leslie Thomson, 'Beds on the Early Modern Stage', *Early Theatre* 19.2 (2016), 31-57.

¹⁶ The curtained 'discovery space' at the back of the area marked out on stage by the pillars and the canopied 'heavens' would supply a further visual reminder of the tester bed. Thomson has questioned the existence of a 'discovery space' ('Beds', 34-5), but there are many scenes in early modern drama that would seem to require such a facility, and it remains an accepted feature of the make-up of the early English public theatre; see Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 4th edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 180, 183-4. (It should perhaps also be noted here that the 'canopy' was more often used to refer to the gathered hanging at the bolster-end of the bed than the roof above it.)

¹⁷ This is the term preferred by Sasha Roberts, "'Let me the curtains draw:": the dramatic and symbolic properties of the bed in Shakespearean tragedy' in *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 153-74 at 154-5, though the OED gives a rather later first citation date. The network of associations would include the large movable stage property known as the 'state'; see Gurr, *Shakespearean Stage*, pp. 183-7.

remains connected to its staged environment. The bedtime experiences of intimacy and sleep (and sleeplessness) permeate the poetry of *Macbeth*, but are always framed by greater matters. The play situates the private world of the curtained bed within the grander context of affairs of state, replicated on the stage itself as the pillars of state shift in the audience's imagination between a diagram of the wider world and the structure of the standing bed, nested within.¹⁸

A medieval Scottish castle is, of course, at some centuries remove from the period 1570-1640, designated by Hoskins as the timeframe of the Great Rebuilding, as well as being the period of the early modern English theatre. But as with other examples of anachronism in Shakespeare, the locations in *Macbeth* imply an accommodation to the lived experience of his audience, particularly that of the middling sort. In creating a sense of intimacy between husband and wife, *Macbeth* draws upon the development of private space in the Elizabethan and Jacobean home, as well as upon a middle-class language of endearment. The nature and extent of that private space remains the subject of debate, and Hoskins' original thesis has been extensively qualified in recent years, but that is not really the issue here.¹⁹ Although the language of the play evokes the atmosphere of the bed-chamber, it is the more clearly defined space of the curtained bed itself that I want to focus upon. 'It was the place where two contemporary definitions of "intimate" met for early modern householders', write Tara Hamling and Catherine Richardson: "'inmost, most inward, deep-seated" and familiar, "close personal relations."' In other words, the bed was a space of personal exploration and of the most intimate interaction between the married couple'.²⁰

¹⁸ I draw here upon metaphors used by Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 111-24. A systematic use of Bachelard's work would require a different kind of approach from the one followed here, but it remains an exceptionally valuable resource for thinking about the relationship between imagined domestic space and the language of the poetic text. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare uses the metaphor of the nest with brutal effect in the murder of MacDuff's family (4.2.9-11; 4.3.218-21).

¹⁹ The most important work of revision has been by Lena Cowen Orlin in *Locating Privacy in Tudor London* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁰ Tamling and Richardson, *Day at Home*, p. 239. Although they do not cite Bachelard, their book provides the material underpinning for an understanding of the poetics of space in the early modern English domestic dwelling.

This is the locus of what Macbeth calls ‘the curtained sleep’ (2.1.50) immediately after the murder, imagining in that moment what will forever be denied to him, but it is also the locus of the ‘curtain lecture’. John Ray defined the expression in his proverb collection of 1678 as follows: ‘A *Curtain*-lecture. Such an one as a wife reads her husband when she chides him in bed’.²¹ The earliest recorded reference to it appears in the Wolverhampton preacher Richard Lee’s *The Spirituall Spring* (1625): ‘Get a good conscience that will cast vp thy accounts euery night, and reade thee a curtaine lecture for thy negligence’.²² But this looks very much like the figurative employment of a term that was already in use in a different context, though one that had not yet found its way into print. The speech form itself was certainly recognised well before Lee, or indeed *Macbeth*. It is described towards the end of Edmund Tilney’s fictional discussion of the duties of marriage, *The Flower of Friendship*, first printed in 1568. Here, the lady Julia, in whose house the debate is taking place, offers the view that in matters of great importance ‘verie circumspect, and warie must the woman be in reprehending of hir husband’, and stipulates that

