

Crossing Boundaries in Shakespeare

Emily Detmer-Goebel
Northern Kentucky University

BORDER METAPHORS show up in two recent critical treatments of Shakespeare's plays. At first glance, one might see little connection between Alexander Leggatt's *Shakespeare's Tragedies: Violation and Identity* and Judith Weil's *Service and Dependency in Shakespeare's Plays*, other than they are both written by scholars of Shakespeare. Yet both books are interested in identity, and Leggatt and Weil each use the metaphor of borders or boundaries, among other things, to discuss their subjects.

While border metaphors are not new to Shakespeare Studies, they are not as common as they are in American Studies, especially in Chicana/o writing, where border theory and border literature have become key ideas to engage issues of nation, culture, gender, and sexuality (for example, see Hicks). In Renaissance Studies, the borders have been mainly geographical and interest has been on national identity (see for example, Hopkins). While neither Leggatt nor Weil deal directly with geographical borders in Shakespeare, each scholar attends to various borders to explore representations of identity in Shakespearean drama. As his title suggests, Leggatt is primarily interested in violation and identity. He argues that Lavinia's violation in *Titus Andronicus* is a foundational moment in the beginning of Shakespeare's career that resonates throughout many of the later trag-

EMILY DETMER-GOEBEL is an Associate Professor of English at Northern Kentucky University, where she teaches courses on Shakespeare, Renaissance drama, early modern women writers, and composition. Her work appears in various journals including *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *Shakespeare Studies*, and *Women Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. She received her doctorate from Miami University.

edies including *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth*. Leggatt finds it useful to consider a whole list of boundaries crossed within the plays to explore the ways the plays “question not just what we do to each other, but who we are” (7). For Leggatt, meaningful boundaries are constantly negotiated (for example, between stage and audience and actor and role, as well as within the world of the play). Each act of crossing can be a kind of violation, one that can echo throughout a play.

Approaching the plays through close reading, Leggatt traces the idea of violation and its implications. While acknowledging the usefulness of culturally oriented criticism of the last twenty-five years, he favours an approach that treats the text “not just as a cultural document, but a play” (1). The danger he sees of an approach that considers at great length the culture in which the play was originally produced is that sometimes “a thick reading of the culture will entail a thin reading of the plays” (1). While one might have liked a fuller engagement with these critics, especially those working on identity in the period, the strength of this work is located in Leggatt’s often persuasive reading of reoccurring themes and images in these Shakespearean tragedies.

As stated above, Leggatt sees Lavinia’s rape in *Titus* as haunting the play, and it might be said that this act not only haunts the rest of the tragedies under consideration but also Leggatt’s own book. When Titus first sees the raped and mutilated Lavinia, he at first doesn’t recognize her. When he asks, “But who comes with our brother Marcus here?,” Marcus replies, “This was your daughter” (3.1.63–64). An act of violation puts identity, relationships, and language itself into crisis (9).

As a result of this rape, all sorts of boundaries are crossed or dissolve in the play. Clear distinctions between atrocity and order and between family and other become difficult to recognize (13). Leggatt riffs on the recurring image pattern of “crossing thresholds” in the play, which underscores how the overall action of the play is based on a rape by an enemy invasion (14). Throughout the book, he pays close attention to thresholds, hands, names, tombs, and kisses.

Interestingly, Leggatt finds that some violations can heal. Lucius will cross over to the enemy to garner the support he needs to invade Rome in defense of his father. When Titus’s family kiss his dead body, the barrier between dead and living dissolves in a way that is meant to heal those left behind. Unlike the violation experienced by Lavinia when her mouth is stopped by Chiron and Demetrius, or when Titus places his hand in her

mouth, here “[t]he mouth becomes again the seat of affection, and with its healing language is healed” (25).

Given this reading of the last act of violation, his own analysis suggests an earlier violation that could be read similarly: Lavinia’s act of naming the rape and rapists. Leggatt builds on other critics who have seen the act of writing, with the writing implement in her mouth, as another rape: “Yet in the physical act of writing she cannot recall the rape without re-enacting it; she cannot use language without symbolically violating her own body” (23). He notes that the recent Julie Taymor movie uses flashbacks of the rape to underscore this point. Leggatt leaves us with the image that “language itself wounds” (23). Yet Lavinia willfully embraces this tool as it gives her back her voice.

