"Here's a knocking indeed!": *Macbeth* and the *Harrowing of Hell*

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Knock. Knock. Who's there? In the *Harrowing of Hell* scenes of English mystery plays, the answer to that question was no joke. The *Harrowing* marks the climax of the battle between God and Satan for the fate of humanity. Following the crucifixion, Christ descends into Hell and lays siege to its battlements in order to "harrow," or plunder, the souls in Limbo.[1] More than forty years ago, Glynne Wickham noted that Shakespeare's play relies upon his audience's familiarity with mystery drama and that *Macbeth* draws from the dialogue, action, and setting of *Harrowing of Hell* pageants.[2] Wickham's research set an important precedent. Scholars like Michael O'Connell, Helen Cooper, and Beatrice Groves, for example, have made important claims about the histrionic conventions and incarnational aesthetics that Shakespeare inherited from the mystery plays like the *Harrowing*.[3]

This essay, though clearly indebted to Wickham's scholarship and sympathetic to O'Connell and others, makes a different claim: I argue that a sound effect borrowed from mystery drama catalyzes dialogue and action in a Shakespeare play. The knocking at the gate of Inverness castle prompts the Porter of *Macbeth* to tell jokes and ask questions in the manner of traditional devil-porter behavior in the mysteries. The re-creation of a sound from an outlawed stage tradition brings the pre-Reformation theatrical past into the present. It is, therefore, not a neutral dramaturgical choice, but a potentially subversive bit of stage business that has two important implications for Shakespeare's play. First, by inviting but then denying affinities with Christ's climactic battle with Satan, the Porter scene exposes the inadequacy of Jacobean political theology. When Wickham's essay was published, it joined John Harcourt's "I Pray You, Remember the Porter" (1961) in arguing that Shakespeare, pressured by royal patronage, wrote *Macbeth* in support of James' views on kingship and godly rule.[4] Much recent scholarship, however, has stressed the play's potential involvement in resistance theory.[5] My own contribution to this critical conversation will be to suggest that the Porter scene, once the cornerstone of pro-Jacobean readings of Macbeth's reign as an "awful parenthesis," is in fact an elaborate joke that undermines the Crown's claims to sacred authority. Second, by borrowing from the superseded dramaturgy of the Old Faith's plays, the Porter scene mocks religious opponents of the London playhouses. At the time that *Macbeth* was being performed, antitheatricalists like the Protestant preacher William Crashaw were calling upon James I to extirpate "the vngodly Playes and Enterludes so rife in this nation."[6] Critics of the theater condemned the public stages as the theatrical progeny of popish mystery drama, and I want to suggest that the knocking at the gates provokes and unprovokes such desires to link commercial drama with its Catholic antecedents.

Asserting an acoustic link between Shakespeare and the mysteries is important for broader methodological reasons as well. As Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda have noted, literary criticism has long positioned Shakespeare as the "peerless representative of a transcendent dramatic literature . . . [that] disdains vulgar physical

accoutrements."[7] Following their work, as well as the indispensible collection *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, I want to argue that we further strive to see Shakespeare as "a *playwright*, a craftsman who, like a shipwright or cartwright, fashions his material for practical use."[8] A playwright not only crafts words but also joins them to stage materials: costumes, properties, actors' bodies and voices—and sound effects. Sounds are not objects in the traditional sense of material culture studies, yet it may be helpful to think about the acoustic affinity between *Macbeth* and the *Harrowing* in terms of material stage properties—as if Shakespeare borrowed an aural prop, rather than a Hell-mouth or devil's costume, to momentarily suggest the setting of Hell. Shakespeare is also the peerless representative of Renaissance literature. This present study of the knocking in *Macbeth* aims to unsettle that casual periodization—and corresponding assumptions about the relative superiority of the Renaissance author over the medieval object.[9] That is not to suggest that we read *Macbeth* as a seventeenth-century mystery or morality play for, as we'll see, the play confounds attempts to do so. Rather, I wish to contribute to a growing body of scholarship that is attempting to address what O'Connell has called the "almost general disinclination" to see the mystery plays as having any relationship to the professional London stage.[10] In doing so, I want to suggest that material pieces from the mystery plays gave shape—and sound—to the joinery of Shakespeare's theatrical works.

Hearing and Remembering

Bruce Smith's recent work in *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* explores how early modern audiences experienced sound—both inside and outside the Globe theater. According to Smith, sound and other extra-verbal aspects of drama require us to adopt a more expansive approach to Shakespeare's plays than textual study has traditionally permitted. His "historical phenomenology" therefore aims to situate the study of human hearing in the historical context of Elizabethan-Jacobean England.[11] How, in other words, did Shakespeare's audiences experience sound, and how did they understand it? Two aspects of Smith's study are important for this discussion: first, both sound and memory were viewed as material remnants of past experience, and second, extra-verbal sounds were often crucial to a Globe performance. With regard to the former, late-sixteenth- and early-seventeenth-century studies of the brain's faculties understood memory as a "densely material" trace of speech. As Smith explains, "early modern physiology invited people to think of their memory as something physical and graphic: a trace of the brain tissues that could practically be seen and touched."[12] Renaissance theorists of memory drew upon the writings of Plato and Aristotle which compared human memory to wax that retains the impression of a seal or other object no longer present.[13] According to Smith, this material understanding of memory implies that the brain must re-create the experience of hearing a word when it recalls that word and transforms it into a sound. "Because words have semantic meanings," he writes, "we forget that they also encode bodily experience—at the very least the expulsion of air, the adjustments of muscle, the shaping of tongue that it takes to pronounce those words." And so, "memory transforms air waves into embodied action. It *re*members sound in vari-

ous parts of the human body: in the other ventricles of the brain, in the ears, in the hands, in the eyes, in the body as a kinaesthetic whole."[14]

