

MICK JAGGER MACBETH

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With opening credits that announce the film as 'A Playboy Production', and list Hugh Hefner as Executive Producer, Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* is nothing if not a period piece. In his autobiography, *Roman*, by Polanski, Polanski recalls his creative collaboration with Kenneth Tynan (who also wrote for *Playboy*) in terms that situate it within the sybaritic world of the late sixties and early seventies. As they rehearsed the murder of Duncan in a Belgravia flat, with Tynan reclining on the bed and Polanski, as Macbeth, bent over him, an open window allowed their game to be witnessed by a clique of fascinated elderly residents who stared, 'trans-fixed, sherry glasses frozen in midair'.¹ Polanski concludes, 'they doubtless assumed that our actions were all part of the swinging London scene'. Along with its association with the international party crowd, Polanski's *Macbeth* was mired in controversy from its inception. While its graphic depiction of violence and nudity earned the film an 'X' rating before its release in autumn 1971, the grisly murder of Polanski's pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, by Charles Manson and his followers in August of 1969 made it impossible to view the film, and, in particular, its obsessive return to visual images of hanging and stabbing, without recalling the events of that terrible summer. Queried by Tynan about the amount of blood shed by the injured and dying bodies in the film, Polanski referred to his own experiences to authorize his directorial choices: 'You didn't see my house last summer. I know about bleeding.'²

Yet Polanski has complained about the extent to which critics fastened upon the obvious parallels

between life and art, insisting that the film must have served him with 'some cathartic purpose'.³ Indeed, many of Polanski's directorial choices seem to draw upon the Manson murders: the domestic space of the Macduff household 'surprised', and his 'wife and children savagely slaughtered' (4.3.206-7) is depicted in gruesome detail, with multiple dead

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¹ Roman Polanski, *Roman*, by Polanski (New York, 1984), p. 333.

² John Parker, *Polanski* (London, 1995), p. 178.

³ Polanski, *Roman*, p. 331.

Each critical discussion of Polanski's *Macbeth* calls attention, in some way, to the parallels. See Kenneth Rothwell, 'Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*: Golgotha Triumphant', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1 (1973), 71-5; Normand Berlin, 'Macbeth: Polanski and Shakespeare', *Literature/Film Quarterly* 1 (1973), 291-8; Jack J. Jorgens, *Shakespeare on Film* (Bloomington, 1977), pp. 161-74; William P. Shaw, 'Violence and Vision in Polanski's *Macbeth* and Brook's *Lear*', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 14 (1986), 211-13; E. Pearlman, 'Macbeth on Film: Politics', *Shakespeare Survey* 39 (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 67-74. Bryan Reynolds's article, 'Untimely Ripped: Mediating Witchcraft in Polanski and Shakespeare', in *The Reel Shakespeare: Alternative Cinema and Theory*, ed. Lisa S. Starks and Courtney Lehmann (Madison, 2002), pp. 143-64, compares the atmosphere of the Elizabethan/Jacobean witchtrials to the Manson murders.

bodies splayed in the hall.⁴ In an early scene, when a soldier on the battlefield nudges a body to check for life, the body squirms, and the soldier bludgeons it, just as the Manson murderers made sure that they did not leave behind any survivors.⁵ Particularly stunning is the extent to which specific events and lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* seem to apply directly to the Manson murders. For example, in each case, women are active participants in the violence: in *Macbeth*, the three witches' prophesy instigates Lady Macbeth's murderous plan, whereas the Manson murders were accomplished by three female members of the Manson 'family' and their lone male companion. Lady Macbeth's impulse to wash the blood from her hands was shared by Manson's followers, who tried to wash their own blood-stained hands with a garden hose; the observation, 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him' (5.1.34) was echoed by the testimony of the cult members at the trial. The idea of Macduff having been 'from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped' (5.10.15-16); and Malcolm's evocation of Scotland's political vulnerability 'each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds' (4.3.41-2), are eerily consistent with the horrifying fate of Sharon Tate.

As much as it represents a specific response to his own personal tragedy, Polanski's *Macbeth* offers a wide-ranging meditation upon the larger political and social events of the sixties, when events such as the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr and Robert Kennedy, the riots of 1968, and the Vietnam war brought a decade which had advocated racial tolerance, sexual liberation and civil rights to a violent, bloody conclusion. Dubbed 'the most distinguished cinematic version of the play' by A. R. Braunmuller, the editor of the New Cambridge *Macbeth*, Polanski's *Macbeth* explores the dark side of the combination of boundless individualism and a powerful sense of collective purpose that characterized the youth culture of the sixties.⁶ Polanski's relentless depiction of violence produces a kind of jaded nausea, through overexposure, that lends itself to a reading of the Macbeths as representatives of sixties optimism: supremely confident in their own moral superiority, but also the

unreflective instigators of an unexpected tragedy. In this respect, Polanski's *Macbeth* does more than hold a mirror up to the nature of sixties culture; it also offers a powerful, personal study of its excesses.

THE SEASON OF THE WITCH

Polanski had been eager to try his hand at Shakespeare ever since he was a student in acting school in postwar Krakow. The idea for a *Macbeth* film occurred to him while he was on the slopes of Gstaad, where he spent the winter of 1970 recovering from the murders in the company of martial arts actor Bruce Lee and an assortment of students from one of the local finishing schools. His batteries recharged by the promise of a new project, Polanski flew to London, holing up in the Belgravia flat with his friend Tynan (the producer of *Oh! Calcutta*, literary director of the National Theatre, and the first person ever to say 'fuck' on television). There they acted out scenes, dreamed up swordfights and produced the screenplay for *Macbeth*. What impressed Polanski most about Kenneth Tynan was his 'encyclopedic knowledge of Shakespeare and uncanny knack of extemporizing Shakespearian blank verse to fit any occasion'.⁷ Flying to Hollywood to promote the script, Polanski was introduced to Hefner by his friend Victor Lowndes, head of the British division of Playboy, Inc. As Polanski recalls, Hef 'flew in in his black bunny DC-9, with a retinue of girls and courtiers, played a lot of backgammon, and gave the go-ahead'.⁸

Polanski considered *Macbeth* fair game because he felt that the technical shortcomings of Orson Welles's 1948 film version of the play (which he described as 'a sort of universal sewer filled with

⁴ See *Macbeth*, ed. A. R. Braunmuller, The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge, 1997). All quotations from *Macbeth* are from this edition.

