

Appetite and Ambition: The Influence of Hunger in *Macbeth*

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Abstract: This article examines the prevalence of food and food-related imagery in *Macbeth*, arguing that the severe anxiety about the provision of food that affected a large proportion of the population of early modern England has a profound influence on the play. It surfaces first in the brief encounter between the weird sisters and the sailor's wife in 1.3 – an episode which depicts hunger and deprivation overtly – and re-emerges in the language of the noble characters, who, though they do not suffer such an obvious shortage of food themselves, nevertheless express their desires, fears and ambitions through the language of eating, suggesting that during Macbeth's tyrannical reign – despite the appearance of plenty that the banquets imply – food supply might be precarious for all social strata. Thus food becomes, in *Macbeth*, universal shorthand for all that is significant, reflecting the fundamental place it occupied in the minds of early modern people: a centrality that has perhaps been lost to modern western society where food is plentiful and easily obtained.



“What moved the masses most in the societies of five or three hundred years ago? [...] It was, above all, hunger, and the urgent need to relieve it through food.” Roy Porter¹

Macbeth is not a play obviously associated with hunger. Think of *Macbeth* in relation to food, and the celebrated banquet scenes immediately spring to mind. An expression of prosperity and plenty, the banquet

became synonymous with excess, especially in England at the time *Macbeth* was first performed.² Chris Meads suggests that:

Food, its abundance and the consumption of it, seemed to gain the English a reputation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Eating, the skill of cooking, and the virtue of hospitality were highly regarded both at home and abroad [...]. Negotiating the fine line between the virtue of hospitality and the vice of gluttony is anxiously explored in a variety of texts [...]³

Hospitality expressed through food is central to *Macbeth*, with the hero first hosting a feast to celebrate Duncan's victory over the rebels and later attempting to cement his own kingship through the banquet at which Banquo's ghost makes its unwelcome appearance. Yet despite the play's affluent setting, and the apparent abundance of food available to its noble characters, a subtle undercurrent of fear of scarcity and privation and an obsession with food and food culture run through the play. This thread of anxiety over the provision of food is forcefully and immediately present in the characters of the weird sisters, and their often-overlooked dealings with the largely invisible low-status people who lurk at the periphery of the play, but it also manifests unexpectedly in the language of the noble characters for whom lack of food would not seem to be an immediate concern.

Diane Purkiss has argued that *Macbeth* uses the characters of the weird sisters only to highlight the national and political concerns of the play: "Shakespeare could only find significance in the stories of village witchcraft if they became signs of events in the public sphere; failure to churn butter or the death of a child hardly matters unless it signifies something about where Scotland stands."⁴ However, I contend that the references to food shortages and hunger that characterise the weird sisters' brief appearance in 1.3 are integral to the meaning of the play, and that what Purkiss characterises as, "events in the public sphere," are dependent upon and intimately connected to the more prosaic concerns of food provision represented by stories of village witchcraft. In other words, where Scotland stands politically hardly matters unless the butter churns and its people are well-fed. Examining how concern about food operates on all levels in *Macbeth*, this paper argues that provision of food – a very real and pressing concern at lower levels of society during the early modern period – becomes for *Macbeth's* noble characters the symbolic focus of all their hopes, anxieties, and fears. In *Macbeth* metaphorical hunger (ambition or desire) is as strongly associated with food as physical hunger

(appetite), along with the accompanying disruptions of war, civil strife, and tyrannical rule, is directly linked to food crises.

HUNGER AND WITCHCRAFT

The following brief and seemingly tangential episode introduces the spectre of hunger to *Macbeth*:

1 *Witch*: Where hast thou been sister?
 2 *Witch*: Killing swine.
 3 *Witch*: Sister, where thou?
 1 *Witch*: A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
 And mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd: 'Give me,'
 quoth I:
 'Aroynt thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries.
(*Mac.* 1.3.1-6)⁵

Superficially, this exchange merely sets the scene for Macbeth's subsequent meeting with the sisters, indicating their malevolence and capacity for disruption. Examined closely, however, several aspects of this incident suggest hunger and deprivation in both 1 *Witch* and the sailor's wife. The witch depicts the sailor's wife as an archetype of greed and indulgence: gorging herself on chestnuts. Yet this interpretation may well be misleading, since chestnuts were often a food of the very poor, relied upon when other crops had failed, as Diane Purkiss notes: "The witch asks for food and is rudely refused. The food she asks for is a staple diet of the poor; bread was sometimes made with chestnut flour when wheat was scarce."⁶ Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, quoting Charles Estienne and Jean Liébault's *L'agriculture et maison rustique* (1583), also stresses the chestnut's association with scarcity, stating that in "the sixteenth century, we discover that 'an infinity of people live on nothing else but this fruit' [the chestnut]."⁷ Yet despite the connection between chestnuts and poverty, the witch describes this sailor's wife as a "rump-fed ronyon." Defined in the *O.E.D.*, "Ronyon," is "a fat bulky woman," with "rump-fed," implying either that she is fed on rump steak or literally that her rump is well-fed.⁸ Both interpretations imply gluttony and excess in the sailor's wife, as does the witch's almost hypnotically repetitive insistence that the women "mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd." Given the woman's status as a sailor's wife and the connotations of poverty and dearth attached to chestnuts, it is unlikely that she is overfed or indulging to excess. Perhaps, the witch interprets the woman as fat because she herself is even poorer