Like the human body, the London playhouses were "instruments for producing, shaping, and propagating sound." Smith's study notes that the "wooden beams, plaster over lath, and wooden boards over joists" effectively transformed the stage into a "gigantic sounding board." Far from being acoustically restrictive, the 1599 Globe "offered a volumetric listening space per auditor that actually surpasses that of modern theaters."[15] Sound effects were therefore often crucial to an early modern audience's experience of a play. As Smith shows with regard to the thunder heard during the opening scenes of *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*, plays had "soundscapes" or auditory fields that were often purposefully defined at the outset of the play.[16] Yet the Globe, I want to suggest, not only produced, shaped, and propagated sound— it *re*membered it. The opening peal of thunder "through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11) surrounding the weird sisters and the hellish pounding din we hear later at the Porter's "Hell gate" were, as we'll see, prominent features in the soundscape of *Harrowing of Hell* plays.[17] In fact, the noises produced on or behind the stage were so similar to the older plays—and so familiar to audiences—as to allow the professional theater to play upon the previous significance and context of these sounds. The clown playing the Porter of Macbeth's castle does just that.

A History of Hard Knocks

"Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key" (2.3.1-2). When the actor playing the Porter enters saying these words, he is alone onstage. There is no dialogue that prompts him to compare himself to a devil guarding Hell's gates. There is only a noise—which the 1623 First Folio records as a stage direction repeated ten times—*Knocke within.*—and which the Porter himself repeatedly mimics.[18] It is that knocking, too, that would have encouraged the audience to play along with his imagination. They have heard, as the Porter has not, Macbeth's final line in the previous scene: "Wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou couldst" (2.2.72). After the Reformation, as before, a knock that could wake the dead from their sleep in a dark castle recalled the popular apocryphal legend of Christ's *Descensus ad Infernos*. Christians in Europe and England had been reading about—and enacting—the legendary knocking of the *Descensus* for centuries. As David Mills explains, the story excerpted from the *Gospel of Nicodemus* came to the pageants of the late medieval mysteries via the "standard lections of the Church," such as the *Legenda Aurea* and *A Stanzaic Life of Christ*.[19] The *Nicodemus* account, moreover, turns on the famous *Tollite portas* verse from Psalm 23 [AV 24]: "Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lift up, ye everlasting doors; and the King of Glory shall come in."[20] The command is spoken with a "hideous" voice like thunder ("A voice spak þan full hydusly, / Als it war thonours blast"), before finally "Ihesus strake so fast, / þe yhates in sonder yhede / And Iren bandes all brast."[21]

The *Harrowing* plays in York, Chester, Townley, and N-town repeat the *Tollite portas* or similar lines as many as three times, with the gates crashing down on the

final injunction. The gates of Hell cannot prevail and, as Clifford Davidson notes, the knocking of Anima Christi therefore becomes central to the play—because of it, guildsmen were obliged to construct a Hell-mouth with gates that would appear to collapse.[22] The Chester Cooks, for example, constructed a huge bestial maw tall enough to contain gates and a "dungeon" emitting smoke and sulphurous stench.[23] Mystery play adaptations of the *Descensus ad Infernos* from the *Gospel of Nicodemus* and other sources also reproduce the hideous "thonours blast" that accompanies Christ's approach to Hell's gate. A stage direction in the Chester play calls for great clamor and noise: "*Tunc venit Jesus et fiat clamor, vel sonitous magnus materialis.*"[24] The precise meaning of the "material noise" remains a crux for scholars. Wickham interprets this stage direction as "trumpets and knocking." Mills is less specific in his translation: "Then Jesus shall come, and there shall be a cry, or a great physical din." Richard Rastall points out that if the word "materialis" is a noun, rather than an adjective, then it's quite possible that the stage direction is telling the Cooks who are performing the play to make "a great sound of material," namely by banging together the pots and pans of their trade. This interpretation, says Rastall, activates a medieval conceptualization of Hell that "we understand only imperfectly: the idea of Hell as a kitchen."[25] Whether kitchen or torture chamber, Hell is confusion's masterpiece, and yet the devils in the *Harrowing of Hell* are, like Macbeth, appalled by noise: "How is't with me when every noise appals me?" (2.2.56). They cannot abide either the knocking or the commotion it arouses among their prisoners. In the Chester play, the din at the gates prompts Sathanas to cry, "Owt, alas, what is this?" (161). In York, the pounding precipitates further noises as the devil-porter Rebalde runs to warn Belsabub of the great commotion among the souls in Limbo:

> I Diabolus. What, heris thou nouȝt þis vggely noyse?
> Þes lurdans [wretches] þat in Lymbo dwelle,
> Þei make menyng of many joies
> And musteres grete mirthe þame emell. (101-04)[26]

The Wakefield Sathanas, much like Shakespeare's Porter, mockingly imitates the repeated knocking he hears, commanding his devils not to be abashed ("abaste") by Christ's presence and to "ding," or knock, "that dastard downe!"[27] Roaring "Owte, harrowe!" the York demons raise a clamor of their own. Yelling, complaining, and mimicry of the knocking were commonplaces among devils in the *Harrowing*, and so it is fitting that Macbeth's Porter should act in a similar manner.

