

Macbeth and the Contingency of Future Persons

LUKE WILSON

AN HEIR IS A PECULIAR SORT OF PERSON. Persons who can be termed apparent or presumptive heirs may exist at any time; but an heir comes into existence only when the person whose heir he or she is is dead; an heir and the person whose heir he or she is can never be alive at the same time. As the common law maxim runs, *nemo est heres viventis*: no one is heir to a living person.¹ Or, to put it a little differently, *You can't have an heir: not until you're dead, and then there's no "you" to "have" anything.* There are heirs everywhere, just not for you. From the point of view of the person whose heirs they may turn out to be, heirs remain future, contingent persons, persons who may (or may not) exist biologically, and who may be described as heirs apparent or heirs presumptive, but who do not exist, legally, as heirs.² One's heirs are thus, in a special sense, future persons, persons whose existence as heirs will always be for you contingent upon your own death. Technically, in sentences whose subject is "my heir," the verb can only be in a future tense.

In Shakespeare, the future is typically conceptualized in and through the figure of the child, or more exactly the child as heir contingent (presumptive, apparent, likely, unlikely, whatever). A great deal of the fretting over the future in Shakespeare involves the paradox of the passage from heir contingent to heir in fact. In early seventeenth century England one's children would not necessarily be one's heirs, nor one's heirs one's children. Even so, the deep connection between children and heirs helped entrench the more broadly held notion that, as the song says, "I believe the children are the future . . ."³ We coexist with our children for a time, but they do not exist as our heirs (or our replacements) until we are gone, so

that, under what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism,” our obligations are always, ultimately, obligations to a future embodied in persons who do not, in the relevant sense, yet exist. Under a regime of reproductive futurism all existing persons are obliged to the child and all the more so to the child who does not yet exist. How exactly relations of obligation may exist between oneself and a person who does not exist, or does not exist in the relevant sense, and may never exist, is a bit of a puzzle, even as it is an extremely common assumption today, as it was when Shakespeare lived—so much so that it only comes to our attention where it is radically challenged, as in Lee Edelman’s calls for a refusal of “the social order and the Child in whose name we’re collectively terrorized,” or in the paradoxically child-oriented anti-natalism of David Benatar, who in a carefully reasoned and dispassionate argument calls for the cessation of human reproduction altogether, on the grounds that “coming into existence is always a serious harm.”⁴ Shakespeare’s plays are, in general, deeply invested in reproductive futurism; but I will argue here that accompanying this investment are signs, in *Macbeth* at least, of an early modern anti-natalism that resists it.

The category of the heir is fraught, not only because one can never “have” one but also because contingent (presumptive or apparent) heirs do exist, but (from one perspective) primarily as contingent shadows of what they *will* or rather *may* be. One never knows whether one’s heirs contingent will be heirs in fact, and consequently whether they are your heirs-to-be or just persons of no particular significance. In this sense, questions of whether an heir will exist and in what sense a contingent heir does (or does not) exist are, in *Macbeth*, affectively and conceptually entangled. Thus the traditional question in the play of whether Macbeth has (contingent) heirs becomes itself a form of the more pervasive puzzles posed by the contingent status of future persons in general.

Few other plays by Shakespeare, one would think, turn more directly on the issue of heirs, or a lack of heirs. And yet while Shakespeare uses the word “heir” or “heirs” in 33 of the 37 canonical plays, as well as in the *Sonnets* and *Venus and Adonis*, in *Macbeth* alone among the tragedies and histories the word does not appear.⁵ Except that, in the Folio text of the play, when he first responds to what the weyward sisters have told him, Macbeth asks, “why doe I yeeld to that suggestion, Whose horrid Image doth unfixe my Heire, And make my seated Heart knock at my Ribbes, Against the use of