Earlier, Leggatt points out the ways in which Lavinia made failed attempts to dissolve the boundaries between her and her father. This action is a similar failure. Lavinia uses words to try to “bring herself back into relationship with others” (23), yet even as her experience is better understood—that she has been raped—it allows Titus to shift the focus away from her and toward revenge.

Leggatt finds many of the plays under discussion ending in an unsettled way, one that resists closure. For this play, it is the violation of boundaries, both of bodies and identities:

Identities, after all, draw boundaries: between Roman and Goth, between love and rape—and, in the scene with which we began, between Lavinia and not-Lavinia, the named and the nameless. To remove boundaries is to remove identities and to deny closure. The play itself in the end resists closure; the audience cannot leave it behind as something settled and finished. (28)

And according to Leggatt, Shakespeare doesn’t see his treatment of these themes as finished either. The rest of the book reflects back on these moments, noticing the ways that the other plays respond to just these ideas.

Leggatt sees *Romeo and Juliet* as in some ways answering the violence of *Titus Andronicus*, especially in the initial meeting of Romeo and Juliet where Romeo’s words hint that the touch of his hand might seem a violation; here his touch leads to a gentle kiss that seems designed to “heal the wounds of Lavinia” (29). While the healing does not last long, Leggatt’s close reading of the play is best in his recalling of the all the ways love and death are intertwined throughout the play. As he will in each of the chapters, Leggatt notes an image or act of violation that resonates through the

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play: “As Lavinia’s rape resonates through the whole of *Titus Andronicus*, the lover’s impulse towards death begins to infect the world” (49).

Another fruitful comparison with *Titus* comes from seeing how different Juliet is than Lavinia in terms of agency: Juliet is not silent, nor is she passive with her lover or her father. In examining the ways that each lover in *Romeo and Juliet* considers shedding his or her own name for the sake of the other, Leggatt finds that “when it comes to boundary-breaking, Juliet is swifter and more daring than [Romeo]” (33). She is able to use and manipulate language in a way that demonstrates her intelligence and agility to manage her dual positions as insider and outsider. Leggatt points to the moment when she tells Lady Capulet how she feels about Romeo upon hearing that he has killed her cousin. Lady Capulet hears one thing, but the audience knows that Juliet means quite another thing. Like one who lives near the border of two different cultures, Juliet uses language to connect with what her mother expects to hear but not deny her true feelings about Romeo.

Just as the border between life and death seems uncertain when Juliet only seems dead for much of the last act, Leggatt nicely shows how it is just this uncertainty that is disrupted by the presence of the Ghost in *Hamlet*. Whereas Leggatt claims the attack on Lavinia is “replicated everywhere in *Titus Andronicus*, the attack on the old king’s body reverberates throughout *Hamlet*” (58). He also builds on his discussion of *Romeo and Juliet*: “Death and marriage, which ought to be opposites, come together for Romeo and Juliet as a sign of their mutual commitment. In *Hamlet* the link between death and marriage lies in the fact that both are disrupted and made unnatural” (58).

Just as the characters have trouble reading the mutilated Lavinia, Leggatt aptly shows how the difficulty of reading Gertrude and Ophelia relates to some of the themes of the play; they are, like the Ghost, disturbing presences that “provoke and resist attempts at interpretation” (75). Most interesting is Leggatt’s reading of Hamlet’s divided identity that contemplates the way he becomes like Old Hamlet, “absorbing the identity of a dead man, named like him and soon to be dead like him” (82).

Leggatt’s discussion of *Troilus and Cressida* begins with the difficulty of pinning down its genre, noting that it “breaks generic boundaries” (84). Since the same violation themes and image patterns show up in *Troilus and Cressida*, Leggatt strongly argues that it should be considered a tragedy. Troilus responds to Cressida’s betrayal with a statement that questions her identity (“This is and is not Cressid” [5.2.153]), and Leggatt also notes the violation that came before:

Yet the kissing of Cressida—alone, outnumbered, unreadable in silence and in speech—has had disturbing echoes of the rape of Lavinia, and suggests that what is at stake here may be, if not the breakup of the universe, the breakup of a human identity. It is a violation of a less literal kind, but still violation; and it is momentous enough, if not to qualify the play simply as tragedy, at least to give it a serious affinity with the unquestioned tragedies that precede it and follow it. (86)

Leggatt closes his chapter considering how the play seems to break the boundaries between audience and stage to implicate all of us, not just in the spreading of diseases that Pandarus speaks about but also in participating in making meaning as we try to make sense of the characters' actions.