The best tyme is, when anger and malincholy raigneth not, and in any case, let no person be in place, to heare hir. For it is a wise mans grieffe, to beare the open reproofe of his wife. The best place, is, as I sayde, when they are both in bed ... where she maye lawfully poure out into his bosome all the thoughts, and secrets of hir loving hart.²³

This is a humanist marriage treatise in the manner of Erasmus or Vives, both of whom appear as characters in the work. Erasmus himself had suggested in the colloquy *Coniugium* [Marriage] (1523) that the wife sometimes had a duty to reprehend: ‘in a serious matter, when something important’s at stake – it’s right for a wife to reprove her husband’.²⁴ The

²¹ John Ray, *A Collection of English Proverbs* (Cambridge, 1678), p. 69 [sig. F3r].

²² Richard Lee, *The Spirituall Spring. A Sermon Preached at Pavls* (London, 1625), p. 19 [sig. C4r]. The OED gives Thomas Adams (1633) as its first citation. There are classical antecedents; see Juvenal, *Satires* 6.36-8, which suggests that a man might prefer boys to women because a boy, as his seventeenth-century English translator puts it, ‘reads no curtain-Lecture’, *Mores Hominum: The Manners of Men, Described in sixteen Satyrs by Juvenal*, trans. Robert Stapylton (London 1660), p. 154 [sig. U2v].

²³ Edmund Tilney, *The Flower of Friendship: A Renaissance Dialogue Contesting Marriage*, ed. Valerie Wayne (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 140.

²⁴ Erasmus, *Colloquies*, trans. and ed. Craig R. Thompson, *Collected Works of Erasmus* 39 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 313. On the wife’s duty to issue a reprimand see Ralph A. Houlbrooke, *The English Family, 1450-1700* (London: Longman, 1984), p. 102.

essential point was that the reproof should take place in secret, where it could not be heard by family or servants, and that meant the privacy of the curtained bed.²⁵

The curtain lecture was also known as the 'bolster lecture' (or 'canopy lecture') and the 'curtain sermon', and these alternative terms spell out the two different directions in which the form developed, both of which have application to *Macbeth*. What was presented quite solemnly by Tilney's lady Julia as proper wifely conduct took on a rather more light-hearted and satirical character in Thomas Heywood's *A Curtaine Lecture* (1637), the only work of the period to adopt the term as a book title, and Richard Brathwait's *Ar't Asleepe Husband? A Boulster Lecture* (1640). The first six chapters of Heywood's book are morally serious, but after the conventional survey of marital duties he changes tack: 'I come now to shew you what manner of Lectures wives use to read unto their husbands'.²⁶ Beginning with country wives who 'when they are willing to sleepe, whisper many private lectures in their [husbands'] eares', Heywood continues through different social groupings, ending with 'A Curtaine Lecture read by a Queene to her Husband'.²⁷ This part of the book is essentially a story collection. Like Heywood, Brathwait uses fabliau-type material with the curtain lecture or 'bolster lecture' as a framing device. But he also turns the form inside-out, since it is the man who does the lecturing, offering a vast compendium of stories about women gathered under different headings in order, he says in his verse prologue, to 'silence a Canopy

²⁵ On the need for secrecy see, for example, Robert Cleaver: 'Let there be therfore reasonings secretly betweene themselues, of such matters as might breede a skarre', *A Godlie Forme of Householde Government* (London, 1598), p. 90 [sig. F5v]; William Whateley: 'the third & most necessary part of wisdom is to giue a reproofe in secret', *A Bride-bush, or A Wedding Sermon* (London, 1617), p. 26 [sig. D3v]. Erasmus's character Eulalia in *Coniugium* emphasises that any reprimand should be 'in private' (*Collected Works of Erasmus* 39: 313), without specifying the bed; but Robert Snawsel, reworking the colloquy in the early seventeenth century, writes that the reproof should be given 'either in bed, or in some conuenient place', *A Looking Glasse for Married Folkes* (London, 1610), sig. B4r.

²⁶ Thomas Heywood, *A Curtaine Lecture* (London, 1637), p. 145 [sig. H1r]. On Heywood and Brathwait see LaRue Love Sloan, "'I'll watch him tame, and talk him out of patience:" The Curtain Lecture and Shakespeare's *Othello*" in *Oral Traditions and Gender in Early Modern Literary Texts*, ed. Mary Ellen Lamb and Karen Bamford (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), pp. 85-99 and Kathleen Kalpin Smith, *Gender, Speech, and Audience Reception in Early Modern England* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 19-57, which discusses the form in relation to *Othello* and *The Winter's Tale*.