⁵ My sources on the Manson murders are Vincent Bugliosi with Curt Gentry, *Helter Skelter* (New York, 1974), and John Gilmore and Ron Kenner, *The Garbage People: The Trip to Helter-Skelter and Beyond* (Los Angeles, 1978, rpt. 1995).

⁶ See Braunmuller, *Macbeth*, p. 86.

⁷ Polanski, *Roman*, p. 332.

⁸ Polanski, *Roman*, p. 334.

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a bunch of incestuous warlocks'), and the artistic shortcomings of George Schaefer's 1961 version, left much to be desired.⁹ While landmark theatrical productions of *King Lear* in the forties and fifties starring John Gielgud, Alan Badel, Laurence Olivier and Donald Wolfit (among others), and culminating in Peter Brook's 1962 production with Paul Scofield, reflected overwhelming feelings of loss and destruction in the aftermath of World War Two, the moral ambiguities of *Macbeth* – with its topsy-turvy sense of 'fair is foul and foul is fair' (1.1.12), and its rapid movement from a spirit of possibility and entitlement to one of decadence and disillusionment – had more to say to the sixties generation. Thus, Polanski deliberately cast the Macbeths as 'young and good-looking – not, as in most stage productions, middle-aged and doom-laden'.¹⁰ Tynan defended their choice of Francesca Annis and Jon Finch, both in their twenties, with characteristic bluntness: 'It makes nonsense to have Macbeth and Lady Macbeth performed by 60 year-olds and menopausal. It's too late for them to be ambitious. Much more plausible for them to be young, sexy with their lives ahead.'¹¹ For both Polanski and Tynan, *Macbeth* is not the story of middle-aged aspirants seizing their last chance, but instead, of an untimely decline from starry-eyed youth to disillusioned maturity, the movement from high hopes and great expectations to jaded dissipation.

Annis was initially hesitant about accepting the part of Lady Macbeth: 'I thought Lady Macbeth should have been older, but Roman didn't have to do much arm-twisting to persuade me.' Finch, best known for his work in Hammer Studios horror films such as the lesbian-themed *The Vampire Lovers* and *The Horror of Frankenstein*, who was cast as Macbeth, bears an uncanny resemblance to Mick Jagger, lead singer of the Rolling Stones (see illustration 2).¹² Finch's Macbeth seems to draw particular inspiration from Turner, the autobiographical character Jagger plays in *Performance* (1970) directed by Nicholas Roeg and Donald Cammell (see illustration 3). Jagger is cast as a debauched rock-star who provides refuge to a gangster on the run (played by James Fox), giving



2 Jon Finch as Macbeth in Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971).

him a sartorial and sexual makeover. The film's examination of the theme of performance – the fluidity of gender and sexual identities, and the appeal of surfaces and the spectacle – pushed the buttons of many critics, who considered it a self-indulgent star vehicle. A key example of sixties theatricality, with its emphasis upon the performative quality of everyday life (or 'living theatre'), *Performance* was embraced by younger audiences, for whom it represented the cutting-edge of cool at a time when 'art films' were just beginning to reach the mainstream. As it charts, in a leisurely manner, the burnout and murder of its self-destructive hero,

⁹ See Roman Polanski, interview with Francis Wyndham, 'The Young Macbeth', *Sunday Times Magazine* 28 February 1971, pp. 16–19. For discussion of these versions, Michael Mullin, 'Macbeth on Film', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1 (1973), 332–42.

¹⁰ Polanski, *Roman*, p. 332.

¹¹ Mark Shivas, 'They're Young, They're in Love, They're the Macbeths', *New York Times*, 28 February 1971, Section D 13.

¹² He later starred in Alfred Hitchcock's *Frenzy* (1972).



3 Mick Jagger in Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg's *Performance* (1970).

Performance glamorizes the sixties mandate of peace and love as well as its more destructive aspects, thus anticipating Polanski's reading of Macbeth as a charismatic sixties anti-hero, abandoned to the pursuit of satisfaction.

Annis and Finch were unpopular with the critics. Although each was a seasoned actor (Annis had played Ophelia, Miranda and Juliet, and Finch augmented his B-movie career with appearances in upwards of fifty plays), many read their youth as inexperience. Pauline Kael found a lack of depth to their performances, complaining that 'the murder of Duncan does not change Macbeth or awaken anything in him', while a critic for the *Daily Mirror* dismissed Lady Macbeth as a mere 'spot-crazy Playboy bunny'.¹³ But this is precisely the point. As a study in the loss of the ideals of sixties youth culture, the film uses the twenty-something Macbeths to convey a sense of naivety, even superficiality, as opposed to corruption or even self-awareness. For Polanski, the choice was consistent with his personal theories about evil: 'people who do ghastly things in life, they are not grim, like a horror movie'.¹⁴ As with Mick Jagger's performance in *Performance*, the contrast between their youthful guises and their diabolical actions highlights the sense of moral disconnection from their actions. As Tynan observes (in words that could apply to the

sixties generation as a whole), 'they don't know they're involved in a tragedy; they think they're on the verge of a triumph predicted by the witches'.¹⁵ Accordingly, their murder of Duncan evokes the kind of Oedipalized struggles that motivated many of the anti-establishment activities of the sixties in the spirit of the credo, 'Never trust anyone over thirty'. The plan is presented by Lady Macbeth in a spirit of puckish mischief and, when she faces opposition, offended innocence that seems better suited to such harmless acts of civil disobedience as putting cut flowers in gun barrels. As the film progresses, and Annis becomes glassy-eyed and jittery, and Finch, with a more than a few days' beard, is hard-eyed and surly, Polanski reveals (as Duncan puts it) 'the mind's construction in the face' (1.4.12), dramatizing the extent to which the party is over.