In his study of the prolonged stage career of devils before and after the Reformation, John D. Cox explains that "one reason devils endured was that the material base of culture changed very little throughout the time they were popular: the slow pace of economic and technological change meant that costumes and the materials for assembling them remained the same."[28] Shakespeare's stage, in fact, utilized many of the same technologies as the mysteries, including those used to make thunderous noises. In 1584, a man named "starche" was paid "to make the storme in the pagente" for the Coventry Doomsday and Destruction of the World play. Perhaps Starche made use of the "baryll for the yerthe quake" listed in the records and was aided by

"Christofer Dyglyne . . . [with] hys ij drummes."[29] As for the London playhouses, Andrew Gurr states, "thunder came from the 'roul'd bullet' on a sheet of metal, or a 'tempestuous drum.'"[30] If the drum or barrel were pounded steadily, rather than "tempestuously," it might have produced the kind of din that irritates the Porter ("Knock, knock. Never at quiet." [2.3.15]), not to mention Macbeth ("Whence is that knocking?" [2.2.55])—the noise evidently so loud that he can't tell where it's coming from. Indeed, if Smith is correct, the Globe's architecture and building materials would have propagated the sound all through the theater: "As a twenty-sided polygon, the Globe provided plenty of reflective surfaces."[31] Macduff's response to Macbeth's prompt entrance ("Our knocking has awaked him" [2.3.38]) would then seem as humorous as it is ironic. Who *wouldn't* have been awakened?

Remembering and *Re*membering the Porter

Using similar dramaturgical technologies to create thunderous sound effects, *Macbeth* reproduces the knocking of the *Harrowing of Hell*. What must be emphasized, however, is that Shakespeare adapts and transforms these acoustic sounds without entirely emptying out the knocking of its previous signification.[32] Rather, past theatrical material is brought into the present *as past material*. "Sound in early modern theater," Smith writes, "is important not so much for what it *is* as for what it *signifies*. What audiences actually heard in the theater and what they *imagined* they heard may not always have been the same thing." Drawing from Stephen Handel's work on sound perception, he notes three distinct levels of sound experience. The audience would first of all have perceived certain *physical* phenomena (the noise of trumpets, hautboys, and drums, for instance) as well as elusive *perceptual* phenomena conveyed by these physical sounds ("brightness" in the trumpet, for example, or "pointedness" in the hautboys). Most important for our study of the knocking in *Macbeth* is what Smith describes as "certain imaginative phenomena" that a sound effect, musical instrument, or an actor's speech can "invite" the audience to hear. "By a process of metonymy," Smith explains, "what the audience hears, in the last analysis, is not just physical properties of sound, nor even psychological effects, but the acoustic equivalent of a visual scene—an 'aura,' perhaps."[33] Brass instruments, he suggests, might aurally create a royal or "power scene" while those same instruments coupled with drums and gunfire might suggest combat. I am suggesting that Hell, too, had an "aural scene" that Shakespeare's audience would readily have recognized from its experience of provincial mystery drama.[34] As Helen Cooper explains, the levels of population migration to London in the late-sixteenth and early-seventeenth centuries meant that "the dominant living theatrical experience of the childhood and youth of a large number of the playgoers would have been the cycle plays." "Playgoers who came from anywhere near Coventry," Cooper further argues, "would have a distinct advantage when it came to recognizing the porter of *Macbeth*" because of their firsthand knowledge of the famous devil-porter in that *Harrowing* play.[35] Hamlet's warning to the players not to overact like the figure of Herod (3.2.12) and the description of Master Slender's "Cain-coloured beard" in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1.4.20) are two verbal references to the theatrical prac-

tices of the mysteries that likewise presuppose audience familiarity with this banned dramatic form.[36] Applying Smith's analysis of sound phenomena in the Globe to the knocking at Macbeth's castle gate, we might say that the acoustics of the Porter scene are temporally ambivalent or double. The audience hears a "perceptual" knocking that it associates with the present action of the play, presumably the arrival of one of the play's characters at the gate. Simultaneously, they experience an "imaginative" knocking or "acoustic equivalent of a visual scene" that would have resonated with the *Harrowing* plays of the recent past. Thus, as the walls of the Globe and the listeners' ears and brains *re*member the physical phenomena of the knocking, they are also remembering the aura of Hell from the mysteries.

The actor playing the Porter further encourages this dramatic remembrance. He opens the gate with the request that Macduff pay him for his services: "I pray you remember the Porter" (2.3.20). The line is often delivered so as to amuse the audience with the clown's sudden politeness and propriety. I'd like to consider the possibility that the Porter addresses this line to the audience. Certainly it was not unusual for stage devils to interrupt the action of the play—particularly at crucial moments— to ask for money from the audience.[37] But what if the Porter is not begging but simply putting the question to them: "Do you remember the porter?," that is, "Do you recall the devil-porters of the Old Faith plays whom I have just imitated?" Wickham first explored this possibility by noting that the Porter's request "is in two worlds at once; that of Macbeth's castle and that of another scene from another play [namely, the *Harrowing of Hell*] which has just been recalled for the audience and which the author wants them to remember."[38] The Porter scene derives much of its power—and its comedy—from its temporal ambivalence. As Harris notes regarding the sulphurous squibs used in the play, "*Macbeth* is temporally double, evoking a past-in-the-present."[39] Cued by the sound of knocking, the Porter performs a bit of old devil-porter behavior from the mysteries. He doesn't simply answer the gate, he "devil-porters" the gate by telling jokes at the expense of Hell's inhabitants and repeatedly asking "who's there?" in the manner of the *Tollite portas* rituals. The devils of the *Harrowing* are made present again through the performance of the actor playing the Porter.

Yet they are not fully present for, like Iago, the gatekeeper wears no cloven feet; he is not really a devil, but a clown pretending to be a devil.[40] In *Macbeth*, devilish behavior has become a dramatic custom—a stylized role that can be remembered, performed, and then discarded: "I'll devil-porter it no further" (2.3.16).[41] The Porter scene is a moment in which the Shakespearean stage borrows acoustic stage properties and customary practices from the mysteries, disowns them as not really relevant ("this place is too cold for hell" [2.3.15-6]), and then asks the audience if they recall the old plays. In Smith's terms, the *Harrowing* plays are *re*membered and remembered. First, they are made theatrically present again—*re*membered—as the thunderous knocks reverberate throughout the Globe and the gatekeeper enunciates the traditional speech of stage devils. But then Shakespeare's play treats the mystery plays as a thing of the past; they are superseded insofar as the actor playing the Porter can ask his audience if they remember them. And, in a play where even the slightest imagined hum triggers subsequent dramatic action—

> Ere to black Hecate's summons
> The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums
> Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done
> A deed of dreadful note. (3.2.42-45)

—it is a sound, a *Knocke within*, that prompts the remembering / *re*membering of mystery drama.