While the *Othello* chapter begins with considering the different ways in which Desdemona and her marriage are read by various characters, the strongest elements come in Leggatt's contemplation of Iago, whom he argues lacks an identity. The play opens with Iago's depiction of Desdemona's elopement with Othello as a sort of violation experienced by Barbantio, but "the real act of violation, however, was not the marriage but Iago's interpretation of it." In other words, Iago "turns interpretation into a destructive force" (124). Othello's famous "he that was Othello" (5.2.280) speech underscores the book's claim that violation often leads to a breakdown of identity and meaning. While the play allows the audience at first to dismiss this malicious interpretation of their marriage for a while, Leggatt claims the final act allows it to be confirmed through Emilia's comments and, finally, by her presence on the deathbed.

For *King Lear*, the violation of the relationship between Lear and Cordelia is what is broken; Cordelia's banishment and dismissal as daughter vacates not only her identity but Lear's as well. In trying to turn Cordelia into nothing, Lear "becomes nothing himself" (177). Like *Othello*, this play returns to the initial violation even as characters reunite; "hurt and healing are so twisted together that they cannot be separated" (176).

In the final and perhaps most intriguing chapter, Leggatt attends to the ways that the act of Duncan's murder, a violation in every form, is for the Macbeths a "violent consummation of their marriage" (198). He carefully charts the many moments in the play where "the language dwells obsessively on unnameable deeds" done by unnameable agents (179). While the Macbeths cannot seem to name the murder ("a deed without a name") or acknowledge their agency regarding it, we watch them come together to get the deed done, but once accomplished their marriage is destroyed

and comes undone. It is this assault on their togetherness that gives them humanity. Their own reactions to the acts they have perpetrated have made them more human than they or we in the audience may wish to acknowledge.

Taken as a whole, Leggatt's book addresses a weakness in the critical tradition which has until recently dismissed *Titus Andronicus* as an inferior work. This analysis takes the play seriously in the development of Shakespeare's career as a writer; Leggatt demonstrates that Shakespeare first dramatizes several themes about violation and identity in *Titus* and they can be found in his later other tragedies as well: "As the ideas of violation and identity develop through those seven tragedies we see a series of reactions and contradictions as one play ricochets against the other; and we see an internalization of what in *Titus Andronicus* is physical and literal" (205). Equally important, *Violation and Identity in Shakespeare's Plays* is enjoyable to read. Undergraduates can gain a great deal from digesting Leggatt's careful close readings of the plays. In less able hands, these readings could have become predictable, but the writing remains fresh and polished, as well as persuasive.

Judith Weil's book, *Service and Dependency in Shakespeare's Plays*, approaches the plays "as evidence of how [Shakespeare] tested and explored cultural attitudes toward service and dependency" (1). To do so, Weil carefully balances the amount of social history about servants without losing focus on the plays as plays; she asserts that "social practice and dramatic form are mutually illuminating" (1). In addition to social historians, Weil introduces Raymond Williams's notion of "inhabited border" as useful for examination of the "significant agency [that] may occur between, among, as well as above, below, and beyond established social roles or categories" (5). For Weil, Shakespeare's characters can be seen as operating on the borderline "in unstable conditions" which often allow them more agency than traditionally assumed (6).

Rather than attempt a catalogue of all servants or service roles in the plays, Weil has opted to arrange her chapters on several key relationships of service and dependency such as "Sons, daughters, and servants," "Wives and servants," and "Friends and servants." The final two chapters focus on *King Lear* and *Macbeth* in which Weil brings together issues explored in the earlier chapters.

Weil begins her exploration of the plays with consideration of the social practices that linked youth to service in early modern households. Weil provides enough social history to bring readers up to speed, so to speak, in order to understand her reading of service and dependency in the plays.

While Leggatt expressed concern in his book about the ways cultural approaches can lead to thin readings of plays, Weil never overwhelms the reader to the point that the play gets lost. Weil strikes a careful balance and often shows how attending to issues of service and dependency through a cultural lens can lead to a greater understanding of the play as a whole.