If the film's casting supplied easily identifiable characters to its intended audience (those old enough to gain admittance to an X-rated film, and young enough not to be alienated by its affiliations with *Playboy*), its bleak, blank landscape places it firmly in the theatrical and critical avant-garde of the sixties. The 'grey, desolate muddy seashore, with heavy clouds hanging over it' which opens the film evokes the hopeless, miserable world of Samuel Beckett and absurdist drama.¹⁶ Polanski and Tynan came up with the ghastly detail of the severed hand in the first scene: the Blind Witch 'places the handle of the dagger in the palm of the severed hand, and tries to force the fingers to grasp it. Rigor mortis prevents her from succeeding.' This scene of ritualized violence establishes a

¹³ Pauline Kael, *Deeper into Movies* (Boston, 1972), p. 400 and Polanski, *Roman*, p. 297.

¹⁴ Polanski, 'The Young Macbeth', p. 19.

¹⁵ See Kathleen Tynan, *The Life of Kenneth Tynan* (London, 1987), p. 292.

¹⁶ *The Tragedy of Macbeth by William Shakespeare*. Screenplay by Roman Polanski and Kenneth Tynan (1970), p. 1.

On the three versions of the screenplay, see Bernice W. Kliman, 'Gleanings: the Residue of Difference in Scripts: the Case of Polanski's Macbeth', in *Shakespearean Illuminations. Essays in Honor of Marvin Rosenberg*, ed. Jay L. Halio and Hugh Richmond (Newark, 1998), pp. 130-46.

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continuity with Peter Brook's landmark production of *King Lear* at Stratford-upon-Avon: a production in which many critics located, and criticized, the influence of Jan Kott, the Polish intellectual whose controversial *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (1964) made waves in the scholarly community. As Kott argues, 'a reader or spectator in the mid-twentieth century . . . is not terrified – or, rather, not amazed – at Shakespeare's cruelty. He views the struggle for power and mutual slaughter of the characters far more calmly than did many generations of spectators and critics in the nineteenth century'.¹⁷ Finch's portrayal of Macbeth as morally vacuous and spiritually vacant is of a piece with Kott's sense that 'Macbeth has reached the limits of human experience. All he has left is contempt'.¹⁸ Like his countryman, Polanski obsessively lingers over violence, challenging the viewer to connect the violence in Shakespeare to the atrocities of twentieth-century history.

Polanski mines the play for every trace of violence. As Kott insists, 'a production of *Macbeth* not evoking a picture of the world flooded with blood, would inevitably be false'.¹⁹ Hangings are taking place in the background as we see Macbeth for the first time, fresh from battle. While the film eliminates so many of the vivid, lyrical speeches that distinguish the language of the play, it allows Polanski's trademark technique, voyeuristic set pieces without dialogue, to present an interpretation of *Macbeth* through the preponderance of action. Polanski adds to the violence that already exists in the play, actualizing events that are implicit in the text, but are either not part of its action or not explicitly mentioned. He adds a scene in which Cawdor ('nothing in his life / Became him like the leaving of it' (1.3.7–8)) is hanged, showing his feet dangling for a little while afterwards. The scene is preceded by a spectacularly Foucauldian moment in which the traitor is shown, hands cuffed, wearing an iron collar that secures him, with four chains emanating out from it, attached to iron rings embedded in the stone floor, creating a kind of 'X' shape. The murder of Duncan goes on at great length. The screenplay reads: 'After a long pause he slowly removes the coverlet from the KING's naked chest with the tip

of a dagger. Gently he extends the dagger towards the KING's heart, not touching the skin. He hesitates . . .'.²⁰ The scene concludes with Duncan awakening, which startles Macbeth into plunging the dagger repeatedly into his chest. Even Lady Macbeth has her moment: having evidently thrown herself from the balcony, her body is inspected by Macbeth and his attendants. It is as if Polanski wants to excavate every trace of violence in the play, in order to present the full story: while he does not wish to praise it, clearly, neither will he bury it. Instead, the desire to uncover and to foreground violence that is inchoate in what is already an extremely violent play seems to aim for a kind of exorcism: the audience witnesses these acts of violence directly in an effort to rid the play of it altogether, not through repression or excision but through exposure.

In the spirit of Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, Polanski makes the audience complicit in the film's violence by placing it in dialogue with apparent normalcy. Polanski's childhood memories of the Krakow ghetto inspired his direction of Macbeth's henchmen in the Macduff household: 'the SS officer had searched our room in the ghetto, swishing his riding crop to and fro, toying with my teddy bear, nonchalantly emptying out the hatbox full of forbidden bread'.²¹ Polanski locates the greatest terror in domestic details: the naked young Macduff in the bath emphasizes the fragility and vulnerability of the inhabitants, as the murderers chuck

¹⁷ *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, trans. Boleslaw Taborski (New York, 1964), p. 3. On the connections between Kott's and Polanski's work, and their Polish roots, see Per Serritslev Petersen, 'The Bloody Business of Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*: A Case Study of the Dynamics of Modern Shakespeare Appropriation', *Screen Shakespeare*, ed. Michael Skovmand (Aarhus, 1994), pp. 38–53. On Artaud, see Reynolds, 'Untimely Ripped'.

¹⁸ See Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 77.

¹⁹ See Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, p. 86.

²⁰ Polanski and Tynan, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, p. 27.