Nature?" (TLN 245–48). As has often been noted, the Folio's spelling of "hair" activates an apt play on words: if Macbeth's thoughts make his hair stand on end, it is because they bear on heirs, Banquo's if not his own; "unfixe my Heire" even suggests that the prophecy has disabled in advance any dynastic aspirations Macbeth might have had, though since "unfixing" here means something like "causing to stand on end," it may also suggest, conversely, the animation of the heir. Hair, heir, and air participate in a "verbal vagrancy" in the play, often drifting into and out of one another's semantic territory.⁶ The last instance of this drift is when Siward says of his just-dead son, "Had I as many sons as I have hairs I would not wish them to a fairer death; And so his knell is knolled" (5.11.14–16).⁷ Again, the life and death of hairs/heirs is at issue when Macbeth reflects that "The time has been my senses would have cooled To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair [F Haire] Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir as life were in't" (5.5.10–13). His hair no longer stands on end at horrors, as it had in 1.3. It used to be that the heir/hair had life in it, but no longer.

That a play so much about heirs permits Macbeth to talk about them only by means of a pun he himself seems unaware of reveals, I suggest, both something about the play and something about the character. For Macbeth to note that the heir will rouse and stir no more precisely when he hears that Lady Macbeth has died may seem appropriate, since she ought to figure in any thoughts he might have about heirs. The strange thing, however, is that neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth ever seems to have such thoughts. "Heirs" as inheritors go unmentioned in the play, and this is of a piece with the familiar uncertainty about whether Macbeth has any children. The evidence appears to conflict (Lady Macbeth's "I have given suck" versus Macduff's "He has no children" and Macbeth's "barren scepter"). In one sense the entire play turns on Macbeth's apparent lack of an heir, on his concerns about Banquo's offspring in contrast to his own "barren scepter." And yet the play is remarkably vague about this. Given how important the question of whether Macbeth has children should be, one might expect that Macbeth would actually mention it, but for all his tangled engagements with the future he never directly complains of being childless, never thinks about how he might beget an heir, or did, or didn't, or had one and lost him (or her).

To begin with, "I have given suck . . ." (1.7.54–59) seems to contradict Macduff's "He has no children" (4.3.217). The sensible ex-

planation may be that the baby mentioned has died, as infants so often did, or will have done so by the fourth act.⁸ Whether or not it has already died we can't say, but if it has, then Lady Macbeth is saying that if her baby weren't already dead she'd kill it, which suggests a fantasy of killing it again. If Duncan sleeping resembled her *dead* father, as it is reasonable to infer, then her reluctance to kill him amounts to the same thing and the two are structurally identical fantasies of killing the already dead, either to make sure that the dead stay in their graves (in a play in which they just won't), or because (in a play in which it comes to the same thing) she can't stand that they *are* dead.

It is more strange still that, whether Lady Macbeth is imagining killing her already dead child, or killing a child that is still alive but will die before the end of the play, or killing an imaginary child that she never had, she's imagining killing Macbeth's heir in order to secure his kingship, as if to get the one means sacrificing the other. What are we to say then of the fact that, in a play in which heirs ought to be of the first importance, Macbeth's only known heir gets mentioned only in the context of killing it? And how is it that for Lady Macbeth compassing the crown also means eliminating one's own heirs? From the very start, Macbeth frets about the difference between being king oneself and one's children being kings (1.3.84). Lady Macbeth's avowal seems both to bear on that consideration and to be oblivious to it. Does she mean that it's worth preventing one's children from being king in order to be king oneself? There's no indication either of them sees what she says as having anything to do with this question. Indeed, Macbeth's response seems strangely unfocused as well, oddly disconnected from the question of succession, which the play in fact *never* faces directly. He seems similarly oblivious to the way in which his remark brushes unwittingly past what would have been the pertinent utterance, something like "You, wife, are such a hard-ass that I can be confident you'll produce a male heir for me, which happens to be just what I need, especially if I'm going to be king." At the same time, it makes the matter of offspring even more relevant, since Macbeth seems to consider his wife still capable of reproducing. But just where he ought to be thinking about getting an heir, these lines are tossed off merely in passing; he seems to see no relation between "Bring forth men-children only" (1.7.72) and the idea that she might bring forth *his* men-children, his *heirs*.

