

Mapping out Home and Homeland in *King Lear* and *Macbeth*

"The tyranny of the open night" does not only rain down on *King Lear* out on the heath (3.4.2) – the environment is the irrational king of pre-modern and early-modern Britain, both the source of authority and the cause of strife. This wild habitat pressed on human relationships, and the people inside it needed to develop an equitable and just society despite - and to conquer - the ever-present threat of being lost and exposed to the elements. "Geographic representation on the early modern stage...is connected to real-world developments," and two of these processes are particularly relevant to the imagined worlds of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*: "the spectacular demographic growth and physical expansion of London after 1550" and "the increasing consolidation of England from a medieval kingdom into an early modern nation-state, and the changing composition and self-understanding of social groups in that nation-state" (Howard 313). Looking at these shifts informs the interpretation of a play that discusses the role of property and a play that presents options for ruling an increasingly complex nation. *King Lear* and *Macbeth* call for Shakespeare's English audiences to redefine their relationship to their homeland as a modernizing society in the process of shifting from agrarian to city-based. The action takes place in the near-but-strange countries of ancient Britain and semi-primitive Scotland, where characters equate land with its owners and violence with power, with tragic results.

If ownership of land (and nature) constitutes authority, potential power is limited and cannot be constructed effectively in an increasingly mobile early modern society where people move to London to make more money than they ever could on traditional English feudal-style farms. Shakespeare presents an earlier era to teach something new: in *King Lear*, land is not just the source of power – it is so important that people are treated as if they are unified with their

property, and family members hurt each other in the effort to acquire and maintain control. *King Lear* is a "study of...the politics of the family," but the family in this case is very large: the play is about "the profound tenuousness of...the assumption that the model for the commonwealth was the family, and that all on levels of society, father was king" (Orgel xxxi). In this model, the king *is* his land, and Cordelia *is* her land. By the end, it is apparent that the cost of this model is too great, and human personal relationships must be valued beyond the patriarchal and territorial.

The trouble in *King Lear* starts when Lear equates love with kingdoms, but he learns better by the end. By way of addressing Cordelia, Lear says, "to whose young love / The vines of France and milk of Burgundy / Strive to be interested" (1.1.83-85) – because from his perspective, they *are* their land, and she *is* her land. So when Lear asks Cordelia to communicate her love for him (for *his land*) in exchange for this material gain, that may seem easy to him but it is impossible for a person who loves deeply and intangibly – and she replies "Nothing". For Lear and her suitors Burgundy and France, "the issue of inheritance is the primary one...women are property...and the more property they represent the more desirable they are" (Orgel xxxix). According to Lear, Cordelia has "little seeming substance" when her land is gone (1.1.203), but France seems to see favor as "folds", clothing instead of substance (1.1.222). France also says "She is herself a dowry" (1.1.246), implying that she is such valuable property that he needs no extra land, but the realistic view is that France is gambling: she is a dowry because Lear might change his mind – or they might go to war later and gain the whole kingdom (Orgel xxxix). France says Burgundy is "wat'rish" (1.1.264), lacking substance because he lost out on Cordelia's potential addition to his land. It may allude to Burgundy's milk production too, thus conflating his personal quality with the quality of his property. Lear is oddly shallow about relationships, mistaking surfaces for substance during this game: Goneril and Regan appreciate

and love him while he represents land, but he does not realize that they will see themselves in charge after he gives it to them. Later, Kent says Goneril is "Vanity the puppet's part against the royalty of her father" (2.2.34-35) -- she is without substance because she is neglecting her duties as a queen. Near the end of the play, Lear's willingness to be imprisoned "like birds i' th' cage" (5.3.8-9) is a desire to be permanently free of land, to just enjoy his time with Cordelia, because he has realized that considering land to be unified with people causes a world of hurtful contradictions.

In general Lear feels he *is* the land. After distributing his land, Lear is just his shadow (1.4.224) - he has given away the substance of his body and merely retains the image (or after-image). Regan and Goneril then take away the remainder of his substance (his knights), but Lear still thinks he can command nature (1.4.272). Lear invokes nature when cursing - he feels he has control of the land. He considers the natural world sacred and alive, including the stars, and feels connected to their power. Lear would rather be in his wild kingdom than in a house turned against him, so he heads out into nature (2.4.207) and calls Goneril a disease in his flesh (2.4.221). Lear is dressed in weeds (4.6.80 s.d.) - dressed in his land. He says kings are born, not made ("Nature's above art in that respect," [4.6.86]), and even calls on the birds of his kingdom to be his army (4.6.91). Kent has told Lear and Gloucester to travel to Dover for "welcome and protection" (3.6.90-91), or in words more to the point, because Dover contains "well-armed friends" (3.7.18-19). The fool had earlier compared Lear to a snail without a shell (1.5.29-30) - without a home, without protection.