²¹ See Polanski, *Roman*, p. 291. See Herbert Eagle, 'Roman Polanski', in *Five Filmmakers: Tarkovsky, Forman, Polanski, Szabo, Makavejev*, ed. Daniel J. Goulding (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 92–155.

the pet falcon under the chin, smash the milk jug, and murder the little boy, the escalating violence accrues greater horror through its intrusion into the quotidian. By contrast, the final fight scenes, in which Macbeth kills a sequence of soldiers in hand-to-hand combat, before Macduff finally gets to him, possesses a two-dimensional, iterative, *Monty-Python-and-the-Holy-Grail*-esque quality. It is like reading Malory: one soldier is killed after the other, a variety of methods (dagger, sword, battleaxe, clubs) produce a myriad of flesh wounds, and the climax occurs only with Macbeth's beheading. The violence is unrepentant, unremarkable, and relentless, precisely because it seems so offhand and everyday. In both scenes, Polanski manipulates the tension between the violence and death, which take place at the outer limits of experience, and the mindset and frame of reference of the normal.

Polanski's use of violence participates in the rebellion, among his theatrical contemporaries, against the tendency in eighteenth and nineteenth-century productions of Shakespeare to minimize or overlook violence: a tendency which allowed Macbeth to be celebrated as a pathetic, tragic hero.²² Yet at the same time, Polanski's sharp sense of historical accuracy seems a throwback to the detail-driven antiquarianism of Charles Kean and his followers. Polanski and Tynan were not as concerned with avoiding what Brook called the 'operatic hangover' of nineteenth-century tradition. While they were filming in North Wales, Polanski shot medieval castles, costumes, and catapults with an almost Victorian fascination with historical accuracy. He had an enormous amount of trouble with the fireballs that are sent crashing into Dunsinane at the end of the film, which prompted him to dub his crew the 'special defects' team. Just as the Victorian stage used medieval history, filtered through Shakespeare, to dramatize the historical roots of English nationhood, Polanski locates, in the play's medieval Scottish setting, a resolutely contemporary sense of the godless universe. As with Peter Brook's 1971 *King Lear* (a film version of his stage production), Polanski's medieval setting uses furs and pelts, primitive wagons and enormous stone fireplaces to convey the sense of chill and isolation connoted by 'the

Dark Ages' that dovetails neatly with the absurdist void.

While Polanski's historicism, like that of Charles Kean, was effective at conveying an overarching visual sense of the Middle Ages, it left him vulnerable to criticism from scholars. Frank Kermode objected vociferously to the anachronism of Fleance's 'sad song of love', performed just before Duncan retires to bed. As Kermode argues, the lyric, entitled 'Merciles Beaute', was 'written by Chaucer for the court of Richard II three hundred years later, and in another country' (actually, the poem was not ascribed to Chaucer in the manuscript, and scholars continue to debate its authenticity).²³ Yet anachronism is hardly a valid criticism given Shakespeare's own presentation of history. And while a fourteenth-century lyric may be anachronistic for eleventh-century Scotland, it is a perfectly viable indicator of Shakespearian notions of the medieval: lyrics such as these were well-known to Shakespeare. The complexities of historicism aside, this medieval English lyric offers a poignant commentary on Macbeth's conundrum: as Fleance sings, 'Oh, your two eyes will slay me suddenly', he makes a complaint about ensnarement, even victimization by the beloved. Lines such as 'I may the beauty of them not sustain. / So pierceth it throughout my heart keen' offer a pithy commentary on Macbeth's manipulation by Lady M, as well as anticipate the murder which is about to take place. Lines from the lyric that the film does not include, such as 'For Daunger halt your mercy in his cheyne' and 'Giltles my deeth thus han ye me purchaced', shed thematic light on why Tynan may have thought of the lyric in the first place.²⁴

²² On the Victorian Shakespeare, see Richard Schoch, *Shakespeare's Victorian Stage* (Cambridge, 1998).

²³ Polanski and Tynan, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, p. 18. On the Chaucer lyric, see the *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Boston, 1987), p. 1090 and Frank Kermode, 'Shakespeare in the Movies', in *Film Theory and Film Criticism*, ed. Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen (New York, 1974), p. 326.

²⁴ *Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson, p. 659. I am citing the screenplay's modernized version of lines which appear in the film, and the *Riverside Chaucer* for those that do not.

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4 Francesca Annis as Lady Macbeth in Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971).

The film's self-conscious medievalism, from suits of armour to bearbaiting (a popular medieval sport also associated with the Elizabethan theatre, which Polanski uses to great effect to communicate the heartlessness of the Macbeths in the wake of their rise to prominence), extends beyond the desire for historical verisimilitude. Sixties medievalism, like that of its nineteenth-century predecessors, had as much to do with adaptation and appropriation as it did with acts of historical recovery. At the same time that medieval studies was offering scholars an opportunity to locate a system of solid structures of belief and community, as well as an alternative and antidote to the violence and misery of the

modern, the popular idea of the 'medieval' gave sixties culture a place on which to focus its aspirations for a kind of uncultivated, 'natural' simplicity, even innocence. Indeed, the sixties was the time of the genesis of the Society for Creative Anachronism (founded in Berkeley in 1966), of the worldwide medieval and Renaissance 'fayres', and of the recuperation of the traditions of medieval drama through performance of the Corpus Christi plays in Leeds, Toronto, York and elsewhere. The scene in which Lady Macbeth awaits the return of her husband recalls the visual conventions associated with Guenevere (see illustration 4). Similarly, the ludic performativity of the banquet scene, in which Lady

Macbeth, dressed in an ermine-trimmed gown with a veil and circlet, eats delicately with her hands, while surrounded by a court jester, minstrels, and sword-dancers, all in brightly-coloured, flowing clothes, playing period instruments, seems to have been inspired by the sixties musical *Camelot*: the Broadway hit that provided the soundtrack for the John F. Kennedy administration, and is frequently invoked in its memorialization.²⁵ The film's musical soundtrack is in keeping with the sixties spirit of popular medievalism, and with a vogue for traditional folk ballads and instruments represented by Donovan, Steeleye Span and Fairport Convention. Jagger and Richards were inspired by this trend in their love song to marijuana, *Lady Jane*, composed in what Keith Richards describes as 'Chaucer English', and using an Elizabethan-inspired melody and dulcimer.