Sound and Fury

An early modern audience's kinesthetic experience of thunder and knocking in the "volumetric listening space" of the Globe would have been profound, and hearing an actor describe sounds through linguistic "imagery" is substantially different from hearing those noises emanate from the "hut" above the canopied roof or "heavens." Yet the language of Shakespeare's play also contributes significantly to the aura of Hell—just as the repeated intonation of the *Tollite portas* verses did in the *Harrowing*. After all, without the Porter's verbal commentary, the knocking at the gate may be reminiscent of *Harrowing* plays but would not necessarily signify Hell. A bell "invites" Macbeth to commit the murder, and he imagines that it is Duncan's death knell, summoning him "to heaven or to hell" (2.1.62-4). While "he is about it" (2.2.4), Lady Macbeth imagines an owl shriek as if it were a funeral bell tolling: "Hark, peace!— / It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman / Which gives the stern'st good-night" (2.2.2-4). "Hark!" she cries again a few lines later (2.2.11). Following the murder, the pair again hears noises:

> Macbeth. I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?
> Lady Macbeth. I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.
>   Did not you speak?
> Macbeth.   When?
> Lady Macbeth.   Now.
> Macbeth.   As I descended?
> Lady Macbeth. Ay.
> Macbeth.   Hark!— (2.2.14-16)

They volley words in rapid succession—an aural ping-pong match of monosyllables. But the Macbeths are not the only ones hearing strange sounds: Lennox later tells Macbeth of "Lamentings heard i'th' air, strange screams of death, / And prophesying with accents terrible" (2.3.52-53). The clamor in nature that he describes is soon matched by the confused cries of Duncan's subjects as Macduff returns from the chamber and compares the scene to the Final Doom. "Awake, awake! / Ring the alarum bell," he cries, adding: "Up, up, and see / The great doom's image. Malcolm, Banquo, / As from your graves rise up, and walk like sprites / To countenance this horror" (2.3.70-71, 74-77). In *Last Judgment* pageants, where "the great doom's image" was performed, there was an earthquake as the angels blew their trumpets to awake the dead. Macbeth is reminded of it when he feels his reign circumscribed by

the never-ending line of Banquo's issue: "What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?" he asks the witches (4.1.133). As the *OED* explains, the word "crack" refers to the blaring trumpets of the angels sent by God to summon the dead: "A sudden sharp and loud noise as of something breaking or bursting" including the "thunder-peal" or "archangel's trump" on the Day of Judgment. Macbeth's use of the term in Act 4 underscores the broader linguistic and extra-verbal soundscape of the play. It anticipates his impending doom, when Macduff will command: "Make all our trumpets speak, give them all breath, / Those clamorous harbingers of blood and death" (5.6.9-10). "Crack" also reminds the audience of the play's opening: "*Thunder and Lightning. Enter three Witches*" (1.1.1, s.d.).[42] Macbeth himself, when struggling to carry out Duncan's murder, had compared the death of the king to apocalyptic "blasts" and "trumpet-tongued" angels (1.7.18-25). The thunderous knocking of the Porter scene thus resonates with the many cracks, blasts, trumpets, bells, howls, and shrieks of the play's hellish cacophony of sound and fury. When we last see Lady Macbeth, she is still haunted by the *Knock* at the gate, and her final monosyllabic words are a repetitious staccato reminiscent of the knocking she still fears: "No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that . . . To bed, to bed. There's knocking at the gate. Come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed" (5.1.37-38, 56-58).

Giving Them the Lie

Having argued that both the sound of knocking in *Macbeth* and its dramatic provenance are significant, I would now like to suggest that the Porter scene is a knock-knock joke at the expense of both Shakespeare's royal patron and the religious opponents of the theaters.[43] A knock-knock joke, after all, is a homonymic equivocation that plays upon what Smith calls the "perceptual" and "imaginative" hearing of the audience. For the joke to work, there must be a double hearing: the listener must initially "misidentify" the sound of the knocker's name until the punch line reveals the "mistake." But in fact it is the joke teller (Shakespeare in this case) who punningly misuses sound. He playfully encourages the audience to "hear" Christ at the gate before opening the door to two Scottish lords.

Recent criticism on *Macbeth* has been marked by considerable dispute as to the play's views on Jacobean ideologies and mythologies of kingship. Arguably the most important contribution to this debate has been Rebecca Lemon's study of the sociopolitical impact of English treason legislation up to and beyond the 1605 Gunpowder Plot. According to Lemon, *Macbeth* proves "more complicated in its responses to the treason" than has traditionally been allowed by critics who believe Shakespeare was courting favor with his royal patron. It is the representation of Malcolm, she argues, through which the play challenges the rhetoric of divine right kingship. Malcolm "represents the negotiable model of kingship" whereby "verbal duplicity, typical of traitors, proves necessary in sustaining Scotland's monarchs as well." Thus, "while the rhetoric of scaffold speeches and post-Gunpowder Plot accounts of the treason resound with triumphalism," Lemon argues, "Shakespeare's play simultaneously replicates such rhetoric by initially opposing the demonic Mac-

beths with sanctified kingship and exposes its fictional nature by later drawing not only the audience but also the future king into league with the traitor."[44] In no scene of the Scottish Play are the "demonic Macbeths" more at odds with "sanctified kingship" than when the gate of their castle is imagined as a Hell-mouth. And yet the Porter scene has been largely overlooked in this recent critical debate. If the scene is mentioned, it is usually for its topical reference to the infamous equivocating Jesuit in the Gunpowder Plot, Father Henry Garnet. According to Alvin Kernan, the Porter's joke—"an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven" (2.3.8-10)—is a "grim and unsympathetic" jest for the simple reason that "pity for the king's enemies is not wise in his friends." Garnet's equivocation and other topical matters are therefore "handled in the play in a way to please the king."[45]