The natural world of ancient Britain is harsh, and the people within it sometimes need the support of friends and family members more than they need their titles – the ending seems to be bleak ("the rack of this tough world" [5.3.321]), but there are moments of love and care within

the play. Lear argues that humans need more than just sustenance - they need comforts, such as the fellowship of their knights, or else they are beasts (2.4.264-267). But instead of telling his knights to remain and start a fight, he gives up because he does not want to start a war within his daughter's house. Later, Lear goes naked because a naked man has taken nothing from anyone else, but he cannot survive like that, or survive just based on what the land provides -- "The tyranny of the open night's too rough for nature to endure" (3.4.2-3) -- he needs Kent's help. The outdoors is harsh, and Lear is angry because it seems to be helping his daughters hurt him. The fool says to go inside (3.2.25-26); Kent provides a hovel. Later Cordelia calls upon the earth to help heal Lear (4.4.15-18), but it is really her he needs. An old tenant helps Gloucester (4.1.13-15), and in the Dover cliff scene, Edgar relieves some of his father's suffering by protecting him from the real world because he loves him. Albany tells Goneril that she is "not worth the dust" of the wind because "nature which contemns its origin / cannot be bordered certain in itself" -- a branch cut off from its tree is no longer a branch but a dangerous weapon (4.2.31-37). None of these acts of kindness (sometimes life-saving) requires much wealth or resources -- instead, they require people to invest in their human relationships.

Disguised exile provides opportunities for trying to change the alienating system where land is valued over relationships. People must to go outside their claim to the land (or have none) in order to speak truth. The Fool has no land or claim to land, only affection for Cordelia and King Lear, and he can speak the most freely of anyone -- he says that Lear has "banished" his two older daughters since "freedom is hence" (1.4.100); he does not believe that property is all-important. But he is also realistic and says that money brings love and service (2.4.77, 2.4.48). When King Lear banishes Cordelia, Kent tells her "freedom lives hence...the gods to their dear shelter take thee" -- she should take this opportunity to get out of the system and return later.

When Lear exiled Kent, he says "thy banished trunk" (1.1.182), which is a telling synonym for "body" because a tree cannot be banished -- trunks have roots. Kent does not accept his exile and remains in the area.

Howard writes, "If Shakespeare's English histories begin in nostalgia for medieval kingship, they end in celebration of a nation that exceeds the equation of country with king" (Howard 306). King Lear has some elements of a history play, but in the end it is a tragedy caused by the characters' inability to separate their lives from their lands. "Tragedies, particularly those of the first Jacobean decades, narrativize the decline and fall of once dominant groups" (Howard 314). The problem represented here is that in Shakespeare's era, "one's place in the social hierarchy was determined not primarily by wealth but by lineage" while "agrarian capitalism turned many people off the land and transformed them into wage laborers" (Howard 308). This growing contradiction meant that society needed to shift its emphasis away from land as power and to find new sources for authority. It is set in Britain's past in order to make the characters seem a little strange yet still familiar – different enough that the audience can see them with fresh eyes, but similar enough to require listening. In this tragedy, the "protagonists are both mundanely homely in their suffering and also larger than life, denizens of a heroic, alien realm" (Howard 314). By placing these characters back in time, Shakespeare suggests that an emphasis on family and friends is England's lost heritage.

Shakespeare uses Scotland – "a phantasmagoric landscape of horror in which nobility and savagery are inseparably intertwined" (Howard 319) – to present the contradictions inherent in leaders who have also been violent soldiers. Macbeth cannot separate his warrior life from his political power. Prompted by the hostile environment of Scotland, he goes on a bloody rampage for power that "exposes the ruthless violence and tyranny that haunt the institution of kingship

and threaten its sanctity, its legitimacy" (Howard 316). He is recognized as a tyrant and killed and replaced by another warrior – but it is questionable whether any warrior can truly exercise peaceful power. This Scotland is dangerous, reminiscent of the England of Shakespeare's time but intensified: more wild and wooly, harsher, and more magical. Shakespeare presents this cautionary tale to an audience of royalty faced with how to rule an increasingly civilized and capitalistic land, growing post-agrarian. War is primitive and destructive, not even suitable for barren heaths; Shakespeare directs England to take inspiration from its mythological ancestor Banquo and develop a wiser strategy.

Macbeth struggles with divisions between reason and force, mind and body, heart and hand. He chooses destructive options because he was trained and acclaimed as a warrior – and his wife naively reinforces that trait. "Brave Macbeth" is accustomed to unseaming people (1.2.16, 1.2.22) in a land "foul and fair" (1.3.38) where violence and civilization are mixed up together. In this society, both words and wounds are honorable (1.2.43); they defend themselves against vicious attackers using viciousness.