In keeping with sixties discourse about Shakespeare, however, Polanski draws upon medieval culture only as far as it contributes to his own reading of the play, not hesitating to substitute a more contemporary sound or semiotic where necessary. Along with his academic and theatrical counterparts such as Kott and Joseph Papp, creator of the New York Shakespeare festival, Polanski's priority was to make *Macbeth* speak directly to the concerns and experience of his late twentieth-century audience. As Papp exhorts, 'If you have loved wisely but too well, if you have felt the unkindest cut of all, if you have held the mirror up to nature and asked what's in a name, you are thinking Shakespeare.'²⁶ Rather than appreciating the play as a piece of medieval history or as a Jacobean artifact, Polanski wanted his audience to relate *Macbeth* to their current preoccupations. Polanski justified his decision to present a young Macbeth not with reference to historical verisimilitude or authorial intention, but because he is 'easier for me to identify with' [italics my own].²⁷ The Third Ear Band, which composed the original music for the film, and which became popular with the release of their 1969 album, *Alchemy* (they also produced the soundtrack for a German television version of *Abelard and Heloise*) superimposes electronic instruments over hand drums, woodwinds and strings,

producing a hurdy-gurdy effect that is described by one critic as 'a baleful but strangely beautiful interweaving of modern and medieval music'.²⁸ When the situation calls for it, as in the murders of Duncan and Macbeth, the film's soundtrack dispenses with medievalism altogether, and adopts instead the qualities of contemporary aleatory or chance music, as in the work of John Cage, to express its themes of moral dissolution and disorder.

This interplay between historicism and contemporaneity is best illustrated by the film's portrayal of Lady Macbeth. Polanski's decision to depict the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth in the nude was ostensibly a gesture to authenticity (and theatre history). As Polanski observes, 'everyone slept naked in her day. The wearing of nightclothes was a social and theatrical convention, not least because women's parts in Shakespeare's time were played by young boys.'²⁹ *The Times*, brilliantly, declared her 'Lady MacBuff'. While we may applaud Polanski for his rejection of bourgeois convention in order to remain faithful to the historical realities of medieval culture and the early modern stage, the nude Lady Macbeth also illustrates the freedom with which Polanski moves between Shakespeare (and medieval Scotland), and personal and political

²⁵ The connection apparently started with Jacqueline Kennedy, who gave Theodore H. White an interview shortly after John F. Kennedy's assassination, in which she explained that the Kennedys would listen to the soundtrack on the Victrola each night before bed, and that Jack's favourite song concluded with the following lines: 'Don't let it be forgot / That once there was a spot / For one, brief, shining moment / That was known as Camelot'.

²⁶ See Helen Epstein, *Joseph Papp. An American Life* (Boston, 1994), p. 84. Kott makes a similar argument: 'by discovering in Shakespeare's plays problems that are relevant to our own time, modern audiences often, unexpectedly, find themselves near to the Elizabethans; or at least are in the position to understand them well'. See Kott, *Shakespeare*, p. 3.

²⁷ See Polanski, 'The Young Macbeth', p. 19.

²⁸ Their music for *Macbeth* was nominated for a BAFTA (though they lost to Nino Rota's score for *The Godfather*). The quotation is from critic Debora Thomas's citation for the award, quoted in: www.forcedexposure.com/artists/thirdearband.html.

²⁹ Polanski, *Roman*, p. 333.

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preoccupations that reflect the cusp period between the sixties and the seventies. When the film was released, Lady Macbeth's mad scene in which, as Polanski and Tynan ordain, 'she is naked', caused quite a stir.³⁰ Although the viewer is treated to little more than a bare bottom, it was this brief scene, as much as the endless violence, that instigated the film's 'X' rating.

If Lady Macbeth's nudity is true to history, it is also utterly co-existent with her status, throughout the film, as a kind of naughty-angelic 'bunny': Playboy underwrites the film in more than just the financial sense. Annis's handling of Macbeth in their first scene together, from her seductive delivery of 'O never shall sun that morrow see' (1.5.59-60); to the Stepford-wifely domestic competence exuded by 'leave all the rest to me' (72); to the tearfully girl-ish petulance of her subsequent 'When you durst do it, then you were a man' (1.7.49), offers an interpretation of the character as a perfect blend of the contradictions inherent in the Playboy *mythos*: the smiling acquiescence of the sex symbol, the persistent acceptance of helpful domesticity, and the transparent emotional manipulations of the *femme fatale*. Yet the nude Lady Macbeth would be as at home at a party at the Playboy Mansion as she would at a nudist beach: with her Lady Godiva-like hair and naturalistic pallor, we can imagine the naked Lady M in a sixties commune, her hand-wringing dementia the result of a bad trip.

Filtering the play's female characters through the lens of contemporary gender politics, Polanski removes all references to Lady Macbeth's motherhood ('I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me', 1.7.54-5). While Lady Macbeth's image of a murdered baby ('I would . . . / Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed his brains out' 1.7.56-9) may have given the grieving Polanski pause, its absence, along with the excision of such lines as 'Come to my woman's breasts / And take my milk for gall' (1.5.46-7), suggest how motherhood is at odds with the film's conception of her character. The physical realities of maternity and lactation contradict the Playboy vision of femininity: high voice, golden tresses, slender figure. If Lady

Macbeth represents one side of Swinging Sixties sexual liberation, the witches evoke its other side, offering an unappealing image of first-wave feminist sisterhood. The scene in which Macbeth visits the witches appears to contain hundreds of topless witches (though Polanski had a hard time finding extras for this scene, and had to rely on cardboard dummies). Although the witches seem as likely to be throwing their bras into the cauldron as newts' eyes, their opposition to the kind of conventional female behaviour displayed by Lady Macbeth does not extend to embracing hirsutism. Beards are as much at odds with the film's characterization of the witches as motherhood is with Lady Macbeth. While they may be 'so withered, and so wild' (1.3.38), and in another dimension entirely from Lady Macbeth's Guenevere-esque chic, the witches still don't get to have beards. Banquo does not get to speak the lines that convey a typically early modern confusion about the witches' gender: 'You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid to interpret / That you are so' (43-5). Contrary to the transvestite conventions of the Shakespearian stage, then, in Polanski's *Macbeth*, the women are *always* 'women'.