and crucially hungrier than the sailor's wife. If so, the witch's "Give me" may not merely be an uncouth demand but also a desperate cry for sustenance, directed at a poor woman by one who is even more deprived.⁹ The hospitality that is to be displayed in the Act 1, scene 7 banquet, where plentiful food is offered by Macbeth's household to the King and all the thanes, is here foreshadowed by its opposite: in the world of the witches and the sailor's wife, food is not generously offered but urgently demanded and angrily refused. Yet the civil unrest prompted by the Thane of Cawdor's rebellion, which allows Macbeth to excel on the battlefield and ultimately results in the celebratory banquet of 1.7, may also be partly responsible for the hunger experience by the witch and the Sailor's Wife, since war was a leading cause of famine in medieval and early modern Europe. Mack P. Holt describes how, during the French Wars of Religion, "rural peasants unprotected by city walls found themselves the easiest target for pillaging troops. But the seizure of livestock not only meant that they might be unable to bring in their harvest or replant the following year, it also reduced the fertilization of what crops they were able to continue to harvest."¹⁰ It is likely that the original audience of *Macbeth* would understand the connection between war and food scarcity all too well, although it is perhaps less immediately obvious to modern readers and spectators.

Indeed, seventeenth-century theatre-goers would not have had to look as far afield as France to see the frightening reality of dearth, nor its relationship to civil unrest, for when *Macbeth* was first performed the English agrarian crisis of the 1590s was still vividly within living memory for playwright and audience alike. During this decade food shortages gripped the country: Joan Thirsk describes how "the autumn of 1594 brought a disastrous harvest failure, and this was but the first of a series of four. The subsistence farmer was quickly reduced to abject helpless misery; he could not feed his family, let alone pay his rent."¹¹ The capital was by no means exempt from feeling the pinch of hunger during this time, as Peter Clark argues: "In London the seasonal pattern of deaths in 1597 [...] points to starvation as an important causal factor of the high mortality."¹² The pressure of these food shortages, accompanied by the associated rise in the price of grains and other foodstuffs, led to riots and disorder in London in 1595, an episode that Buchanan Sharp calls "one of the most serious social crises of Shakespeare's own lifetime."¹³ The impression that this period of want and uncertainty must have made on the inhabitants of the city should not be underestimated, and it is clear that the original audience of *Macbeth* would have been aware of the many examples – at home and abroad – of hunger and food-shortages both causing and resulting from exactly the kind of conflict and civil unrest which occurs throughout the play.

It is not only the civil unrest experienced by *Macbeth's* Scotland that has resonances with hunger: the presence of the three "witches" also strongly indicates the importance of this theme in the play. Piero Camporesi stresses a connection between witchcraft and lack of food – "the relationship between witchcraft, undernourishment and hunger goes without saying" – and describes how a Lombardy doctor, Girolamo Cardano (1501-1576), identified the difficulty of distinguishing between a poor and hungry old woman, and a witch:

There are these little women, wretched, living in valleys on herbs and wild vegetables [...] So, being decidedly thin, deformed, with eyes discharging, pale, and rather indistinct, with their black bile and melancholy they display a strange intuition. They are taciturn and dazed, and they hardly differ from those who are thought to be possessed by the devil; fixed in their thoughts ...What is affecting them, however, is the sickness of black bile, plus the getting of food, lack of money [...]¹⁴

Cardano's description of the malnourished woman who is thought to be a witch, or who thinks herself a witch, correlates with Banquo's description of the weird sisters in *Macbeth*:

"What are these,
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th'inhabitants of the earth,
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question? You seem to understand me,
By each at once her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips [...]" (1.3.39-45)

Where Cardano's description calls the women "thin" and "deformed," Banquo's assertion that the weird sisters are "wither'd" and "wild," with "skinny lips" conveys the same sense of decay and ill-health. It would be reductive to suggest that the weird sister's "powers" are necessarily hallucinatory: the product of poverty and malnutrition; yet, whether we believe in the witches or not, clearly witchcraft and anxiety about food are inescapably related.¹⁵

Macbeth's weird sister's desire for food reflects real-life accounts of suspected witchcraft in early modern English villages, as Purkiss argues:

In shaping their stories of witchcraft, women focused on an encounter with the suspected women involving either an exchange, usually of food or food-related items, or a failed exchange of food, or

sometimes merely a discussion about food [...]. Food is therefore a constant theme in depositions of witchcraft.¹⁶