Weil begins her study with by examining the relationship between service and youth. Young people from all social stations of life would be familiar with the role of service. Not only would they mingle with servants, they might likely become servants themselves. Weil demonstrates how early modern families, including aristocratic families, would exchange children because learning service was “a vital part of their education” (18). Weil is interested in what exactly was learned in this position of servant. Underscoring that personal attendance did not necessarily feel “servile,” Weil shows that this social education had several purposes. For some, it was a way to become a better master, noting the household ideology that taught “the best masters had been servants” (19). Well-born children will also learn to be obedient in a household where he or she is not subject to special treatment from the servants, as the master’s child, or be subject to revenge on a disgruntled servant. This is not to say children from noble households were treated the same as the other servants; instead, it’s likely that this “close connection between youth and service could have made specific relationships unpredictable and highly volatile” (22).

Weil is most interested in the characters in Shakespeare’s plays that seem most conscious of service in terms of “instrumentality and imitation” (22). Hamlet provides one of the best examples of this view of service by his anguish at “being used as a human instrument” (22). Closely reading Hamlet’s scenes with Claudius’s servants, Weil shows how Hamlet deeply resents the instrumentality of Polonius as well as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; these “servants remind him of his limited strength and means” (26). The result is that Hamlet grows more violent as he purposely cuts himself off from those dependents.

To shore up this discussion of the relationship between youth and service, Weil also turns to *Coriolanus*, *Cymbeline*, and *King John*. While Hamlet and Coriolanus are not often compared, Weil asserts that their “social roles, rather than their personal traits, justify considering them together” (33). Coriolanus’s scornful view of subordinates, especially slaves, interests Weil. While other treatments of the play have explained this aspect of his character through psychological approaches, Weil points to his early successful military career which could account for his lack of education in dealing with a range of other children, servants, and other dependants.

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Shakespeare transforms his source; Plutarch's rude warrior with a basic "resistance to bondage" becomes a "scarred hero [with] phobic responses to servitude" (34). The shame Coriolanus feels is tied to this crisis in service and reward. Weil counters the readings that point to a crisis in gender by uncovering the ways in which these young men, Hamlet and Coriolanus, occupy a vulnerable position in "a border country" (41).

Weil next turns to the slippery relations between wives and servants; how they relate to one another and how their subject positions are similar but not the same. Weil examines ways that wives and servants are temporarily fused in four plays, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Othello*, and *The Winter's Tale*. In discussing *Shrew*, Weil explores the potential for competition between servants and wives as well as how their relationship can be a means for transformation. Servants in this play are often known to have the skill of imitation such as when the Lord assumes his page, Bartholomew, can impersonate a gentlewoman and when Lucentio's "trustworthy servant" can transform into a master at a moment's notice. Since the border between the two roles seems so slippery, competition can develop.

Unlike another of the shrew-tales where a clear competition develops between Kate and Petruchio's servants, Shakespeare uses the servants to be the means to Kate's transformation. When Kate defends Grumio, Petruchio's servant, she begins "to see herself in the way that Petruchio treats third-party servants" (56). Since Petruchio treats Kate as "a servant or worse," she is educated about such roles when she learns from her submission to them that she is dependent "on those who help and care for her" (55, 57). Thus, Kate gains the ethical insight that leads to her "myth of reciprocity" which her sermon highlights (58). While Weil acknowledges that modern audiences might not be taken with the reading that Kate changes into a female Grumio, she asserts that this "group membership" promotes "greater freedom to please oneself by pleasing others" than would an environment of competition among the wife and the servants (59).

While the fused nature of the servant and wife in *Shrew* is seen as positive, it can also be seen as monstrous. Weil points to the household manuals which stress that patriarchs must not treat their wives like servants but also suggest an anxiety with wives having power over male servants. In *All's Well That Ends Well*, Helena is clearly a character molded out of her service in the household: "[B]efore she can be accepted as a wife, she must play and outgrow many features of a servant, including the menace of servility" (62). In other words, immediately after her marriage to Bertram, she continues to be a good servant when she obeys his order and fulfills

his conditions for true marriage, but, in the process, she demonstrates to all that she is a capable wife and mistress of other's actions.