Perhaps another reason that the Porter scene is now overlooked when arguing for the play's engagement with resistance theory is that, for nearly two hundred years, it has served to underwrite the opposing view—namely, that Shakespeare's play endorses the rhetoric of sacred kingship. The eighteenth century found the Porter too bawdy for "our Poet" and marginalized the scene in print and cut it from performance.[46] In the nineteenth century, however, the Porter scene underwent a stunning reevaluation. No longer superfluous, it became the linchpin of the play's tragic action. Thomas De Quincey's famous essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*" (1823) is largely responsible for this critical reconsideration. In De Quincey's account, the knocking in the Porter scene closes an "awful parenthesis" of demonic evil following the murder of Duncan. The regicide performed, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are, he says, "transfigured: Lady Macbeth is 'unsexed'; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed." But then comes that "*Knocke within.*" and, De Quincey explains, "when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard, and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish."[47] De Quincey's reading of the knocking in *Macbeth* as a kind of apotropaic ritual is seductive, particularly in that, like Shakespeare's play itself, it compares Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to hellish fiends.[48]

When, more than a century later, Wickham argued for the scene's indebtedness to medieval *Harrowing* pageants and liturgies, he left De Quincey's "awful parenthesis" largely intact. Although he claims there was "no attempt" by Shakespeare to write *Macbeth* as a "direct parallel" of the *Harrowing*, Wickham nevertheless contends: "Thunder, cacophony, screams and groans were the audible emblems of Lucifer and hell on the medieval stage [and] their relevance to the moral meaning of [*Macbeth*] could scarcely have escaped the notice of its first audiences."[49] For Wickham, as for De Quincey, *Macbeth* is the beneficiary of the *Harrowing*'s black-and-white moral universe such that, by Act 5: "Scotland has been purged of a devil who, like Lucifer, aspired to a throne that was not his . . . and was finally crushed within the refuge of his own castle by a saviour-avenger accompanied by armed archangels. Hell has been harrowed: 'the time is free.'"[50] According to Wickham, therefore, the play didactically

replicates the moral absolutes of the *Harrowing*: Macbeth and his queen are demonic fiends; Macduff and Malcolm are agents of divine recompense; Inverness represents Hell Castle; fair is fair and foul is foul.

Not surprisingly, therefore, the import of the line "I pray you remember the Porter" (2.3.20) for Wickham is not its retrospection on the *Harrowing* plays *per se*, but its foreshadowing. If we interpret the request to "remember the porter" as referring to the devil-porters of mystery drama then, he says, "we recollect that it was Jesus who with a loud knocking entered Hell-castle in search of Satan." Wickham then argues, "At this point in *Macbeth* Shakespeare has not yet informed us that Macduff is destined to avenge Duncan's murder, but in his use of the porter he gives us a clear hint of what to expect."[51]

The Porter scene in Wickham's account anticipates, as in De Quincey, the conclusion of the play when good triumphs over evil and "the time is free" (5.11.21). Whereas Wickham reads the Porter scene (not to mention the play as a whole) as an earnest endorsement of Jacobean claims to sacred authority, I believe that it is an elaborate knock-knock joke. The Porter scene first offers a tantalizingly straightforward reading of history in which a "saviour-avenger accompanied by armed archangels" rescues and guards the Scottish crown. But this is like the first response to "Who's there?" in a knock-knock joke. A double-hearing is required. Shakespeare's audience is invited to hear not only the past context of the knocking, but also its present significance. If they listen carefully, in fact, they hear the Porter overturn the association with the *Harrowing*: "this place is too cold for hell" (2.3.15-16). And the aura of the *Harrowing* is shattered when the flawed Macduff knocks and enters, not the Christ-like Malcolm—and certainly not James' ancestor, the "true, worthy Banquo" (1.4.54). Contrary to Wickham's account, the conspicuous absence of a Christ-like savior reemerges at the conclusion of the play, which brings not the utter defeat of evil and the establishment of godly rule but moral and political uncertainty. "Why," asks Stephen Orgel, "in a play so clearly organized around ideas of good and evil, is it not Malcolm who defeats Macbeth? . . . What happens next, with a saintly king of Scotland, and an ambitious soldier as his right-hand man, and those threatening offspring, the heirs of Banquo, still waiting in the wings?"[52]

Scotland is not Hell, and the murky chronicle histories of its kings are not quite so fair or foul as James would have them. As with the punning use of sound in a knock-knock joke, Shakespeare's mocking of Jacobean political theology relies on an acoustic gap or distance between *Macbeth* and the mysteries as much as on their aural resonance. I am not making an argument for Shakespearean sophistication at the expense of medieval simplicity for, as scholars have shown, stage devilry in the mysteries was itself highly nuanced and politically subversive. According to Cox, a "political pattern" runs throughout all of the major mystery play cycles: "This pattern identifies pride and rebellion against God with nearly everyone in the stories who possesses wealth, social prestige, and political power."[53] Responding to Cox's "feudal reading," Robert Barrett suggests that the Chester *Fall of Lucifer* is less "a palace revolt" than it is a "self-consciously urban performance" that engages the city's "oligarchic ideologies and institutions." Lucifer thus leapfrogs "his way up the heavenly (and, by analogy again, the civic) hierarchy to seize God's position at the

top."[54] These brief examples of the politics of demonic performance further illustrate why Shakespeare may have borrowed from the mysteries in order to engage in resistance theory—namely, by the time *Macbeth* was written, devils had long been used to stage "abuses of power by the powerful."[55]