The altercation between the weird sister and the sailor's wife in *Macbeth* certainly involves a failed exchange of food. If, as Purkiss suggests, tension over food was at the heart of many witchcraft accusations, it may be the weird sister's demand for the chestnuts, as much as her wild and ragged appearance, that marks her out as a "witch" in the eyes of the sailor's wife. Alan Macfarlane documents the connection between accusations of witchcraft and hunger in sixteenth-century Essex:

one type of behaviour seems to have been common to all of them [the accused]. This was begging, combined with grumbling or cursing when they were refused. For example, Mother Cunny asked a neighbour for some drink, but 'his wife being busie and abrewing, tolde her she had no leysure to give her any. Then Joane Cunnye went away discontented.' Next day her refuser was in terrible pain.¹⁷

If food is a constant theme in depositions of witchcraft it is because food was a constant source of concern and worry in early modern lives, and especially in the lives of women, who were overwhelmingly responsible for food preparation.¹⁸ It is perhaps apt that these concerns remain marginal and implicit in *Macbeth*, for they remained so in the records of the time: just as *Macbeth* foregrounds the feasting and banqueting of the nobles while the undercurrent of hunger and want represented by the witches and their victims exists on the periphery of the drama, so in historical accounts the situation of the poor was also suppressed, as Stephen Mennell explains:

The celebrated banquets of the Middle Ages and Renaissance, known to us from literary sources like Rabelais and from numerous documents throughout Europe, give a misleading image of typical eating in that period [...] the well-chronicled feasts are symptomatic of the period only in that there was often little to chronicle below this level, and the great mass of people were lucky to be eating much at all.¹⁹

In stark contrast to the popular image of the gluttonous Renaissance banquet, overindulgence was the exception rather than the rule, and, although England did not suffer as badly from famine as continental Europe, Keith Thomas reminds us that "in the seventeenth century [...] it was rare, but certainly not unknown, for men to die in the streets from starvation or exposure."²⁰ With food supplies precarious and the line between survival and famine tenuous, it is little wonder that witchcraft

was often blamed for otherwise inexplicable but devastating occurrences such as the failure of crops or the death of livestock. *Macbeth's* second witch's admission that she has been "killing swine" accords with the image of the witch as a woman who destroyed the livestock of her neighbours and left them facing hunger (1.3.2). Yet, as my reading of the exchange between *Macbeth's* witch and the sailor's wife suggests, anxiety about food is not limited to victims of witchcraft, but it also manifests in the witch herself. Purkiss argues that the prominence of food in witches' confessions suggests that a shortage or absence of sufficient food in the women's real life was compensated for by imagined feasts and banquets:

in the few English confessions involving accounts of the [devil's] Sabbath, food is more central to events than sex [...]. However the devils' feast is duplicitous, since 'they were never the fuller or better for the same' [...]. [F]antasies of abundant diabolic feasts [...] represented a nurturance absent from the witch's environment.²¹

In fact, these "fantasies of diabolic feasts," though they seem to mark the witch as transgressive and anomalous, are comparable to the dreams and fantasies of plentiful food that seem to have sustained the wider population in times of hardship. Massimo Montanari argues that "The best cure for the fear of hunger lay in dreams: dreams of tranquillity and a full stomach, of abundance and overindulgence; a dream of the land of Cuccagna [Cockaigne or Lubberland in English accounts] where the supply of food was inexhaustible and readily available."²² What emerges is a thread of commonality between 'witches' and their accusers. The beliefs and actions of both groups seem to have been motivated – at least in part – by fear of hunger and the desire for sufficient food, which was not often readily available. It is possible to read these tensions in *Macbeth* in *1Witch's* demand for chestnuts and the sailor's wife's accusatory "Aroynt thee, witch!" (1.3.6).

FOOD AS POWER

The witches' brief appearance in 1.3 evokes an image of women, themselves hungry and malnourished, who interfere with the food supplies of a rural population that remains largely invisible in the noble world of *Macbeth*. This image seems to reproduce, in miniature, the larger and more obvious preoccupation with food that surfaces in real-life accounts of witchcraft from the early modern period, in which, as Thomas argues, "many of the accused persons [...] 'were women in the habit of

going from house to house, and from door to door for a pot of milk, yeast, drink, pottage, or some such relief, without which they could hardly live.'"²³ Diane Purkiss highlights the lack of attention she feels Shakespeare pays to such concerns, arguing that while the weird sisters' appearance makes brief reference to the wider concerns of food production and subsistence that occupied the minds of early modern village women, on the whole such concerns are subordinated to and subsumed by the wider 'male' story of *Macbeth*. For Purkiss, in *Macbeth* the primary female concern (appetite and provision of food) is eclipsed by the primary male concern (ambition):

The reference [to killing swine] is so brief that any reading feels like overexpansion. Witches attacked pigs in village stories, but here those stories are condensed into a single gesture [...] the last thing that is conjured up here is a domestic animal, a plump porker on which a family might depend for winter protein [...]. In *Macbeth* women's stories are put to work as part of the more grandiose male narrative of the play [...]. [W]hat was rich, complex and coherent in the stories of village women is reduced to signs of vague disorder here.²⁴