²⁷ Heywood, *Curtaine Lecture*, pp. 146, 241 [sigs. H1v, M1r].

Lecture'.²⁸ All this despite a frontispiece engraving which shows a wife haranguing her husband in bed as he pretends to sleep. The two works are roughly in the same genre, but while the first part of Heywood's book has some continuity with Tilney, writing seventy years earlier, Brathwait's moves more in the direction of sexual badinage.

The term 'curtain sermon' points in a rather different direction. It first appears in a story from the 'Saxon Monarchs' section of John Speed's *History of Great Britaine* (1611) in which a newly married husband seeks to prevent his wife from being seduced by King Edgar by having her dress 'in the meanest attires' with 'the nightly curtaines drawne about our new-Nuptiall bed, and the dayly cloudes to hide thy splendent Sunne from his sharpe, and too too piercing sight'. But this plan does not have its intended effect, as the lady Elfrida 'began seriously to thinke vpon this Curtaine Sermon, whose text she distasted', and decides to pursue a quite opposite course.²⁹ John Donne says in a sermon delivered in 1622 that '[w]e have use to speak proverbially of a Curtain Sermon, as of a shrewd thing', which makes it clear that the expression had already been use, both in its principal sense and figuratively, for quite a long time.³⁰ And the term also appears in Jeremiah Dyke's *Good Conscience* (1626) where the reader is advised that, while preachers may often be ignored, 'God hath giuen men a Preacher in their own bosome, & this Preacher wil make many a curtaine Sermon will take men to taske vpon their pillow'.³¹ It cannot be claimed that these various terms are used very consistently (and they are not even consistent in defining the form as female speech), but what they do is to map out the territory of the curtain lecture as it moves between sexual discord, more general marital issues, and night-time spiritual anxieties, within the private space of the curtained bed.

²⁸ Brathwait, *Ar't Asleepe Husband?*, sig. a2r. Brathwait's book is attacked in 'Mary Tattle-well', *The Womens Sharpe Revenge* (London, 1640) alongside other misogynistic tracts which 'are called Lectures, as the Juniper Lecture, the Crab-tree Lecture, & the Worm-wood Lecture', p. 5 [sig. B3r].

²⁹ John Speed, *The History of Great Britaine* (London, 1611), p. 271 [sig. 3S2r].

³⁰ *The Oxford Edition of the Sermons of John Donne, V: Sermons Preached at Lincoln's Inn, 1620–23*, ed. Katrin Ettenhuber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 124.

³¹ Jeremiah Dyke, *Good Conscience: or a Treatise Shewing the Nature, Meanes, Marks, Benefit, and Necessitie thereof* (London, 1626), p. 70 [sig. F7v].

This is also the territory of *Macbeth*. After receiving her husband's letter about his encounter with the witches Lady Macbeth expresses her desire to get him home, and in private:

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round. (1.5.23-6)

This combines the secretive persuasions of those wives who 'whisper many private lectures in their [husband's] eares' with the stridency of a female tongue-lashing and both are characteristic of the curtain lecture.³² When she does confront him and tries to stiffen his resolve, she does so in terms of sexual reproof, which is also entirely typical of the curtain lecture. What is less typical is that the reproof does not take the form of accusations of adultery – a staple of the genre, as the stories in Heywood and Brathwaite attest – but lack of virility. And this seems entirely appropriate in a play where so much depends upon the intimacy of its two central protagonists. Lady Macbeth's fear is not of another woman, but that her husband, to use the words of Calvin's English translator, may 'proove a milkesop, or a white-livered souldier', too cowardly to do the deed; that he is one of those 'Masculine milke-sops that dare doe nothing, and we the Feminine undertakers, that dare to enterprise all things', as the author of *The Womens Sharpe Revenge* puts it in what may even be an echo of *Macbeth*.³³ Lady Macbeth's version of this is her concern that he is 'too full o'th'milk of human kindness' (1.5.15), which she turns into an accusation that challenges his masculinity:

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now to look so green and pale

³² Edmund Hickeringill writes that 'Souldiers wives are more properly seated in their husband's *Kitchin*, then his *Tent*', and though he claims to be immune to the 'dreadfull Catechisme of a *Curtain Lecture*', he advises prospective husbands to get a charm against 'th' *Curtain-whisper in the ear*', *Jamaica Viewed... With several other collateral observations and reflexions upon the island* (London, 1661), pp. 67-9 [sigs. F2r-F3r].