Macbeth is "rapt", entranced (1.3.57) by the weird sisters promising royalty, and they provoke his existing impulse toward using his sword. He says "To be king stands not within the prospect of belief" (1.3.74) because reasonably, becoming king cannot happen – but this is a "blasted heath" (1.3.77) where nature/violence rules. Banquo is much more of a critical thinker and says, "Have we eaten on the insane root that takes the reason prisoner?" (1.3.85). Macbeth's answer is an implied "yes!" as he repeats the prophecy as fact: "Your children shall be kings" (1.3.86). Macbeth has recently been acclaimed as a great warrior, and true to form, he has jumped to thinking of violent action even though he knows it is against polite society – a "horrid image" (1.3.135). The problem is that Macbeth is "nothing afeared" of the "strange images of

death" he makes, and he has been praised and rewarded for them. (1.3.96-97). This idea upsets him, "shakes so my single state of man" (1.3.140), but he is not singular – he is both a fighter and a politician, and until now those two sides have been working together for the good of his king, but soon they will not. Macbeth says "the eye be blind to the hand; yet let that be which the eye fears, which it is done, to see" (1.4.52). He has realized his potential. Later, Macbeth tries to reunite his heart and hand, but he unites it in favor of the impulsive hand (4.1.146) – although the Banquo and Macduff murders are done by hired hands, not his. This is a damning mistake. A warrior may kill another warrior in a fight, and killing a sleeping king may be horrible but has some justification – there is no honor or civilization in killing women and children, only brutishness.

New clothes don't fit right away (1.3.44), and manners and politeness do not fit well on a warrior society. It is "wrought with things forgotten" – ancient things. Macbeth seems very polite, speaking honorary formulas (1.4.22-23) while he is plotting horrible things. Macbeth says he killed Duncan's murderers impulsively (2.3.110), which seems accepted by his peers – except Banquo, who has reason to suspect him and reacts with the suggestion that they should discuss and investigate this event (2.3.128). Shakespeare may be telling James that he should act more like wise Banquo (his ancestor) than Macbeth. An Old Man even says that blessings go to those who would make "friends of foes" (2.4.41). In the end, Malcolm is better but still bloody, and there is hope that Banquo's children will rule more wisely and gently – especially in a land not quite so menacing as Scotland.

The weird sisters are ancient representatives of this land, personifying its harshness – they can control it to create disasters. They only meet during bad weather (1.1.1), "hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11), and "melted as breath into the wind" (1.3.81) – they are the

sinister aspect of the earth, killing swine, overturning ships, and causing insomnia (1.3.2-19); they can see "which grain will grow" (1.3.59) because they can see all of time. Lady Macbeth calls upon similar spirits to help her be cruel; "no compassionate feelings of nature shake my savage purpose" (1.5.46) – she wants to reach back to access an animalistic self beyond the rules of humans. She wants Macbeth to "look like the flower but be the serpent under it" (1.5.67), maybe reaching back to Satan, but also reaching to ancient human fears of snakes. Macbeth has reservations about the act because it would violate the rules of kinship and hospitality (1.7.12-16). Macbeth wonders if it is even human to do such a thing (1.7.46-50), and Lady Macbeth says they should be inhuman, using a military metaphor (1.7.60). It is possible that Lady Macbeth is so willing to do this because she has not seen the horrors of violence much before, while Macbeth has. (Later, when she is disturbed and sleepwalking, she says "who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" [5.1.43].) Even Macbeth, inured to violence, has to steel his body to go through with this act (1.7.80). Lady Macbeth says "You do unbend your noble strength to think so brainsickly of things" (2.2.45) – she does not favor reason getting in the way. However, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth soon suffer brainsickness from their actions – starting when Macbeth gets bad dreams (3.2.19) and says they are unsafe because they've divided their faces from their hearts (3.2.34); he calls on evil nature to help him be calm about his actions (3.2.49). Still, he no longer feels whole (3.4.23), and he sees the ghost of Banquo (3.4.39) as his civilization and manners disintegrate in front of his thanes. He says that "blood used to be shed here before human statute purged it" (3.4.77), but something has gone wrong. The play advises kings to have a healthy respect toward waging war: to not be desensitized, but to be wary.

The witches may manifest one aspect of the land, but the human characters repeatedly recognize their feelings in the natural world. The air is “foul and fair” to Macbeth, but King Duncan says, "The air is sweet" (1.6.1) since he thinks the situation is fine. When Duncan is murdered, "Some say, the earth was feverous and did shake" (2.3.62) – so the land appears to be harsh but sympathetic. But for now, Macduff says the land cries out in pain (4.3.5) and suffers (4.3.164), and when he hears of the murder of his family, he acts (4.3.255) and continues the bloodying of the earth. Macbeth does not fear his predicted doom because he thinks the land itself cannot rise against him (5.3.3). By the time he sees the wood coming toward him, he is sick and tired and ready to die (5.3.25). This is symbolic: he has gone so far that even nature is against him. He is reduced to "bearlike" (5.7.2) but summons up the effort to die fighting. Since the land seems so sympathetic, it is possible that within the magical world of the play, politeness and civilization could make the land good.

King Lear and *Macbeth* look at the relationship between people, power, and the land in places familiar yet intensified, teaching a modernizing England to throw off the tragic ways of the past.

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