Much has been written about Iago's role in relation to his master, Othello, and Weil adds to this conversation by building on the work of those interested in slavery. While Leggatt sees Iago as lacking an identity, Weil reads Iago as believing that service itself destroys identity. Rather than be enslaved by such service, Iago will only offer a pretense of service. In doing so, he becomes the enslaver of Othello when he taps into Othello's fear that marriage brings with it a form of servitude (72). Emilia, on the other hand, recognizes her role as first owing loyalty to her husband and then to her mistress. Yet, she exercises her will when she chooses one over the other. Weil points out that "in acting for herself as well as for her mistress, she gives lie to the alternatives initially posed by Iago" (75). Moreover, Emilia's speech about all that has happened also seems to revive Othello, freeing him from Iago's chains, to return to the role of "public guardian" (75).

Just as Emilia acts heroic, despite her role of wife and servant, several servants in *The Winter's Tale* take actions to save the master from himself. While Leontes has nothing but doubts and suspicions about the loyalties of his subordinates, it is their independent actions that bring about the reunion at the end of the play. Emilia's initial love for her husband allowed her to give Desdemona's handkerchief to her husband, rather than return it to its owner, her mistress. Here, the love each servant has for the falsely accused seems to enable them to disobey orders with good ends. Camillo and Paulina are both servants who disobey orders and end up saving Leontes from himself. Again, Weil is pointing to the ways that servants have agency; while wives and servants often work to intervene in the will of their masters, these plays suggest that co-operation among masters, servants, and wives is indispensable.

In one of the most interesting chapters of the book, Weil examines the "fusion of service with friendship roles" in *Henry IV, Part Two* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. In these two plays, she finds Shakespeare testing the social codes and customary practices surrounding relationships where service and friendship "can become a dangerous border country" (88). While Falstaff and Enobarbus are "self-protecting figures, especially adept at maneuvering in ambiguous social territory," their downfalls give "the lie to commonplace wisdom on how supple undergrowth is able to weather political storms in which colossal oaks crash down" (81).

Rather than patronage, Weil is interested in the competing discourses about the role of friendship in service. While some writers seem to cel-

celebrate the fusion as a state of bliss, others are more cynical about the “border-land where service and friendship overlap” (85). Weil explores various discourses about friendship: “Aristotle, Cicero, and Montaigne, among others, tried to exclude familial and instrumental relations from true friendship,” while Sir Walter Raleigh “distrusts both friends and servants” (85). Weil is interested in what she calls “assured friendship” which “derives from the feudal system” and “entails reciprocity within ‘unequal obligations’” (84). Weil finds that these two plays explore the danger in the convergence of service and friendship not only for Prince Hal and Antony, in their respective plays, but also through a whole range of dependants; Bardolph and Poin help us see Falstaff more clearly; similarly, Cleopatra’s attendants bring into relief choices made by Enobarbus, as well as Cleopatra herself.

The last two chapters of Weil’s book examine, like Leggatt’s book, the tragedies of *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. While each author sees the painful associations in dependant relations between father and child in *King Lear*; their treatments of *Macbeth* are quite different (yet each produces an impressive reading of the play). For Weil, both tragedies are alike in that “specific interactions by specific individuals prove terribly destructive precisely because they seem always to have worked, to have been validated by customary wisdom and tradition” (105). Yet, while *Lear* explores the needs of social bonding through its breakdowns, *Macbeth*’s story is one where tyranny and bondage produce a kind of terror that destroys all sense of love, friendship, or loyalty.

Weil develops the notion of “outcasts” to discuss the key characters in *King Lear*. Lear begins the play with an assurance that his followers, including his daughters, owe complete devotion to him. Lear “makes few distinctions between the duties owed him by daughters, noblemen, and body servants” (108). Weil’s point is not that Lear is wrong to do this; after all, her previous chapters have shown the many ways these roles overlap. Chaos comes for Lear when he doesn’t recognize that “a fusion negotiable in one set of circumstances might become a destructive confusion in others” (111). His failure comes from being “overly dependent on the followers he loves; he confounds his children with his assured friends when he trusts them to confirm his division of the kingdom” (115).