Only if the *re*membered knocking brings the theatrical past into the imaginative present can the play provoke and unprovoke the king's fantasy of godly rule. Once we appreciate the scene's moral—and temporal—ambivalence, the Porter's assertion, "But this place is too cold for hell" (2.3.15-6), does more than simply mark the transition from comedy back to tragedy: it becomes an ideological refutation of James' *Basilikon Doron* insofar as it denies that "this place"—Scotland—is a place where "the trew difference betwixt a lawfull, good King and a usurping Tyrant" can be so easily delineated.[56] That is not to deny the "structural antithesis" which, as Peter Stallybrass argues, so strikingly distinguishes Shakespeare's play from Holinshed's account.[57] It is to note, in fact, that the knocking-at-the-gate scene is an important source of antithesis. And secondly, it is to suggest that the play may structure itself antithetically but still expose the untenability of moral and political absolutism. *Macbeth*, as Lemon explains, initially opposes "the demonic Macbeths with sanctified kingship" but subsequently exposes the fiction of such triumphalist narratives by "later drawing not only the audience but also the future king into league with the traitor" Macduff.[58]

Popish Progeny

Aside from these political considerations, Shakespeare may have had more self-interested reasons for first recalling then disavowing the *Harrowing*. If we recollect the manner in which antitheatricalists repeatedly compare the London stages to popery and popish drama, then perhaps the Porter scene is a knock-knock joke at their expense as well. In his 1607 sermon, Crashaw offers a genealogy of the English stage in which the pre-Reformation mysteries, the popish progeny of ancient heathen theater, are seen as direct conduits of the ungodly errors put on display in London's public playhouses: "The vngodly Playes and Enterludes so rife in this nation; what are they but *a Bastard of Babylon*, a daughter of error and confusion, a hellish deuice . . . deliuered to the *Heathen*, from them to the *Papists*, and from them to vs?"[59] Reminding King James that the primitive Church had condemned plays, Crashaw calls for the destruction of this "tower of Babel" as part of a larger program of religious reformation. Decades before Crashaw, Stephen Gosson in his *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (1582) admits that "It cannot bee denied that Gregory Naziancen one of the fathers of the Church, wrote a Playe of Christe." Yet Gosson then claims that Naziancen wrote an edifying closet drama rather than a blasphemous stage production: "For Naziancen detesting the corruption of the Corpus Christi Playes that were set out by the Papistes, and inueighing against them, thought it better to write the passion of Christ in numbers himselfe, that all such as delight in numerositie of speach might reade it, not beholde it vpon the Stage, where some base fellowe that plaide Christe, should bring the person of Christ into contempt."[60] What is significant here is not Gosson's anachronistic projection of Corpus Christi

drama back to the fourth century, but rather that he makes no effort to distinguish between ancient and modern, pagan and papist theatrical forms. To the contrary, he eagerly yokes them together on account of their fleshly idolatry—all are the "pompe, the plaies, the inuetions of the Diuell"—in order to call for the utter eradication of contemporary English theater: "Haue we sinned with the Gentiles in representinge of theire Playes? Let vs learne with true Christians to abolish them."[61] Gosson and Crashaw's historical accounts of English theater were commonplace, as Cooper notes regarding the polemics of John Northbrooke and Henry Crosse, who also make "no distinction between the acting of divine mysteries, and stage performance of any kind."[62] Thomas Heywood's 1612 *Apology for Actors* is sensitive to this widespread claim that the public stages descended from Catholic drama. Embracing theater's pagan origins, Heywood is careful to exclude popish forms of play: "I omit the shewes and ceremonies euen in these times generally vsed amongst the Catholikes, in which by the Churchmen & most religious, diuerse pageants, as of the Natiuity, Passion, and Ascension, with other Historicall places of the Bible, are at diuerse times & seasons of the year vsually celebrated."[63] According to Crashaw and Gosson, the theater persists in a continuous history of corruption and heathen degeneracy. In Heywood's narrative, on the other hand, commercial theater has disclaimed a dark age of Catholic drama in order to recuperate respectable pagan virtues.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* does not share Heywood's sensitivity but rather seems to enjoy titillating antitheatricalist desires to tie the public playhouses to the drama of the old religion. In fact, with its comic transformation of the *Harrowing* into a series of jokes about drunkenness and lechery, the Porter scene seems guilty of the charge leveled at the theater in Philip Stubbes' *Anatomie of Abuses* (1583): "they [are] most intollerable, or rather Sacrilegious, for . . . the price of Christ his bloud, & the merits of his passion, were not giuen, to be derided, and iested at as they be in these filthie playes and enterluds."[64] The Porter scene is no ordinary jest but, as we noted with regard to the Jacobean politics of the play, a homonymic pun which toys with the audience's interpretation of the knocking. When the "*Knocke within.*" is first heard at 2.2.54, the Macbeths are still onstage, and the audience naturally assumes that one of the play's characters is at the gate. But as the Porter enters and says, "If a man were porter of hell-gate . . . " the knocking and the action of devil-portering begin to confirm the worst fears of the theater's religious opponents by suggesting that the mystery plays are not, in fact, superseded after all. Like the two role-players in a knock-knock joke, the Porter and the audience are, in Wickham's words, "in two worlds at once; that of Macbeth's castle and that of another scene from another play [the *Harrowing*]." 2.3.20 ("remember the Porter") is the punch line, for as he says these words, the Porter opens the gate and Macduff and Lennox enter. The temporal ambivalence catalyzed by the *re*membered sound reverberating around the Globe now ends, and as the noise fades, the audience gets the joke: "Who did you think it was—Christ?" Whereas Heywood's *Apology* is at pains to distance professional theater from pre-Reformation religious drama, the anticlimactic entrance of Macduff and Lennox laughs off the dangerous proximity of *Macbeth* to the mystery plays. Shakespeare lets his audience believe what they want about the relationship between

the two forms of drama as the scene knavishly makes and mars the polemical narratives of the theater's most vituperative enemies. From this perspective it becomes clear that pre-Reformation dramatic material was not entirely feared or spurned, but rather quite attractive to theater companies always eager for new material. True, they were prohibited from staging some volatile religious topics, yet the iconoclasm and censorship introduced by the Reformation were in some ways a boon for the London playhouses. Beyond the liturgies and dogmas that, according to Greenblatt, were "emptied out" and re-imagined for commercial theater, religious upheaval led to the prohibition of mystery drama and thus to the provision of more direct—and more material—dramatic resources. As a craftsman of plays, the playwright Shakespeare could cannibalize the stage properties, costumes, and sound effects of the mystery play pageant wagons and refashion them to suit his purposes.