One way to explain this obliviousness is to say that Macbeth

thinks in terms of fate as delivered in the witches' prophecy: it's not that he doesn't have an heir, it's that he believes his heir won't inherit. But this raises another puzzle, namely the way that in 3.1, Macbeth and Banquo interpret or remember the witches' prophecies. The scene begins with Banquo making a striking mistake.

Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all
 As the weird women promised; and I fear
 Thou played'st most foully for't. Yet it was said
 It should not stand in thy posterity,
 But that myself should be the root and father
 Of many kings.

(3.1.1–6)

The latter part of what Banquo says is correct: the witches say that Banquo's issue will be kings ("Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none" [1.3.65]). But the witches never say that Macbeth's heirs will not be kings themselves; they only say "All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter." There's an asymmetry here, since to Banquo they say, in effect, "Your children, yes; but you, no," where to Macbeth they say only, "You, yes." Although the prophecy sets Banquo up in hope (3.1.10) only for his issue, it's not clear why both he and Macbeth take this to mean the latter's heirs *won't* be kings. Macbeth could, for example, worry that at some point in the future Banquo's issue will take over from his own; or why not even imagine a comic-historical-romance resolution, in which the two lines might merge through marriage (as John Leslie, following Boece, reports that Duncan's and Banquo's did to produce the Stuarts)?⁹ It is true that the witches offer the equivocal "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater" and "Not so happy, yet much happier" (1.3.63–64); but the point of these is that they *are* equivocal. By the time Macbeth says "Your children shall be kings" and Banquo responds "You shall be king," both seem to have come to see these as mutually exclusive possibilities, as if one can only be *or* produce kings.

That the prophecy in some sense *ought* to be symmetrical is suggested by Simon Forman's report of the scene after seeing *Macbeth* in 1611, where he too remembers the witches' prophecies as Banquo and Macbeth do, with them saying to Macbeth that "thou shalt be a kinge, but beget No kinges, &c." and to Banquo that "thou shalt beget kinges, yet be no kinge."¹⁰ It is possible that Forman's recollection is tainted by a familiarity with the account in Holinshed, Shakespeare's primary source for the scene, in which the witches

tell Banquo, “Yes . . . we promise greater benefits unto thee, than unto him, for he shall reigne in deed, but with an unluckie end: neither shall he leave anie issue behind him to succeed in his place, where contrarily thou in deed shalt not reigne at all, but of thee those shall be borne which shall governe the Scottish kingdom by long order of continuall descent.”¹¹ Shakespeare follows Holinshed closely in 1.3 in respect to the weird sisters’ prophecy, *except that* he has eliminated the symmetry of the prophecies made to Macbeth and Banquo. In this alone he’s closer to Buchanan, the only other source for the scene.¹²

By the time we get to 3.1, however, Macbeth and Banquo seem to be recalling Holinshed’s symmetrical prophecy, rather than the version in 1.3. In a play in which the sisters’ equivocations are centrally important, this is more than merely Shakespeare’s oversight. It’s one thing to say that Shakespeare was remembering Holinshed’s version, rather than his own, when he came to write 3.1; but this does not explain why when writing 1.3 he would have altered the account presumably right in front of him.¹³ In making symmetrical what was initially asymmetrical, Macbeth and Banquo are already misinterpreting; Macbeth, for his part, will do so again. Here, although the prophecy does *not* tell Macbeth that he will die without an heir to the throne, he seems eager to see it that way, eager to submit to a symmetrical either/or that he himself has invented. Being king means killing heirs—not only Banquo’s, Macduff’s and Duncan’s, but his own—or to see compassing the crown *as* killing off the heir.

Macbeth’s misreading of the prophecy is the result of his idea of terminal kingship, a notion disturbed by the knowledge that others will enjoy the dynastic future he has already in effect disclaimed. For this reason his fretting about Banquo and his heirs takes the peculiar form it does a little later in 3.1.