³³Jean Calvin, *Two and Twentie lectures vpon the five first chapters of Ieremiah* [trans. Clement Cotton] (London, 1620), p. 41 [sig. D5r]; 'Mary Tattle-well', *The Womens Sharpe Revenge*, p. 56 [sig. D4v]. 'Milksop' was perhaps the most popular seventeenth-century term of abuse in this context and would repay further investigation. If this is an echo of *Macbeth* it is certainly unconscious, since the author then claims that women have never been guilty of 'trayterous conspiracy against their King and Country' like the actors in the Gunpowder Plot.

At what it did so freely? From this time,
 Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
 To be the same in thine own act and valour,
 As thou art in desire? (1.7.34-41)

The husband's drunkenness was another common theme of the curtain lecture. Here, in an accusation facetiously echoed in the porter scene that drink 'provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance' (2.3. 24-5), Lady Macbeth translates her husband's slackening of desire to go ahead with the murder into a slackening of desire for herself. Her reference to the 'act' fuses the killing of Duncan with the sexual act, implying that if Macbeth is incapable of the one, he is incapable of the other. Stephen Greenblatt has called this 'sexual taunting' and 'sexual terrorism'.³⁴ If the latter expression is viable, it is so because Lady Macbeth relocates the assassination of Duncan to the context of the marital bed.

The strong erotic undercurrent in the language of *Macbeth* highlights the sexual charge between the couple which powers their murderous ambitions – something that is frequently recognised in productions of the play. This extends to failures of will, as above, and to the detumescent aftermath. There are hints of this even before we see the couple together. Tony Tanner comments on the Captain's description of the battle in 1.2:

Doubtful it stood,
 As two spent swimmers that do cling together
 And choke their art (1.2.7-9)

that 'spent swimmers clinging together suggests exhausted lovers rather more than exhausted warriors', but also 'a barren, self-destructive sexuality (to be succinctly expressed by Lady Macbeth later in the play when she says bleakly: "Nought's had, all's spent,/Where our desire is got without content" – II, ii, 4-5)'.³⁵ It is echoed in the dream that Aufidius recounts in *Coriolanus*:

We have been down down together in my sleep,
 Unbuckling helms, fisting each other's throat –

³⁴ *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), pp. 2557-8. The term 'terrorism' is replaced by a second reference to 'taunting' in subsequent editions.

³⁵ Tony Tanner, *Prefaces to Shakespeare* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 570.

And waked half dead with nothing. (4.5.123-5)

And this erotic undercurrent takes other disturbing forms in *Macbeth* itself. After the disrupted banquet, where Lady Macbeth reverts to her sexual taunting, calling Macbeth 'unmanned' (3.4.73), though now in public, the scene closes with Macbeth's words:

Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse

Is the initiate fear that wants hard use;

We are but young in deed. (3.4.142-4)

'Self-abuse' is not recorded in the sense of 'masturbation' until 1718 (OED 3.), but it is still difficult to avoid hearing a sexual element in these lines. Macbeth invites togetherness, but we know they will not sleep; the respite that remains is the 'hard use' of sexual intercourse (and both 'abuse' and 'use' certainly did have sexual associations at this time).³⁶ Macbeth is vowing to commit more murders, but the lines have a more immediate application. Like Lady Macbeth's reference to the 'act' in 1.5, Macbeth's 'deed' fuses killing and copulation.