Yet the reference to "killing swine," albeit brief, serves no purpose other than to situate the witches and their victims in a context of want and deprivation that would be instantly recognisable to contemporary audiences, and while the "more grandiose male narrative of the play" is indeed concerned with power and ambition, I will argue that these concepts are inextricably connected with food and food provision in the early modern period, and that concern about these issues pervades *Macbeth* at every social level. Referring specifically to the medieval period, but making a point that can be applied just as pertinently to the early modern, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that

In our industrialized corner of the globe, where food supplies do not fail, we scarcely notice grain or milk, ever present supports of life, and yearn rather after money or sexual favours as symbols of power and of success [whereas] food was, in medieval Europe, a fundamental economic – and religious – concern.²⁵

In fact, what Purkiss calls the "grandiose male narrative" of *Macbeth* is itself concerned with, and more importantly expressed through, language and imagery of food, and the simple, physical need for food, is not as unconnected from the more complex intellectual and spiritual desire for

power as it might seem. Meads argues, "Revenge and greedy ambition are made analogous with appetite in banquet scenes, or within plays containing them [...] the Latin root of 'appetite,' *petere* – to seek to obtain, to seek to attain – renders the association appropriate."²⁶ The witch's appetite-driven demand "Give me!" finds a parallel in Macbeth's ambition-driven desire for the crown (1.3.5). As I argue below, the pervasive early modern concern with hunger penetrates even the nobles in *Macbeth*, and despite Massimo Montanari's assertion that "Real hunger was unknown to the privileged classes, but not the fear of it," Shakespeare's play suggests that, because of Macbeth's usurpation and the unrest and tyranny that follow it, even for the nobles, "real hunger" may only be kept at bay by the narrowest of margins.²⁷

To understand how appetite and ambition are inextricably connected in *Macbeth*, the significance of food in the lives of early modern nobility must be understood. As Roy Porter argues, "Eating well was more important than being rich, famous, or of high status – conspicuous food consumption in fact stood as proof of all these attributes."²⁸ It is significant, then, that Macbeth's attempt to consolidate and cement his position as king is dramatised in the pivotal banquet scene of 3.4, rather than through his coronation, which is not staged. The coronation marks the symbolic transference of power onto the new king, but it is the hosting of the feast – proving his ability to provide abundance of food for himself and his followers, demonstrating that he, unlike the lowly Sailor's wife, is in a position to be bountiful – that will mark him as a truly powerful leader. As Meads notes, "The newly crowned Macbeth is anxious to consolidate his power, privately by arranging the murder of Banquo and Fleance, and publicly by visibly defining it to his courtiers in terms of a formal banquet."²⁹ The significance of monarchs feasting and banqueting in public is emphasised by King James VI's *Basilikon Doron*, a manual in the art of kingship written for his eldest son: "'It is meet and honourable,' James advises Henry, for the king 'to eate publickly' to 'eshew the opinion that yee love not to haunte companie, which is one of the markes of a Tyrant.'"³⁰ Macbeth seems keen to avoid such accusations, assuring his courtiers that it is only "To make society the sweeter welcome" that he "will keep [himself] til supper-time alone," and then, at the banquet itself, underlining his eagerness to sit amongst them: "Ourself will mingle with society, / And play the humble host" (3.1.42-43, 3.4.3-4). Tellingly, Banquo's ghost interrupts the banquet and the necessary display of kingly joviality never takes place. As with the earlier banquet, when Lady Macbeth scolded her husband for deserting the company – "[Duncan] has almost supp'd. Why have you left the table?" (1.7.29) – Macbeth displays his inability to sit and eat with his fellows. His murderous actions have set him apart from other

men, and he can no longer partake of, what Dyson calls, the “harmony, fellowship and union” of which “banquets and feasting are traditional symbols.”³¹

Yet food extends its influence beyond the public show of the banquet and permeates more private moments of the play. Macbeth not only uses feasting to signify power and authority, he also seems to equate it with personal security and comfort. Disturbed and guilt-ridden in the moments after Duncan’s murder, Macbeth despairs that he has “murther’d sleep” (2.2.41). Yet in his ravings, sleep metamorphoses into that other essential of life, food, to become, “chief nourisher in life’s feast” (2.2.39). Intriguingly, Macbeth figures sleep as the most important component of life – more crucial, we infer, than food itself – and yet he can only express its importance, and his desolation at its perceived loss, through the language of food and nourishment. Later, when he feels his security and self-assurance threatened by the existence of Banquo and Fleance, Macbeth once again turns to images of food to express his unease:

“We have scorch'd the snake, not kill'd it:
She'll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice
Remains in danger of her former tooth.
But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams [...]” (3.2.13-18)

Sufficient sustenance and the ability to eat in peace seem to be the figurative benchmarks by which Macbeth measures his success, security, comfort, and happiness. The man who earlier craved power at the expense of all other things, who expressed his readiness to “jump the life to come” if he could only have the crown, is perhaps beginning to realise the value of less prestigious, but more fundamental assets (1.7.7).