Conclusion

Critical discussion of the Porter scene in Macbeth has been Janus-faced: either the scene is significant for its topical allusions to Garner's equivocation, or else the medieval antecedent of the *Harrowing of Hell* is discussed. This essay has argued for the polychronicity of the knocking at the gate in order to suggest that the play exploits the past to gain present political leverage.[65] The knocking of the Porter scene is also significant because it raises questions about the traditional privileging of the Renaissance authorial subject over the medieval dramatic object—Shakespearean authorship over what E. K. Chambers once called the "dry bones" of the mysteries.[66] Now, more than a half-century after O. B. Hardison refuted Chamber's secularization thesis, both medievalists and early modern scholars are rightly skeptical of teleological narratives that value late medieval drama only for its anticipation of Shakespeare. However, the echoes of the *Harrowing of Hell* in *Macbeth* suggest that this critical awareness is not enough, and that perhaps we need to be bolder in our assertions about the material significance of the mystery plays for the professional theaters that emerged in London in the late sixteenth century. Far from being dead, superseded precursors, the stage properties of the mystery plays were sources of dramatic inspiration long after their prohibition. Once we appreciate the ongoing agency of supposedly outmoded theatrical objects, we may be in a better position to move away from narratives about Shakespeare's creative autonomy over the plays we attribute to him. It then becomes possible to consider that, like the sound of knocking at the gates of Hell, some of the remarkable remnants of the mysteries must have demanded a dramatic rebirth—or *re*membering—when professional acting companies encountered them: Hell-mouths belching sulphurous smoke, the understage space of Purgatory, tombs and sepulchers from which the dead arise, empty thrones which tempt usurpers, Balaam's talking ass. These dramatic properties were not "dry bones" awaiting the breath of Shakespearean genius. Quite the opposite. Exerting their material agency on the stage of the Globe, they were actors in plays that we all too casually label as "Renaissance" or "Shakespearean" drama.

Notes

1. *OED*, entry for "harrow, v.²," b. The Wakefield *Harrowing of Hell* refers to this episode as the "Extractio Animarum"—the Extraction or Deliverance of Souls—which, like the English word "harrow" conveys not just an attack on Hell, but the plunder of its souls.

2. Wickham, "Hell-Castle and its Door-Keeper," *Shakespeare Survey* 19 (1966), 68. See also his *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage: Essays in Medieval, Tudor, and Jacobean Drama* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1969), 214-24.

3. O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000) as well as his "Vital Cultural Practices: Shakespeare and the Mysteries," *JMEMS* 29 (1999): 149-168; Cooper, "Shakespeare and the Mystery Plays," *Shakespeare and Elizabethan Popular Culture*, ed. Stuart Gillespie and Neil Rhodes (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), 18-41; Groves, *Texts and Traditions: Religion in Shakespeare, 1592-1604*, esp. ch. 2: "Shakespeare's Incarnational Aesthetic: The Mystery Plays and Catholicism," 26-59.

4. Harcourt, "'I Pray You, Remember the Porter,'" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 12 (1961): 393-402.

5. Rebecca Lemon, "Scaffolds of Treason in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," *Treason by Words: Literature, Law, and Rebellion in Shakespeare's England* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 2006), 79-106; Arthur Kinney, *Lies Like Truth: Shakespeare, "Macbeth," and the Cultural Moment* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 2001), 86-102; Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988). Yet Grace Tiffany has argued that *Macbeth* upholds the myth of James' paternal kingship in "*Macbeth*, Paternity, and the Anglicization of James I," *Studies in the Humanities* 23 (1996): 148-62.

6. William Crashaw, *The sermon preached at the Crosse* (London, 1607), sig. Z1ʳ.

7. Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, "Towards a Materialist Account of Stage Properties," *Staged Properties in Early Modern English Drama*, ed. Harris and Korda (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 13.

8. Margreta de Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass, "Introduction," *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture*, ed. de Grazia, Quilligan, and Stallybrass (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 6.

9. I use the terms "Renaissance" and "medieval" here in order to challenge these all too familiar periodizing terms. As the work of Theresa Coletti, Richard Emmerson, and Lawrence Clopper has shown, mystery pageants like the *Harrowing of Hell*, though traditionally labeled as "medieval" by Wickham and others, survive to us in sixteenth-century manuscripts often concurrent with Shakespeare's works. See Coletti, "The Chester Cycle in Sixteenth-Century Religious Culture," *JMEMS* 37 (2007): 531-547; Emmerson, "Dramatic History: On the Diachronic and Synchronic in the Study of Early English Drama," *JMEMS* 35 (2005): 39-66; Clopper, "The History and Development of the Chester Cycle," *Modern Philology* 75 (1978): 219-46.

10. O'Connell, "Vital Cultural Practices," 152.

11. Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1999), 12-29.

12. Smith, 107, 108-09.

13. For a discussion of Platonic and Aristotelean theories of memory available in the Renaissance, see Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2001), 214-15.