'Come, we'll to sleep' takes us to the threshold of the bedchamber and thus to the bed itself, the locus of the curtain lecture. Lady Macbeth's intention to 'chide [her husband] with the valour of my tongue' is realised in the challenges to his virility which form part of a latent language of sexuality in the play more broadly. But the curtain lecture does not only have a sexual dimension. Another typical theme is the wife's urging her husband to be more ambitious, which is, of course, the occasion for Lady Macbeth's aspersions on her husband's virility in the first place. We might call this the motivational curtain lecture. One example appears in the English translation of Famiano Strada's history of the wars in the Low Countries of 1650, which reports the efforts of Jeanne d'Albret to stir her more reluctant husband into action. This lady, 'impatiently longing for a Crown, rung in her husbands ears, *That he must not suffer this onely opportunity of recovering the Kingdome of Navarre, to slip out of his hands...*' (the passage continues as reported speech). But since her husband is unmoved, she turns to his more adventurous brother:

³⁶ In fact, *Macbeth* provides first citation for 'self-abuse' as 'self-deception' (OED 1a.) which means that this sense was not already established. 'Abuse', however, is recorded in a sexual sense from 1556, and specifically in connection with witchcraft; see Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), I, 3 (there is a second example from a witch trial transcript of 1613); for the sexual sense of 'use' see Williams, III, 1462-3.

But this furious *Tullia*, was married to a milder *Tarquin*; so as the Duke of *Bourbon* being cold, for all this fiery curtain-Lecture: his brother the Prince of *Condè*, a *Tarquin* that well-matched the Lady *Alibret*, is said to have undertaken the Advance of the Conspiracie.³⁷

Another illustration of the motivational curtain lecture comes from Richard Brathwait again, this time from his romance *Panthalia*, where he recounts how the wife of Bellonius rouses him to action:

especially in this private Curtain-Lecture which she with much vehemency read unto him...This perswasive Lecture delivered by a tongue that had a commanding influence over him, became so prevalent with *Bellonius*, as it quickly raised and roused him from a secure sleep: enlivening his thoughts with actions of an higher temper. Ambition now begun strongly to work upon him.³⁸

There are a number of incidental parallels here: Macbeth is described as 'Bellona's bridegroom', i.e. Bellonius, at 1.2.54; he imagines himself as Tarquin at 2.1.55, though, as Lady Macbeth suggests, too mild to do the act; and William Painter's story of Tullia has recently been identified as a source for the play.³⁹ But the essential parallel lies in the speech form itself through which a wife rouses ambition in her husband. This is decisive with regard to the murder: the one contemporary witness to a performance of the play that we have, Simon Forman, records in his diary that 'Mackebeth contrived to kill Dunkin, & thorowe the persuasion of his wife did that night Murder the kinge in his own Castell, being his guest'.⁴⁰

What I am arguing, then, is that both the form and setting of the curtain lecture provided Shakespeare's audience with a way of imagining things which are at the very heart of this play, but which are difficult to convey in a large arena theatre in daylight. The Macbeths are not literally talking in bed, but in an era when the concept of a private room within the

³⁷ Famiano Strada, *De Bello Belgico: The History of the Low-Country Warres*, trans. Robert Stapleton (London, 1650), p. 57 [sig. l1r]. (Jeanne d'Albret, Queen of Navarre, was leader of the French Huguenots and the passage deals with the events of 1568-9 in the third religious war.)

³⁸ Richard Brathwait, *Panthalia: or the Royal Romance* (London, 1659), pp. 106-7 [sigs. H5v-H6r].

³⁹ John-Mark Philo, 'Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Livy's Legendary Rome', *Review of English Studies* 67 (2016), 250-74. The Tarquin in this story is the father of Lucrece's rapist, as Painter points out.

⁴⁰ Simon Forman, 'Booke of Plaies' in *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, ed. E. K. Chambers (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), I, 337.

average domestic dwelling did not really exist, the tester-bed with its curtains drawn to create a room within a room was the most powerful image of a space in which two people could speak together in private, exchanging 'reasonings secretly betweene themselves', as Robert Cleaver put it in a much more innocent context.⁴¹ So it provides a model for some of the most crucial scenes in *Macbeth*, both in terms of the spectacle of intimate conversation between husband and wife and, as we have just seen, in the form of the wife's speech itself.

