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To the Editor:
In a recent ingenious paper Harrison Pope and colleagues (2007) used a web-based challenge to complement their own investigations into verifiable cases of repressed memories. Pope and colleagues note they have (1) not found any verifiable examples of repressed memories in real people, and (2) that repressed memories appear to have arisen as literary notion in the late eighteenth century. The example below from Act V, Scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* shows that literary musings on repressed memories date at least back to the very beginning of the seventeenth century, while, in Shakespeare's wonderful ambiguity leaving open the question of repressed memories in real people. Also, unbelievably, Shakespeare presages the modern controversy in academic, medical and lay public about repressed memories.

MACBETH. How does your patient, doctor?
DOCTOR. Not so sick, my lord,
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies,
That keep her from her rest.
MACBETH. Cure her of that.
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?
DOCTOR. Therein the patient
Must minister to himself.

Declaration of Interest

None.

Reference

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The Authors' reply
Certainly, *Macbeth* speaks to the issue of memory for traumatic events. However, we would suggest that the passage from Act V is not a 'literary musing on repressed memory', but rather a graphic illustration that one *cannot* repress a memory. Lady Macbeth is utterly unable to forget her complicity in murdering Duncan, much as she might wish to do so. Indeed, in a previous scene, she laments that 'all the perfumes of Arabia' cannot erase the smell of Duncan's blood from her hands (Shakespeare, 1605). Thus, Shakespeare, like writers before him (see Quintas Smyrnaeus, 4th century A.D. in Pope *et al*. 2007), portrays the age-old *wish* that one could somehow erase the memory of traumatic events, but does not suggest that one actually can do so. Indeed, if spontaneous amnesia for traumatic events were a natural human psychological phenomenon, why would Shakespeare have never portrayed it in any character anywhere in his plays?

That said, we would like to take this opportunity to inform readers that we have found cases suggestive of repressed memory in two fictional works (de Laclos, 1782; Marsollier, 1786) from France in the 1780s – the heyday of mesmerism (Darnton, 1968). Both cases display features of delirium and widespread amnesia rather than pure repressed memory, but we have nevertheless awarded our $1000 prize to the opera 'Nina' (Marsollier, 1786), because it

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comes sufficiently close to the criteria posted in our 'repressed-memory challenge' (Pope *et al*. 2007 and http://www.biopsychlab.com). This development does not affect our conclusion that dissociative amnesia is a romantic notion restricted to recent Western culture; it simply sets the onset of this notion a few years earlier than our previously proposed threshold of 1800.

Declaration of Interest

None.

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