Then, prophet-like,
They hailed him father to a line of kings.
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,
And put a barren scepter in my grip,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If’t be so,
For Banquo’s issue have I filed my mind,
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel

Given to the common enemy of man
To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings.

(3.1.60–71)

“No son of mine succeeding”: but no one ever told him that his sons—if he has any—will not succeed to the throne. Nor, for that matter, is he quite saying he has no son, so that the vagueness persists precisely where we might well have expected precision. And it is the crown and scepter, not himself and his wife, who are fruitless and barren, an odd displacement since if he hadn’t misinterpreted the prophecy this would be the place to think about begetting some heirs. It’s as if he can’t quite focus either on whether he actually *has* children or on whether he might someday *beget* children. We don’t quite know whether Macbeth has children because *he* doesn’t quite know. Macbeth’s complaint that “For Banquo’s issue have I filed my mind . . . To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings” resembles the trope of the cuckold bemoaning his fate, which Macbeth rewrites in terms of his own kind of “doing,” imagining the murder of Duncan as his own (one might say sexual) defilement (“For Banquo’s issue have I filed my mind”), a defilement however that has paradoxically resulted in offspring that are not his own, but which he nevertheless finds himself providing for as if they were. He imagines that what he has *done* will *make* Banquo’s offspring kings, though this too is a strictly unwarranted inference, and Banquo, who in Holinshed is Macbeth’s co-conspirator, seems almost to think so too; his silence, apparently prompted by an eye to the future interests of his heirs, implicates him after the fact in Duncan’s murder.

Banquo’s issue then is and is not Macbeth’s; and the same is true of the other murdered heirs in the play, Macduff’s children. As Adelman points out, Macduff’s abandonment of his family invests in him the fantasy of exemption from woman also entertained by Macbeth himself.¹⁴ The final disambiguation of the question of Macbeth’s children, Macduff’s “He has no children” (4.3.217), is therefore itself correspondingly ambiguous. The fact is that at this point neither Malcolm nor Macduff nor (apparently) Macbeth has children, and it could easily enough refer to any one of them, so that being heirless and having dead heirs seem to merge. The confirmation that Macbeth lacks heirs comes in accidentally. “He has no children” *might* mean “He has no *heirs*,” but only with some stretching, since its primary meaning is either “I can’t take proper

revenge by killing *his* children, since he doesn't have any" or conceivably "He could not have done this if he'd had children himself."

Macbeth is bent not on producing heirs but on killing them—whether or not they're his own being, obscurely, irrelevant. He is in this sense not fatalistically inferring his own barrenness but rather actively embracing it. In all other matters he wants to make assurance double sure, as when he proposes to dispatch Macduff in order to "take a bond of fate" that Macduff can't harm him; but when it comes to children he makes no provision (except, I suggest, negatively). Indeed, taking a bond of fate—attempts to ensure by his actions that fate will keep its promises—is Macbeth's characteristic *modus operandi*. It is all the more surprising therefore that he gives no thought to producing an heir, to protecting any heir he might have, or to worrying that he doesn't have one.

If in some weird sense, then, Macbeth is a willing cuckold, a wit-tol who takes pleasure in the idea that he lacks a true heir, he bears comparison with Leontes, who wishes, in Cavell's reading of *The Winter's Tale*, that he too were such a one.¹⁵ Probably within about a year of writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare produced *Pericles*, the first of the romances, which have, no doubt, their own distinctive account of the burden of the child. But if as Bristol suggests, Lady Macbeth's "lost child is as much part of the story of *Macbeth* as the lost Mamillius is part of the story of the *The Winter's Tale*" (32), then the full story of Macbeth's investment in terminal kingship, and of its relation to the augmented investment in reproductive futurism on display in the romances, remains to be told.¹⁶

Notes

1. The rule was well established by the early fourteenth century; A. W. B. Simpson, *A History of the Land Law*. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon, 1986), 95 and 95n46. The rule meant that an heir apparent had only a contingent interest in land he stood to inherit; he might always predecease his father. It has also been held up as the mark of the free alienability of one's land under common law since the thirteenth century. See Alan Macfarlane, "On Individualism," *Proceedings of the British Academy* 82 (1992) 171–199 at 177. Even in the case of an entail, the heir remains contingent for the first reason.