Interestingly, Macbeth’s enemies employ almost identical language when expressing their wish for the return to order and calm that Macbeth’s downfall will bring. Discussing Macduff’s plan to rouse Malcolm to reclaim his throne, an anonymous Lord conveys his hope:

“That, by the help of these – with Him above
To ratify the work – we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
Do faithful homage and receive free honours:
All which we pine for now [...]” (3.6.32-37)

Macbeth and this Lord have utterly opposite hopes and ambitions, yet they articulate these conflicting hopes in the same terms: feasting and sleeping. Food unites these opposed characters, becoming universal shorthand for security, comfort, order and peacefulness. These noble characters may not feel the shortage of food to the same degree as the rural poor represented by the witch and the sailor's wife. They do not dream the hungry peasant's dream of the land of Cockaigne, where "the earth, no longer worked, miraculously produces pre-cooked foods; the trees do not toss down buds and leaves, but hams and clothes; the animals, their own butchers, spontaneously roast themselves for the comfort of men's stomachs."³² Yet the Lord's longing to "again / Give to our tables meat" suggests that even the aristocracy may be feeling a degree of scarcity under Macbeth and that they certainly fear the dearth and want that typically accompanies tyranny and civil unrest.

GLUTTONY AND TYRRANY

Food is so prevalent in this play that it is striking to find the sin of gluttony notably absent from Malcolm's list of self-confessed vices in 4.3.³³ Malcolm tells the horrified Macduff that he is incontinently lustful, desperately avaricious, and utterly lacking in

"Justice Verity, Temp'rance, Stableness,
Bounty, Perseverance, Mercy, Lowliness,
Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude." (4.2.92-94)

Nowhere does he specifically mention gluttony, yet the language in which his lust and avarice are described is steeped in images of eating. When confronted with Malcolm's confession of lust, Macduff replies "We have willing dames enough", and expresses disbelief that Malcolm can possibly have "That vulture in you, to devour so many / As will to greatness dedicate themselves," invoking an image of perverted eating – scavenging on carcasses – to convey his distaste (4.3.73-75). Again, when describing his avarice, Malcolm turns to images of appetite and over-eating to convey the extent of his vice:

"Were I king,
I should cut off the nobles for their lands;
Desire his jewels, and this other's house:
And my more having would be as a sauce
To make me hunger more [...]" (4.3.78-82)

Malcolm's invocation of greed as a metaphor for economic acquisition is in accordance with contemporary discourses which link famine and tyranny. Writing when the food crisis of the 1590s was at its peak, Sir Hugh Plat, the author of *Sundrie New and Artificiall Remedies Against Famine* (1596), complained vehemently about "base & unmerciful lordes" or "covetous and vnmercifull Lords" who raised grain prices on whims in order to increase their revenues, demanding "why should rich men feast when the poore are ready to famish?"³⁴ Malcolm's (false) depiction of himself as a tyrant who would swallow up his subjects' means of survival also recalls the anonymous Lord's earlier complaint that, under Macbeth's rule, he is unable to put sufficient meat on his table. It reminds us that Macbeth is truly the kind of ruler that Malcolm only pretends to be: a tyrant who, despite his attempts to put on a display of bounty and abundance through banquets, is certain to inflict scarcity and want on his subjects, high and low status alike.

Gluttony, therefore, becomes almost an unspoken über-vice in 4.3: images of excessive and uncontrolled eating are the means by which Malcolm inspires revulsion and horror in Macduff. In this respect, the world of the nobles might indeed seem far removed from the world of the witches and the sailor's wife, for, as Bynum comments, "The possibility of over-eating [...] was a mark of privilege, of aristocratic or patrician status."³⁵ Yet although, as Montanari argues, during the early modern period "the area of social privilege and political power was ever more glaringly opposed to the world of hunger and fear," it is clear that in *Macbeth* the line between these two spheres is by no means clearly drawn.³⁶ In the minds of the noble characters, the world of hunger and fear informs, and encroaches on, their experience of political power and privilege, compelling them to express their most deeply felt hopes, anxieties, and fears through reference to food.

"LIKE A HELL-BROTH BOIL AND BUBBLE": BAD FOOD

Food not only signifies comfort, security, and power for the nobles in *Macbeth* but also emerges in a recurring theme of 'bad' or adulterated food and of perverted acts of food preparation and nurturing. After their first encounter with the weird sisters, Banquo wonders to Macbeth,

"Were such things here as we do speak about?
Or have we eaten on the insane root
That takes the reason prisoner?" (1.3.83-85)

His first thought is that the witches are a hallucination produced by the ingestion of a mind-altering substance. This uncertainty highlights the double-edged power of food, resonating with the theme of disorienting doubling and equivocation that dominates the play. Mankind must eat; it is essential to wellbeing and survival. Yet, to ingest food is to make oneself vulnerable to its influence and to accidental or deliberate poisoning. Macbeth's fear of divine retribution for Duncan's murder is expressed through the metaphor of poisoning:

"This even handed justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice
to our own lips." (1.7.10-12)

And an amalgamation of the poisoned chalice and the loss of reason feared by Macbeth and Banquo is inflicted on Duncan's unlucky grooms when Lady Macbeth drugs "their possets" in order that she and her husband can commit the murder for which the grooms will be blamed (2.2.8).³⁷ It is fitting that it is Lady Macbeth who drugs the grooms, since women's role as preparers of food often resulted in suspicion:

cooking was so much a woman's role that it appeared, to men, not merely arcane but threatening. When medieval men projected their hostility toward women into suspicion of what went on in the women's quarters, they frequently spoke of women's control of food. Men suspected women (especially wives) of manipulating them by adding potions or poisons to their meals.³⁸

Lady Macbeth's drugging of the grooms not only resonates with this idea of female food-manipulation, but it also connects her with her social opposites, the weird sisters, prefiguring in miniature the more shocking and potent travesty of food-preparation they perpetrate when they create in their cauldron the "hell-broth" that will bring forth the apparitions that foretell Macbeth's downfall (4.1.19).³⁹ With this act, the weird sisters perform an inversion of 'natural' housewifery. They reverse the traditional female role, which is to prepare wholesome meals to nourish children, and instead prepare an unnatural, inedible concoction that brings forth ghostly visions of children who herald for Macbeth, not growth or prosperity, but destruction and decay.⁴⁰ This strong association between nourishment and children is felt once again earlier in *Macbeth*, when Lady Macbeth's avows to her husband that she would "have pluck'd [her] nipple" from the "boneless gums" of her nursing babe, "and dash'd the brains out" rather than go back on her word, as she believes Macbeth has done (1.7.57-58). It

is no coincidence that her fantasised infanticide takes place while the infant is nursing, for this act epitomises the mother-child bond and the responsibility of the mother to nourish and protect the vulnerable baby. That Lady Macbeth imagines transforming the giving of sustenance – and therefore life – into violence and death, underscores her terrible resolve. When Lady Macbeth wishes to emphasise the need for cold-hearted resolution, she does so by articulating a perversion of maternal instinct, turning an act of nurturance into an act of destruction. When an agitated Macbeth longs for the sense of personal security he feels he has forfeited, he does so in terms of eating meals in peace. When he strives to express how his own brutality has left him numb and desensitized to feelings of terror, he says he has “supp’d full with horrors,” suggesting that he has consumed, and indeed become consumed with, visions and acts of terror, until – in a terrible literalization of the adage “you are what you eat” – he has become, himself, a “horror” (5.5.13). Food imagery accompanies almost every expression of passion in this play: repeatedly and insistently, characters turn to images of food and feeding to articulate their charged states of mind, reflecting the centrality of food-provision to all aspect of early modern life.

This association of food with success is nowhere more apparent than in Macbeth’s final desperate appearances. In 5.5, confronted with both mortal and metaphysical opposition and lashing out at his followers and enemies alike, Macbeth refers to the idea of *famine* twice in quick succession. The ever-present idea of scarcity, which has simmered just below the surface of the play thus far – implied, but not made explicit – now takes centre-stage. Faced with the approach of the armies of Malcolm and his allies, Macbeth encourages his followers with the assurance that

“Our castle’s strength
Will laugh a siege to scorn: here let them lie,
Till famine and the ague eat them up.” (5.2.2-4)

A mere 40 lines later, he threatens his own messenger – who tells him Birnam Wood is moving – with the same fate:

“If thou speak’st false,
Upon the next tree shalt thou hang alive,
Till famine cling thee: if thy speech be sooth,
I care not if thou dost for me as much.” (5.5.38-41)

It is fitting that in his darkest moments Macbeth figures famine as the harshest punishment, for throughout the play he has expressed his wishes

for security in terms of food and feasting. His forecast that famine and ague will “eat up” the enemy force is particularly fascinating, since it mingles an image of starvation with one of ravenous consumption. Famine is personified as the devourer of the hungry, and those who have nothing to eat become food themselves, while Macbeth’s assertion that he “care[s] not” if he himself starves indicates the extent to which his experience of violence and tyranny have left him devoid of natural human feelings. For an early modern audience, familiar with the ever-present anxiety over bad harvests, soaring grain prices, and the resultant dearth, such a dismissive attitude to the possibility of starvation must indeed have signified Macbeth’s inhumanity, and supported his assertion that he has “forgot the taste of fears” (5.5.9).