But the term 'curtain lecture' was also used in another way, and one which has a powerful resonance in the play. Because it is a speech delivered in the prelude to sleep, the liminally conscious state when the mind is most receptive to suggestion and most fearful, it was used by seventeenth-century preachers when they wanted to make appeals to conscience. This is the sense in which the term was first recorded and which is represented by the alternative expression 'curtain sermon', as we saw earlier. This kind of curtain lecture is experienced not by a couple, but by the individual alone, and it is invoked by a number of writers later in the seventeenth century. 'Doth not conscience carry thee to thy closet...Doth it not carry thee into the secret chamber, and read thee a curtain lecture? O conscience do thy duty', writes Joseph Alleine;⁴² in his book on dreams, Philip Goodwin comments on Psalms 16.7: 'Even in the seasons of the night, the most retired motions of *David's* mind, the most hidden thoughts of his heart, did read him, as *one* calls it, a *Curtein Lecture*'; Edward Buckler uses the term as the equivalent of a *memento mori* in his *Midnights Meditations of Death*; in his account of how Sir Anthony Monk plotted King Charles's restoration in 1659, John Price speculates 'that he had been in the Night, quickned with a Curtain-Lecture of Damnation'.⁴³ Macbeth's speech 'If it were done when 'tis done ...' (1.7.1-28), which intervenes between the scenes of private conversation with his wife, is the most famous soliloquy in the play, but it is also a curtain lecture on the prospect of damnation read to him by conscience. In the comic version of the curtain lecture the husband is kept awake by the '*Curtaine clamours*' of

⁴¹ See note 25 above.

⁴² On the closet as private space see Alan Stewart, 'The Early Modern Closet Discovered', *Representations* 50 (1995), 76-100. Stewart focusses on the male couple, though the closet would also (and primarily) have been a space in which the individual could be alone.

⁴³ Joseph Alleine, *An Alarme to Unconverted Sinners* (London, 1672), p. 57 [sig. E5r]; Philip Goodwin, *The Mystery of Dreames, historically discoursed* (London, 1658), sig. b2v; Edward Buckler, *Midnights Meditations of Death* (London, 1646), sig. F2v; John Price, *The Mystery and Method of his Majesty's Happy Restauration, Laid Open to Publick View* (London, 1680), p. 20 [sig. C2v].

his wife, or as Brathwait puts it, 'the too forward discourses of such, who distemper their Husbands quiet with their Conventuall Lectures, and that at uncanonicall hours'.⁴⁴ Here, the religious terminology ('Conventuall' ... 'uncanonicall') is merely ironic. In its tragic vein the midnight torments of the individual, male or female, which prevent them from sleeping are the workings of the guilty soul. The curtain lecture becomes a window onto eternal perdition.⁴⁵

3.

Reading *Macbeth* through the prism of the curtain lecture focusses our attention on the characteristic speech forms of the play, one of which is the proverb or saying. Sayings are typically described as 'homely', so are very much part of the play's 'household stuffe'. Even the Erasmian 'adage' is referred to in this way, as the ballad writer Martin Parker illustrates in his verses on the 'homely adage/...*The prooffe of a pudding is all in the eating*'.⁴⁶ So it is not surprising that proverbs were seen as a feature of female discourse. Marriage conduct books counselled women to have a store of proverbial wisdom on hand to use as a set of instructions for daily living. 'Necessarily [sic] it is that she knowe these common sentences & learne them by harte', writes Thomas Becon in the most widely read of the Reformation-era manuals, offering examples such as 'Stretche out thyne arme no farther than thy sleaue wyll reatche' – a 'sentence' that Lady Macbeth is determined to invert.⁴⁷ It seems appropriate, then, that the most explicit definition of the curtain lecture in the seventeenth century comes from a collection of proverbs, as we noticed earlier.⁴⁸ Proverbs have a vital role in *Macbeth*, as A. R. Braunmuller has pointed out, helping to blend the homely with the eloquent, and the most famous instance of this – at least, the one that actually draws attention to its proverbial

⁴⁴ Heywood, *Curtaine Lecture*, sig. A3v; Brathwait, *Ar't Asleepe Husband?*, p. 14 [sig. B7v].

⁴⁵ The frontispiece to Heywood's *Curtaine Lecture* captures something of the comic and tragic versions of the form. We see the wife lecturing her husband in bed, but also the hour-glass and a burnt-out candle (the latter being an image with particular resonance for *Macbeth*).

⁴⁶ M. P., *Tryall brings Truth to Light* (London, 1634), [broadsheet].

⁴⁷ Heinrich Bullinger, *The Golde[n] Booke of Christen Matrimonye*, trans. Theodore Basille [Thomas Becon] (London, 1543), sig. L4v. (Bullinger's book was read in translations by both Coverdale, which is the earlier version, and Becon.)