Weil considers the ways in which the many references to female sexuality can be linked to service; characters in the play often link “good service to fruitful legitimate pregnancy and bad service or serviceability to lust and bastardy” (117). Moreover, Weil points out several references to the cast-off, pregnant servant girl or daughter “haunting the social borders

of several Shakespearean tragedies” (118). Here, Cordelia’s banishment points to this situation and Edgar’s cover story (that he is “a serving man ruined through an illicit affair with his mistress”) is the male equivalent (120). Lear, in his outcast state, begins to identify with a woman who has been shamed and cast away when he speaks of the homeless, crying infants and hypocritical beadles (121).

Edgar’s fictive biography figures in the final section of her treatment of *King Lear* because it represents a disruption in the fusion of friendship and service. Weil argues that Edgar enacts Poor Tom’s madness as not only a cover from the madness of his own father for attacking him, but the story he tells (“that he has lost his place and been possessed by fiends because he made love to his employer”) is also one which “illuminates the worst abuse of assured friendship” (123). Friends are to provide protection and security; the servant that can seem a friend, who can “simulate loyal obedience,” is one of the most dangerous. For Weil, the five fiends that possess Tom are figures for the predatory, parasitic impulses of lust that can afflict servants. In the discourses of possession and witchcraft that Tom’s speeches recall, “demons who frequently afflict servants, preventing them from work or ruining their productive labor, are themselves regarded as servants of the devil” (126).

Weil concludes her analysis turning to the *Macbeth*, which not only recalls the associations of witchcraft and servility just discussed but also returns to consider the relationship of service and slavery, first discussed in *Othello*. For Weil, almost every scene of *Macbeth* contains suggestions of “servitude and bondage” and almost all of the characters are “preoccupied with security” (129). Macbeth, with the help of the supernatural elements, “drains labor and agency of value” (129). For Weil, the play “evokes freedom through representations of bondage” (131). Weil’s overall project of the book is to locate a form of agency within relations of dependency. To demonstrate this thesis in *Macbeth*, she engages with political theory to question

a cherished belief among many modern libertarians and democrats: that being in or under the will of another person, a condition often used to define servants, is incompatible with freedom. Instead, I will argue that one means by which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth create virtual slavery in themselves is by perverting service. Service in this play can be consistent with freedom; it is opposed to slavery, not identified with it. (131)

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In addition to modern political theory, Weil examines a political treatise entitled *Voluntary Servitude*, by Etienne de La Boetie (1530–63), a friend of Michel de Montaigne, to explore how the culture's sense of free agency, of belonging to oneself, might still coexist with subordinate social status (132). Negating this theory, the play reveals the ways that Macbeth uses his servants as "props for tyranny"; the Macbeths become "servile" themselves by "enslaving others" (134). For example, the witches "behave as if they were servants themselves, but servants whose duties and obligations are impossible to define" (135). The witches make "agency pointless, not so much by inverting or parodying authority (as the witch-hunters liked to believe) but by confusing it so that the vital activity of practical discernment, of freely judging one's complex obligations or, indeed, of working with or through dependent relations, breaks down" (137).

For Weil, Lady Macbeth is not an enslaver of Macbeth's will, as some would have her; instead, she sees her as his instrument or tool, one of those "all too loyal servants or favorites" who "fashioned herself as the perfect hand-maid, a one-way mirror for Macbeth's mind" (138). "Like his wife, Macbeth becomes a virtual slave" but without a clear master; "he becomes a thing or instrument, mutually dependent on other dehumanized things or assassins" (140). When Macbeth feels the most isolated and alienated, after Lady Macbeth's death, he is also surrounded by corrupt and faithless servants, which he had reduced to inhuman tools. In contrast, Macduff and Malcolm enact service to Scotland in their regicide. Resistance to tyranny is again linked with freedom at the end of the play when many of the tools who served Macbeth "choose to turn upon Macbeth and to fight on the side of his opponents (5.7.25)" (131).

For Weil, the interesting border in *Macbeth* is the difference between service (where agency is possible) and slavery (where it is not); for Leggatt, Macbeth crosses a line with the murder and his identity breaks: "[T]he thoughts he has tried to suppress now confront him everywhere he looks. And that border, dividing 'me' from 'not me' is the border that defines identity" (184). Both books engage with the language of the plays to support their interpretations, giving emphasis to various themes and ideas. Interestingly, both use the metaphor of the border to help them describe their interpretation. More often than not, Leggatt looks to where the border is something to be crossed and Weil looks to an in-between space that resembles both sides of the border.

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