CONCLUSION

Macbeth appears to present two opposed worlds of food: the prominent world of the rich, characterised by banqueting and feasting; and the briefly glimpsed, hunger-driven world of the witches and the sailor’s wife, characterised by privation and the desperate desire to protect what small stocks of food are available. Yet the parallels between the weird sisters and Lady Macbeth and the obsession with food that seems to underlie the language of Macbeth and the Scottish lords demonstrate that these worlds are not as separate as they appear. While, as Purkiss argues, the “grandiose” narrative of *Macbeth* is indeed concerned with ambition, power, and success, this narrative does not swallow up the concerns of the poor. Rather the fear of hunger endured by the largely hidden poor encroaches upon the world of the nobles, shaping their reactions and experiences. The nobles seem acutely aware of the freedom plentiful food gives them and of the precariousness of the plenty they enjoy. Food and imagery of eating, therefore, come to underlie expressions of desire, fear, anxiety and hope in the play. Transcending social and gender divides, food becomes in *Macbeth* a symbol of unifying significance: sufficient food allows the pursuit of other aims and ambitions, while insufficient food renders all other concerns meaningless and superfluous. If the nobles in *Macbeth* are not a part of the “masses” described by Roy Porter as moved “above all [by] hunger, and the urgent need to relieve it through food,” they are, at least, acutely aware of, and afraid of, hunger’s power, a power that must have resonated with *Macbeth*’s early modern audience. This audience who would themselves remember periods of dearth all too well and surely lived in fear of future food shortages.

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¹ Roy Porter, "Preface" to Piero Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe*. Trans. David Gentilcore (Oxford: Polity, 1989), 8.

² Although *Macbeth* is set in medieval Scotland, like most of Shakespeare's dramas it relies heavily upon seventeenth-century English assumptions and conventions. For example, while the play acknowledges that medieval Scotland operated a system of elected monarchy or 'tanistry' (see 1.4.37 where Duncan "establish[es] [his] estate" upon Malcolm), both the play's emphasis on patrilineage and references in later acts to Malcolm's "due of birth" (3.6.25) rely on an early modern English audience's belief that patrilineal inherited monarchy is sacrosanct and that Macbeth has not only committed regicide but usurped the throne from the king's eldest son. However, while it largely appeals to contemporary English concerns, *Macbeth* also exploits popular stereotypes of Scotland with which its original audience would have been familiar, particularly the assertion, found in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, that the Scots were "a nation greatlie bent to that horrible practise [of witchcraft]." Raphael Holinshed, *The first and*

second volumes of *Chronicles* comprising 1 *The description and historie of England*, 2 *The description and historie of Ireland*, 3 *The description and historie of Scotland: first collected and published by Raphaell Holinshed, William Harrison, and others: now newlie augmented and continued (with manifold matters of singular note and worthie memorie) to the yeare 1586. by Iohn Hooker aliàs Vowell Gent and others. With conuenient tables at the end of these volumes* (London: Henry Denham, 1587), 37.

³ Chris Meads, *Banquets Set Forth: Banqueting in English Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 13.

⁴ Diane Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations* (London: Routledge, 1996), 209.

⁵ All quotations taken from William Shakespeare, *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, ed. by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan. 3rd series (Thomas Nelson and Sons: Walton-on-Thames, 1998).

⁶ Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, 209.

⁷ Antoinette Fauve-Chamoux, "Chestnuts," in *The Cambridge World History of Food*, vol.1, ed. Kenneth F. Kiple and Kriemhild Conee Ornelas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 359.

⁸ See the Oxford English Dictionary Online, under "runnion".

⁹ Keith Thomas argues that witchcraft accusations in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were overwhelmingly the result of conflicts "not between the rich and the very poor, but between the fairly poor and the very poor" *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), 564. A situation similar to that between the witch and the sailor's wife can be found in Dekker, Ford and Rowley, *The Witch of Edmonton*, ed. Arthur F Kinney (London: A&C Black, 1998). In this play, Old Banks calls Elizabeth Sawyer a witch when he discovers her collecting firewood on his land: "OLD BANKS: Out, out upon thee, witch. SAWYER: Dost call me witch? OLD BANKS: I do, witch, I do. [...] What makest thou upon my ground? SAWYER: Gather a few rotten sticks to warm me" (2.1.17-20). Although the dispute is here over a demand for firewood rather than food, the scenario is analogous to that in *Macbeth*, and both Elizabeth Sawyer and Old Banks are poor characters of low social status, as, I suggest, are the witch and the Sailor's wife.

¹⁰ Mack P. Holt, *The French Wars of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 199.

¹¹ Joan Thirsk, "Enclosing and Engrossing," in *The Agrarian History of England and Wales 1500-1640*, ed. Joan Thirsk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 228.

¹² Peter Clark, "A Crisis Contained? The Condition of English Towns in the 1590s," in *The European Crisis of the 1590s: Essays in Comparative History*, 47 (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985).

¹³ Buchanan Sharp, "Shakespeare's *Coriolanus* and the Crisis of the 1590s," in *Law and Authority in Early Modern England*, ed. Buchanan Sharp and Mark Charles Fissel (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2007), 36.

¹⁴ Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe*, 125. Cardano's account refers to Italy, but English witchcraft suspects seem, by and large, to have also fitted this description. Referring to sixteenth and seventeenth-century England, Keith Thomas says, "deterioration in the position of the dependent and elderly helps to explain why witches were primarily women, and probably old ones, many of them widowed. 'They are usually such as are destitute of friends, bowed down with years, laden with infirmities', said a contemporary. Their names appear among witchcraft indictments, just as they do among the recipients of parochial relief. For they were the persons most dependent upon neighbourly support." (562-3).