14. Smith, 114, 108-09.

15. Smith, 206, 209, 210.

16. However, Smith does not discuss the knocking of the Porter scene.

17. All citations of Shakespeare's plays are from *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

18. *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies; A Facsimile of the First Folio, 1623*, prepared and introduced by Doug Moston (New York: Routledge, 1998), folio page 137, sig. mm_3.

19. See David Mills, *The Chester Mystery Cycle: A New Edition with Modernised Spelling*, ed. Mills (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1992), 302.

20. Ps. 23 [AV 24]: 7 KJV.

21. *The Middle-English Harrowing Of Hell and Gospel Of Nicodemus*, ed. William H. Hulme, The Early English Text Society (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1907), 110.

22. Clifford Davidson, *Technology, Guilds, and Early English Drama*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 23 (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Press, 1996), 84. Also see *The Iconography of Hell*, Early Drama, Art, and Music Monograph Series 17, ed. Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992).

23. Mills, 302-03. Jonathan Gil Harris argues that the scent of gunpowder may have encouraged Shakespeare's audiences to recall medieval stage devilry. "The Smell of Gunpowder: *Macbeth* and the Palimpsests of Olfaction," *Untimely Matter in the Time of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 119-39. The author is deeply grateful to Gil Harris for sharing his inspiring work prior to publication.

24. *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, vol. 1, ed. R. M. Lumianski and David Mills, The Early English Text Society (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1974), 331. As this edition explains, there are variations in the surviving manuscripts of this text, with the Harley 2124 (1607) reading "materialis magnus" rather than "magnus materialis," 331, n. to line 151.

25. Wickham, "Hell-Castle and its Door-Keeper," 73; Mills, 308; Richard Rastall, "The Sounds of Hell," Davidson and Seiler, 112 and n. 27.

26. *The Harrowing of Hell, The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 184.

27. Wakefield *Harrowing of Hell*, lines 180, 183. Cited from *Medieval Drama*, ed. David Bevington (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 600.

28. Cox, *The Devil and the Sacred in English Drama: 1350-1642* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 5.

29. *Records of Early English Drama: Coventry*, ed. R. W. Ingram (Buffalo: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1981), 308, 474.

30. Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1992), 186.

31. Smith, 211.

32. The Porter scene, in other words, does not quite fit Stephen Greenblatt's powerful thesis about how the Reformation made Catholic liturgy and dogma available to the commercial playhouses by transforming sacred signifiers into theatrical representations. *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1988), 119.

33. Smith, 242-43.

34. As Wickham states, "thunder, cacophony, screams and groans were the audible emblems of Lucifer and Hell on the medieval stage," *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage*, 224.

35. Cooper, 24, 32. The Coventry devil-porter had been made famous by John Heywood's allusion to him in his play *The Foure PP* (c. 1543). See also Groves, 36.

36. See O'Connell, "Vital Cultural Practices," 157.

37. See Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater: Studies in the Social Dimension of Dramatic Form and Function*, ed. Robert Schwartz (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1978), 114-15.

38. Wickham, "Hell-Castle and its Door-Keeper," 72.

39. Harris, *Untimely Matter*, 137-38.

40. *Othello*, 5.2.292-93. As Cox says, in *Macbeth* "literal stage devils" are eschewed, 176.

41. As Weimann states regarding the recollection of the Vice tradition (particularly in 3.1.279 of *Two Gentlemen of Verona* ["Your old vice still"]), "The Vice was the *old* Vice, but *still* he could be used or referred to; and the words "old" and "still" indicate the dialectic of innovation and tradition by which Shakespeare's wordplay actually thrived," 151.

42. *First Folio, 1623*, folio page 131, sig. ll$_6$.

43. I am neither claiming that knock-knock jokes were told in the seventeenth century nor that Shakespeare invents them in this scene. Rather, I draw a parallel between Shakespeare's play and this popular form of homonym in order to make the salient point that to "get the joke" of the Porter scene a double hearing of the sound of knocking is required.

44. Lemon, 21, 87, 86.

45. Kernan goes on to claim that Shakespeare adapted Holinshed "to fit his patron's political myth" regarding his divinely ordained prerogative. *Shakespeare, the King's Playwright: Theater in the Stuart Court, 1603-1613* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), 76, 78.

46. Harcourt, 393.

47. De Quincey, "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth,*" *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed., vol. 2, ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 462.

48. Regarding various apotropaic rituals like the *Ordo Dedicationis Ecclesiae* performed to exorcise the devil, see Cox, 16-17.

49. Wickham, "Hell-Castle and its Door-Keeper," 70, 73.

50. Wickham, "Hell-Castle and its Door-Keeper," 74.

51. Wickham, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage*, 222.

52. Stephen Orgel, "Introduction," *Macbeth*, ed. Orgel, The Pelican Shakespeare Series (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), xliii.

53. Cox, 23.

54. Robert Barrett, *Against All England: Regional Identity and Cheshire Writing, 1195-1656* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 2009), 80-82.

55. Cox, 22.

56. *Basilikon Doron*, *The Political Works of James I*, ed. Charles H. McIlwain, Harvard Political Classics (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1918), 18-19.

57. Stallybrass, "*Macbeth* and Witchcraft," *Focus on* Macbeth, ed. John Russell Brown (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 189-209.

58. Lemon, 86.

59. Crashaw, sig. Z1r.

60. Gosson, *Playes Confuted in Five Actions* (London, 1582), sig. E5v-E6r.

61. Gosson, sig. E6v, E8r.

62. Cooper, 22.

63. Thomas Heywood, *Apology for Actors* (London, 1612), sig. E4r.

64. Stubbes, *Anatomie of Abuses* (London, 1583), sig. L5r-v.

65. The term "polychronicity" is borrowed from Harris, who uses it to describe how certain objects "collate diverse moments in time," *Untimely Matter*, 4.

66. Chambers, *The Mediaeval Stage*, vol. 2 (New York: Oxford Clarendon Press, 1903), 225.