LADY MACDEATH

Polanski's *Macbeth* is a product of its time: a reflection of, and meditation upon, sixties culture and its dialogue with the past. Yet this is not to leave the Manson murders entirely out of the picture. For Polanski's personal tragedy was a potent symbol that heralded the end of the sixties. As Joan Didion recalls in her memoir, *The White Album*, 'Many people I know in Los Angeles believe that the Sixties ended abruptly on August 9, 1969, ended at the exact moment when word of the murders on Cielo Drive traveled like brushfire through the community, and in a sense this was true.'³¹ Richard Sylbert, the art director of *Rosemary's Baby*, reflects, 'You could hear the toilets flushing all

³⁰ Polanski and Tynan, *The Tragedy of Macbeth*, p. 71.

³¹ Joan Didion, *The White Album* (New York, 1979), p. 41.

over Beverly Hills. Everybody became Presbyterian. That marked the end of the fun and games of the 60s . . . it was the end of the joke.³²

As people tried to make sense of the carnage, Polanski's involvement with Satanism and the dark aspects of the occult was read almost as an incitation. As Didion puts it, 'black masses were imagined, and bad trips blamed. I remember all of the day's misinformation very clearly, and I also remember this, and I wish I did not: I remember that no one was surprised.'³³ Yet Polanski's films, such as *The Fearless Vampire Killers Or, Pardon Me But Your Teeth are in My Neck* (1967), a spoof on horror films complete with fake blood, bulbs of garlic and a haunted castle, and *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), in which the eponymous heroine is carrying the devil's child, were firmly tongue-in-cheek. They participated in, as well as poked fun at, the popular vogue for Satanism in sixties counterculture, ranging from albums such as the Rolling Stones' *Their Satanic Majesties Request*, and their song 'Sympathy for the Devil', to the goofy Gothicism of Billy Van's popular children's television show, *The Hilarious House of Frightenstein* (in which Vincent Price made a regular guest appearance), and from the feminist activism of WITCH (Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell), to the more sinister doings of the Hell's Angels and the Manson Family.³⁴ In fact, the three Manson girls who committed the murders 'had assumed new names and were known as witches'.³⁵ And, as Charles 'Tex' Watson claimed on the night of the murders, 'I am the Devil. I'm here to do the Devil's purpose.'

In its more benign form, sixties Satanism exhibited a playful kind of rejection of traditional structures of belief and categories of right and wrong prompted by the seriously cataclysmic events of the earlier part of the century. Polanski's personal experiences as a child, in wartime Krakow, living in the Jewish ghetto, his parents sent to concentration camps; his adolescence as a kind of abandoned street-child in the immediate post-war years; and his young adulthood in the repressive atmosphere of Communist Poland, gave him immediate, lived access to the violent extremes of twentieth-century

depravity – a subject which he explores more directly in his acclaimed recent film, *The Pianist* (2001). In his memoir, Polanski quotes a childhood friend on the subject of God: 'if there is a God, he's a rotten old whore who watched what went on at Auschwitz and Hiroshima – who watched say millions of innocent people murdered – and what kind of God is that? No, my friend, there isn't any God'.³⁶ A confirmed atheist, Polanski uses Satanism in *Rosemary's Baby* to poke fun at a mentality that looks to a higher supernatural power to explain mundane events. As Polanski reflects, 'I no more believed in Satan as evil incarnate than I believed in a personal god; the whole idea conflicted with my rational view of the world'.³⁷ Thus, *Rosemary's Baby* depicts the foolish credulity of Rosemary (played by Mia Farrow), a wide-eyed innocent who slowly interprets a series of stereotypical signs and portents to signify Satan's involvement in her pregnancy. The film sets the terms for the audiences not to believe her: it all seems a silly set of coincidences.

However, as *Rosemary's Baby* concludes, Rosemary was right. What appears, at first glance, to be a foolish delusion prompted by the hormonal fluctuations of pregnancy, suddenly turns deadly serious: the film concludes with a cameo by a real-life Satanist, Anton LaVey, Manson's former mentor and the self-designated Black Pope and head of the Church of Satan.³⁸ Polanski's *Macbeth* presents a similar sense of casual dabbling gone horribly wrong, and of its proximity to genuine malefactors.

³² See the New York State Writers Institute Film Notes, posted at: www.albany.edu/writers-inst/fns98n3.html

³³ Didion, *The White Album*, p. 42.

³⁴ For an interesting web site that develops the hypothesis that Mick Jagger is Satan, see www.spin.com/new/koolthing/recentkool.html.

³⁵ See Gilmore and Kenner, *The Garbage People*, p. 74.

³⁶ Polanski, *Roman*, p. 106.

³⁷ Polanski, *Roman*, p. 265.

³⁸ Note the confluence of Satanism with medievalism: Anton LaVey's Church of Satan uses a goat's head emblem associated with the Knights Templar, and Latin prayer that parodies Catholic liturgy: 'in nomine Dei nostri Satanias Luciferi excelsi'. See Parker, *Polanski*, p. 122.