⁴⁸ See note 21 above. The point is reinforced by Donne's reference to the term 'curtain sermon' being used 'proverbially'.

status – is the ‘adage’ which Lady Macbeth uses to seal the end of her speech in the curtain-lecture mode (‘Was the hope drunk...’):

Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own exteem,
Letting I dare not wait upon I would,
Like the poor cat i’th’adage?⁴⁹ (1.7.41-5)

The adage in question is ‘The Cat would eat fish but she will not wet her feet’ and it unwittingly looks forward to the sea of blood that Macbeth will have to wade through after succumbing to his wife’s pretensions. It anticipates the callous resignation of ‘I am in blood/Stepped in so far that should I wade no more,/Returning were as tedious as go o’er’ (3.4.136-8), which itself echoes the proverbial ‘Having wet his foot he cares not how deep he wades’ and ‘Over shoes over boots’.⁵⁰ It is a striking example of the way in which the homely and the eloquent are woven together in the textual fabric of the play.

It also shows how the language of *Macbeth* works through reverberation.⁵¹ Proverbial expression and its derivatives resonate through the play, working on the reader just as Lady Macbeth intends it to work on the mind of her husband. Although many writers emphasise the public and demotic aspect of sayings – they are common property, after all – they were also understood to have hidden depths. Erasmus introduced his *Apophtegmata* (in Nicholas Udall’s translation) with the claim that ‘as thei bee learned w^t pleasure & delite, and dooe lightly synke and settle in y^e mynde, so dooe thei contein more good knowelage and learnyng

⁴⁹ On ‘the eloquent, the homely, the proverbial’ in the play see *Macbeth*, ed. Braunmuller, p. 46f; for an overview of proverbial expression in Shakespeare, including *Macbeth*, see Martin Orkin, ‘The Poor Cat’s Adage and other Shakespearean Proverbs in Elizabethan Grammar-School Education’ in *A Reader in the Language of Shakespearean Drama*, ed. Vivian Salmon and Edwina Burness (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1987), pp. 489-98; Neil Rhodes, ‘Shakespeare’s Sayings’ in *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), pp. 155-73.

⁵⁰ Tilley C144; R. W. Dent, *Shakespeare’s Proverbial Language: An Index* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), F 565.1; Tilley S 379.

⁵¹ I borrow the term from Bachelard, *Poetics of Space*, p. 2; but see also Russ McDonald on the ‘auditory pattern [of] ... repetition’ in *Macbeth, Shakespeare’s Late Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 47.

in y^e deepe botome or secrete privetee, then thei shew at the first vieu'.⁵² Tapping into the 'secrete privetee' of sayings maximises their persuasive power and may affect the reader (or hearer) in a deeply personal way. This is what John Heywood implies when he says in the preface to his *Dialogue of Proverbes*: 'This write I not to teache, but to touche'.⁵³ The suggestion of emotional (touching the heart) as well as physical intimacy here, alongside Erasmus's emphasis on the wellsprings of meaning in the pithy saying, gives us a sense of how this speech form might have a particular application in private dialogue between wife and husband. These observations also help to define the reverberative power of Shakespeare's use of proverb, or saying, or adage in *Macbeth*.

To illustrate this we can go to a specific text. Because proverbial language is common property it might seem futile to look for any one source for its deployment in a work of literature. But in the case of *Macbeth* there is one possibility that may help us to illuminate how the proverbial underlies and draws together some of the principal themes of the play. When Udall was working on Erasmus's *Apophthegmata*, Richard Taverner was busy translating selections from the *Adagia*. His first selection appeared in 1539 and was clearly successful, since he produced an expanded version in 1545, adding English equivalents for Erasmus's Latin proverbs, which was reprinted in 1550, 1552, and 1569. One page-spread in particular seems to have a special relevance for *Macbeth*.⁵⁴ The proverb with the obvious connection to Shakespeare's play is 'The thyng that is done can not be undone', echoed by Lady Macbeth in the sleep-walking scene: 'what's done cannot be undone' (5.1.57-8). The proverb links Lady Macbeth's utterance back to 'If it were done when 'tis done', while the previous injunction in Taverner 'to do the thyng spedily' prompts the second half of the sentence in Shakespeare. And these proverbs on 'doing' appear alongside the reflection on the transience of life, 'Man is but a bubble'. It is the witches who are the bubbles of the earth (1.3.77) rather than Macbeth himself, but Taverner's addition of the English version of *Homo*

⁵² Erasmus, *Apophthegmes, that is to saie, prompte, quicke, wittie and sentencious saynges*, trans. Nicholas Udall (London, 1542), ** 6v-**7r. Although Erasmus is commenting here on *apophthegmata*, this was precisely his view of *adagia*, which was why he worked on them throughout his career.