¹⁵ Diane Purkiss, in her study of witchcraft insists that "one thing we and the other characters can be sure of is that the witches are *witches* and not simply odd old women." Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, 210.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 96.

¹⁷ Alan Macfarlane, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England: A Regional and Comparative Study* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 159.

¹⁸ See Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, 96.

¹⁹ Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food*. 2nd edition (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996), 22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 25. Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 6.

²¹ Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, 137.

²² Massimo Montanari, *The Culture of Food*. Translated by Carl Ipson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 94.

²³ Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, 555, quoting R. Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584).

²⁴ Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth-Century Representations*, 209-10.

²⁵ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (London: University of California Press, 1987), 1-2.

²⁶ Meads, *Banquets Set Forth: Banqueting in English Renaissance Drama*, 32.

²⁷ Montanari, *The Culture of Food*, 96.

²⁸ Porter in Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe*, 9.

²⁹ Meads, *Banquets Set Forth: Banqueting in English Renaissance Drama*, 144.

³⁰ Quoted in Carol Chillington Rutter, *Shakespeare and Child's Play: Performing Lost Boys on Stage and Screen* (London: Routledge, 2007), 231, n. 43.

³¹ J.P. Dyson, "The Structural Function of the Banquet in *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 14 (1963), 371.

³² Camporesi, *Bread of Dreams: Food and Fantasy in Early Modern Europe*, 80.

³³ This omission is particularly striking since Holinshed reports that Scotland was renowned for gluttony: "in Scotland likewise they haue giuen themslues [...] vnto verie ample and large diet, wherein as for some respect nature dooth make them equall with vs: so otherwise they far exceed vs in ouer much and distemperate gormandize, and so ingrosse their bodies that diuerse of them do often become vnapt to anie other purpose than to spend their times in large tabling and bellie cheer" (Holinshed, *Chronicles*, 165).

³⁴ *Sundrie New and Artificiall remedies against Famine*, written by H.P. Esq. uppon thoccasion of this present Dearth. (Printed by P.S. dwelling on Breadstreet hill, at the signe of the Starre. 1596), A2 verso and A3. Accessed through *Early English Books Online*.

³⁵ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 2.

³⁶ Montanari, *The Culture of Food*, 94.

³⁷ A posset is a warm drink of spiced or sweetened milk curdled with alcohol. As Joan Fitzpatrick comments, "it is fitting that Lady Macbeth, who wanted her own milk replaced with gall, should provide a milk-based beverage whose potentially health-giving properties are inverted." Joan Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Dietaries and the Plays* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 54.

³⁸ Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women*, 190.

³⁹ It is worth noting that many of the items in the cauldron listed during the Second Witch's incantation – snake, newt, toad, blindworm, dog's tongue – (4.1.12-19), are very similar to those found in an account of the foodstuffs to which the starving citizens of Paris resorted during the siege of 1590. In this account, translated and circulated in England, the anonymous writer describes how "the flesh of Horses, Asses, Dogges, Cats, Rats, Mice, Weasels, became daintie dishes at gentlemens tables, [...] then our queasie stomachs began to be contented with anything, were it a frying

panne full of frogs, a dish of snailes, or a Skellett full of garden wormes.” Later he describes how the citizens subsisted on flies and beetles, and finally dug up bones from churchyards, and ground them up to make bread. Thus while the witches’ “hell-broth” clearly signifies a perversion of natural housewifery, it also adds to the sense that these characters are suffering from food depravation, since it resonates with accounts of starvation circulating in England in the decade before *Macbeth* was first performed. See Anon., *The coppie of a letter sent into England by a gentleman, from the towne of Saint Denis in France Wherein is truely set forth the good successe of the Kings Maiesties forces against the Leaguers and the Prince of Parmas power. With the taking of a conuoie of victuals sent by the enemie to succour Paris. And the grieuous estate of the said citie at this present.*, Imprinted at London: By Thomas Scarlet for Thomas Nelson, 1590, 17-20. Accessed through *Early English Books Online*.

⁴⁰ Joan Fitzpatrick makes the interesting suggestion that the witches’ incantation “double double” may allude to double-double beer, an exceptionally strong, twice boiled beer, the effects of which were so threatening to public order that Elizabeth I ordered the cessation of its production. She further suggests that this interpretation figures the weird sisters as female brewers, or “brewsters”, women who had a reputation for producing polluted beer and cheating their customers. See Fitzpatrick, *Food in Shakespeare: Early Modern Dietaries and the Plays*, 49-51. Such a reading aligns the witches yet more strongly with Lady Macbeth as women who pervert food-preparation. It also emphasises the domestic, familiar aspect of these characters: alongside the horrifying and exotic ingredients the witches add to their “hell-broth,” the reference to “double double” beer might conjure up, for the seventeenth-century audience, an image of womanhood recognisable from English village life.