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Macbeth's involvement with the witches gives him more than he bargained for. Like a neophyte involved in some kind of sixties cult, he is at first fascinated, and then mildly disgusted by them. Sitting around a fire, singing songs, spattered with folk-festival-esque mud, the witches evoke the earthy communalism of Manson's cult members that was, at the same time, shared by the harmless, idealistic, hippie fringe. Macbeth has no idea what he is getting into with the witches: but how was he to know? Yet their prophecy, with its rhetoric of personal freedom and possibility ('thou shalt be king hereafter' (1.3.48)), reaches something deep inside of him: you can do your own thing!³⁹ That it should involve rebellion against, and even replacement of, authority figures such as Duncan is even more intoxicating. Nevertheless, there is a particularly chilling quality about the youngest witch, played by Noelle Rimmington, who exudes a kind of dishevelled flower-child innocence, and spaced-out credulity, much in the manner of a Manson follower, like 'Suki' or 'Sadie Mae Glutz': she's the witch who suddenly flashes herself at Macbeth and Banquo, with a grotesque squawk. Things can go wrong very quickly.⁴⁰

As a detective working on the Manson case commented, 'this is weirder than *Rosemary's Baby*'.⁴¹ Yet Manson's followers had no knowledge of Polanski's work. While his films' depiction of the dark arts, and his personal involvement with a high-flying 'sex, drugs and rock'n'roll' lifestyle, gave the media ample material for pontification and sermonizing, Polanski had given the Manson 'family' absolutely no provocation. They didn't even know whom they had killed until they watched the reports on television. An aspiring folk musician and one-time minor celebrity, Manson was expecting the music producer Terry Melcher, Doris Day's son, who owned 10050 Cielo Drive, to be at home that night: Melcher had been introduced to Manson by Dennis Wilson of the Beach Boys, but he distanced himself from Manson soon after expressing a tepid interest in his music. Manson, angered by what he had perceived as a broken record contract, had left a bullet with a note attached at the doorstep of the Cielo Drive house a short time before. But Melcher

was out of town, and Polanski was partying with the Playboy crowd in London. Instead, that night, the house contained Sharon Tate, Polanski's wife and budding starlet (who starred in Polanski's *The Fearless Vampire Killers* and a film about witchcraft, *The Eye of the Devil*); Abigail Folger, a coffee heiress; her boyfriend, the Polish writer Voityek Frykowski; and Jay Sebring, hairdresser to the stars.

Manson was motivated more by professional resentment than by political or ideological principles. Terms such as 'pig', which he scrawled in blood on the walls of the house (or worse), borrowed from the Beatles' *White Album*, do not so much express a rejection of the star system as an indignant fury at having been rejected by it. Like Mark David Chapman, who shot John Lennon, Manson was resentful of the disconnect between the classic sixties rhetoric of free-form tolerance and equality ('anything goes', or, to avoid the anachronistic Cole Porter associations, 'let it all hang out') and the realities of the entertainment business, its economic bottom line, its enormous class divide between fans, groupies and celebrities, and its endorsement of an exclusive coterie of 'beautiful people'. Manson's list of future hits included Elizabeth Taylor, Frank Sinatra and Tom Jones. The language of anti-capitalism and anti-authoritarianism (expressed, by Chapman, in a Holden Caulfield-inspired hatred of 'phonies') thus provides only a flaccid pretext for a self-absorbed, Malvolio-like jealousy motivated by the sting of personal rejection. It wasn't that Manson wanted to reject hierarchy and achieve equality instead: he was just miffed that he wasn't on top. His ultimate goal was that the murders would incite a race riot that would result in the installation of an all-white elite.

³⁹ As Pearlman observes, 'Polanski has devised a population which is naively attractive (though violent and irreligious) but prey to a powerful and supernaturally sanctioned cult.' See 'Macbeth on Film', p. 70.

⁴⁰ As Polanski puts it, 'What I like is a realistic situation where things don't quite fit in', quoted in Jorgens, p. 170.

⁴¹ Barbara Learning, *Polanski: His Life and Film* (London, 1982), p. 71.

With his followers, he envisioned the day when he would rule the world, as a fifth angel, accompanied by the Beatles. Of course, the irony is that Charles Manson ultimately did succeed in becoming, however grotesquely, a 'star'.⁴²

As an unavoidable subtext of Polanski's *Macbeth*, the Manson murders invite reflections upon the paradoxes of sixties celebrity culture. Like John Lennon, or Mick Jagger, or even Polanski himself, Polanski's *Macbeth* is a kind of *enfant terrible*, achieving tremendous success, or 'star status', for the wrong reasons, and at a time when he is too immature to handle it. Kenneth Rothwell picks up on this aspect of the film when he describes it as 'cocksure'.⁴³ However, the conclusion of the ill-fated Rolling Stones concert at Altamont Raceway near San Francisco in December 1969 (an event which was seen, like the Manson murders a few months before, to herald the end of the 'Summer of Love') sheds light on why a self-proclaimed 'loser' such as Manson, unknown and untalented, may have felt so betrayed by his celebrity idols.⁴⁴ One of the many myths that swirled about this concert was that an audience member, Meredith Hunter, was stabbed to death by the Hell's Angels while the Stones played 'Sympathy for the Devil'. As the documentary *Gimme Shelter* depicts, the song was actually 'Under My Thumb' – perhaps equally appropriate, as it is a paean to male domination, female obedience, and, most importantly, the violent vindication of the resentful dismissed. As the song reveals, old habits die hard: while mayhem broke out in the crowds, and the Hell's Angels, who had been hired for security for the concert, used brutal and deadly means to attempt to keep them in check, a young black man was their victim. Manson hoped that the murders would instigate precisely this kind of racial violence. But this is the realm of the common man. Mick Jagger, in his long, beautiful, pink silk scarf, simply got into his helicopter with the rest of his band and flew away.

If Polanski's *Macbeth* charts the widespread disenchantment that took place at the end of the sixties, as idealistic hopes for personal freedom and positive collective action were answered by violence and

conspiracy, it also charts a more personal sense of disappointment. Polanski emigrated to America in the wake of the success of his 1962 film, *A Knife in the Water*, which received a 1963 Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Film. While the United States provided the backdrop to his professional triumphs, he was not an unreflective apologist for it. As Polanski recalls, 'prior to the murders, I'd never thought of hippies as potentially dangerous. On the contrary, I'd found them an attractive social phenomenon – one that had influenced us all and affected our outlook on life.'⁴⁵ His depiction of the witches, giving each other back-rubs and engaged in reciprocal grooming, makes them seem less-than-human, like monkeys or apes, and the scene in which *Macbeth* visits their overpopulated coven, suggests not only a kind of nausea about the perversion of hippie culture represented by the Mansons, but also a distaste for the collective.