⁵³ John Heywood's *Dialogue of Proverbes*, ed. Rudolph E. Habenicht (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963), p. 97.

⁵⁴ Desiderius Erasmus, *Proverbes or Adagies gathered out of the Chiliades of Erasmus by Richard Taverner* (London, 1545), sigs. E2v-E3r.

bullā, 'To day a man to morow none' captures the mood of Macbeth's 'Tomorrow, tomorrow, and tomorrow', with its reflection that 'Life's but a walking shadow' (5.5.18, 23), while harking back to his wife's accusations that he is no man (1.7.49-51).⁵⁵ Furthermore, Lady Macbeth's own 'adage' about the timid cat is the only one to appear twice in Taverner's collection: 'The catte wold fishe eate, but she wol not her feete wette'.⁵⁶ So it does look rather as though Taverner's book provided Shakespeare with a proverbial matrix for some of the central lines of thought in *Macbeth*.

Lady Macbeth's 'what's done cannot be undone' is part of a series of speech fragments which represent her final words in the play:

To bed, to bed; there's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come,
come, give me your hand; what's done cannot be undone. To bed,
to bed, to bed. (5.1.56-8)

Uttered in the liminal state of consciousness between sleeping and waking, these lines return us to the domain of the curtain lecture. If Macbeth's 'If it were done when 'tis done' is a midnight curtain lecture read to him by conscience, in this recension of the form we see conscience working through the kind of anguished repetition described by Jeremiah Dyke in his account of the 'curtaine Sermon': the guilty person may try to suppress the prickings of conscience, he writes, 'yet they haue a Repeater in their bosome, that will be at priuate repetitions with them in spite of them'.⁵⁷ This is exactly what happens here, as the dismissive resolution of '[t]hings without all remedy/Should be without regard; what's done is done' (3.2.11-12) finally fractures under the accumulated weight of bloodguiltiness. The sleepwalking speeches are the most intense and most compressed instances of the play's use of reverberation, recalling thoughts and moments which Lady Macbeth has tried so hard to suppress: the indelible stain, the irreversibility of the deed, the terrifying sound of impending retribution – the knocking at the gate – which, recalled in the bedchamber, feels like an invasion of private space. And these thoughts mingle with the only thing she has left to hold on to, the intimacy with her husband, as she echoes his words to her when we last see them together: 'Come, we'll to sleep'. It seems entirely appropriate that Lady Macbeth should go

⁵⁵ Erasmus, *Proverbes*, sig. E3r.

⁵⁶ Erasmus, *Proverbes*, sigs. F7r, H3r.

⁵⁷ Dyke, *Good Conscience*, p. 70 [sig. F7v].

to her death with words that summon up the private place which is so often at the centre of the play, but always out of reach: 'Come, come, come, come, give me your hand ... To bed, to bed, to bed'.

The curtain lecture draws together many of the features that have long been recognised as part of the special ambience of *Macbeth* and helps us to understand why a play which is ostensibly about assassination, war, and affairs of state, should impact upon its audience in such a personal way. The focus on a husband and wife working together in partnership, the privacy of the locations where they speak, the play's atmosphere of enveloping darkness, and a characteristic poetic idiom which can translate a castle into a home where heaven might 'peep through the blanket of the dark', all help to create the conditions of the curtain lecture in the mind of the audience. The form itself is enacted in the combative sexual accusations of wife to husband, and then in the night thoughts of conscience, first in Macbeth's rehearsal of the prospect of damnation, and finally as the 'Repeater' which hammers in the mind of his dying wife. No other play of Shakespeare's blends horror and homeliness in the way that *Macbeth* does, bleakly evoking the comforts of love which are ultimately made worthless by the irreparable spiritual damage that its central couple have visited upon themselves. This is also a play that works on our own deepest anxieties as it explores the liminal imaginative space that lingers, for minutes or for hours, before we sleep.