2. An heir apparent is one who, like Hal in *1 Henry IV*, will become his father's heir if his father predeceases him. An heir presumptive is typically a daughter who will not inherit if her father produces a son before he dies.

3. Linda Creed and Michael Masser, "The Greatest Love of All" (1977), written

for the Muhammad Ali biopic *The Greatest* and performed by George Benson in the soundtrack to that film; later recorded by Whitney Houston in 1986.

4. Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 2, 4–5; David Benatar, *Better Never To Have Been: The Harm of Coming Into Existence* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2006), 8.

5. “Heir” also occurs in *Two Noble Kinsmen* act 2 (probably written by Fletcher), and in *Edward III*. In addition to *Macbeth*, the word does not appear in *Troilus*, *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Lucrece*. Not surprisingly, “heir-apparent” is used thrice in *1 Henry IV* (and once in *Pericles*); Shakespeare never speaks of “presumptive” heirs.

6. Margreta de Grazia and Peter Stallybrass, “The Materiality of the Shakespeare Text,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 44 1993: 255–83 at 264–66.

7. All citations to the text of *Macbeth* are to the Norton second edition, ed. Stephen Greenblatt et al. (New York: Norton, 2008).

8. Michael D. Bristol, “How many children did she have?” in *Philosophical Shakespeares*, ed. John J. Joughin (London: Routledge, 2000), 18–33 at 31.

9. See Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (New York: Octagon Books, 1971), 172. This myth of the merging of the two lines complicates David Kastan’s argument that the play presents two incompatible dynastic claims to legitimacy, Banquo’s and Duncan’s; *Shakespeare After Theory* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 168–69.

10. Quoted from Kenneth Muir, introduction to *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare (1951; London: Routledge, 1984), xv.

11. Raphael Holinshed, *The Second Volume of the Chronicles* (1586), sigs. P1v-P2.

12. See 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: University of California Press, 1987), 78–116. Leslie, following Boece, does not mention the prophecies in telling the story of Macbeth, and only mentions them in passing when he gets to Banquo (Paul 171–76).

13. Since the play has probably been shortened, one can always explain apparent inconsistencies on the basis of missing material. Forman’s recollection may suggest this, though the particular omission in question seems a strange one to introduce, and unlikely to have occurred simply to reduce the play’s length. Given that Shakespeare had Buchanan’s account, which omits the detail of the exclusion of Macbeth’s heirs from the throne, it does not seem unlikely that the divergence from Holinshed was deliberate.

14. Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Material Origin in Shakespeare’s Plays*, Hamlet to The Tempest (New York: Routledge, 1992), 144.

15. Stanley Cavell, “Recounting Gains, Showing Losses: Reading *The Winter’s Tale*,” in *Disowning Knowledge In Six Plays of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 193–221.

16. Behind my own account of *Macbeth* lies Norbrook’s meticulous discussion of the way the play negotiates conflicting historical accounts of the relation between hereditary and elective monarchy in Scottish history (note 9). I have found this essay enormously instructive. Where Norbrook sees *Macbeth* as alive to the humanist pro-elective monarchy position as delivered most directly (in terms of

the Scottish history relevant to the play) by Buchanan at the same time that he holds this position at arm's length in deference to the opposing ideas of his most important audience member, I see the play—OK, I see myself—as less interested in the conflict between elective and hereditary monarchy than in the more abstract question of reproductive futurism and the contingency of future persons.

Copyright of Shakespeare Studies is the property of Rosemont Publishing & Printing Corporation and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.