Polanski's jaundiced attitude toward the continuum of sixties communalism – from hippies to feminists to murderous cult members – is consistent with his suspicion for collective initiatives of any sort (his right-wing sympathies ultimately led to a

⁴² As Gilmore observes, 'These killers are not so special as killers of humans. They just became famous from it. Others have killed but the chemical ingredients to make them stars just wasn't on the menu. We're in a "star system" and being a star is what it's all about. Jimmy Dean and Janis Joplin and Lenny Bruce became stars in other ways. Manson is a star.' See *The Garbage People*, iv.

⁴³ Kenneth Rothwell, 'Roman Polanski's *Macbeth*: Golgotha Triumphant', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 1 (1973), 71–5, p. 71.

⁴⁴ The following lines from Don Maclean's 'American Pie' have been interpreted as a reference to Altamont and the Stones's great escape: 'Oh, and there we were all in one place / A generation Lost in Space / With no time left to start again / So come on, Jack be nimble, Jack be quick / Jack Flash sat on a candlestick / 'Cause fire is the Devil's only friend / Oh, and as I watched him on the stage / My hands were clenched in fists of rage / No angel born in hell / Could break that Satan's spell / And as the planes climbed high into the night / To light the sacrificial rite / I saw Satan laughing with delight / The day the music died'.

⁴⁵ See Polanski, *Roman*, p. 323.

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falling-out with Tynan). His experiences in Communist Poland led him to despise even unions, suspecting them of seeking to limit individual freedom and talent. Thus it comes as no surprise that his *Macbeth* should present the sinister side of a prevailing sixties fantasy of a cooperative, communal lifestyle that expressed itself in a kind of nostalgia for a medieval 'deserted village', as it was precisely the sort of thing that Polanski loathed. While Polanski's *Macbeth* may be read, in this way, as a story of the devastating effects of a collective and its powers of suggestion upon Macbeth, it may also be taken as a kind of homage to Macbeth's own haphazard heroism, and his willing embracement, by the end of the film, of spectacular failure. It implies, as well, a sense of history that is peppered with geniuses, with individuals, and that celebrates the contributions of a name, a personality, instead of the progress of an identity-erasing collectivity. The film's extremely dark visual effects (it was filmed almost entirely using natural light, during an unusually wet Welsh autumn) owe more to Rembrandt, the virtuoso of the self-portrait, than to the kaleidoscopic decorations of the medieval altarpiece. Its rich black-and-brown palette is mitigated by the occasionally stunning tableau: Polanski's evocation of Lady Macbeth in the dagger scene and the mad scene, for example, seems to be a deliberate homage to the dazzlingly ghoulish paintings of Henry Fuseli: her wild, black-circled eyes and striking posture recalling the chiaroscuro effects of characterological paintings such as 'Lady Macbeth Sleepwalking' and 'Lady Macbeth Seizing the Daggers'.⁴⁶

Polanski's *Macbeth* reflects a series of sixties preoccupations – medievalism, folk music, hippies, the occult, B-movie horror flicks – that expressed and responded to a widespread sense of disorientation and disruption, not only in the aftermath of the Second World War, but also in response to the polarized mendacities of the fifties. Polanski mines the depths of violence in his Shakespearian source, and the highly charged theatricality that defines *Macbeth* (from crowd-pleasers such as the witches and the murders, to set pieces such as the daggers and Lady Macbeth's mad scene), to produce a

meditation upon the sixties, and upon sixties theatricality, after the end of the sixties had happened, one might say, to him personally. Through the sixties, television had broadcast war, sex, death, murder, even Tynan's paradigm-shifting 'fuck' into the nation's living rooms, and films and plays experimented with the idea that social life was to be played out before an audience (an idea confirmed by the current vogue for reality TV). Polanski's Kottian quest for an honest, unmediated Macbeth thus returns to the idea of performance that lies at the heart of sixties culture, exploring the limits of representation and of decency that were stretched when the most private and painful parts of his own life were lived, and scrutinized, in public.

Strenuously disavowed by Polanski himself, the connection between Manson and Polanski's *Macbeth* at the very least resists an easy one-to-one correlation. The film challenges the viewer to locate Manson and his followers not only in the witches, but also in Macbeth himself, just as it prompts us to view Macbeth as well as Macduff through the lens of Polanski's biography. Thus, Polanski's *Macbeth* resists any vision of order restored: in this film, there are no sides that remain untarnished. Polanski's *Macbeth* is unable to detach himself fully from his complicity with violence, and from its effects and final outcome. As the film closes, with Donalbain paying his own little visit to the witches, Polanski confirms that no one, not the bright young things, not the self-proclaimed agents of liberation and salvation, is a saint. Ultimately, the film's oblique yet essential connection to Polanski's personal history suggests that, regardless of the position that the historical players may or may not occupy in the film, it is impossible to adopt the position of the detached spectator, relishing the spectacle. It is no longer possible to dabble, to satirize, and to luxuriate in postmodern detachment. Nor is it

⁴⁶ While a full treatment of this subject lies outside the scope of this essay, the corpus of eighteenth and nineteenth-century paintings of *Macbeth* had a major influence on Polanski and Tynan's visual conception of the play.

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possible to laugh with the gods at human credulity, and to undermine recklessly the strong and stark distinctions between good and evil. Polanski's subsequent films, from *Tess* (1979) through *The Pianist*, achieve an increasingly psychological sense of personal responsibility and individual ethics. His is

a filmic universe in which witches are not just a campy convention: they exist, they are malevolent, and they offer bad advice. And so it is necessary to take individual action. This is because, for Polanski, the real evil isn't out there: it is in the weak and impressionable human heart and soul.