

“You should be women,/ And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That  
you are so.” (I.iii.45–46): Masculinity, femininity, and androgyny in  
Macbeth

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Abstract:

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* isolates and contrasts conventional notions of masculinity and femininity, yet also examines their interplay, in the form of androgyny, or their absence, in the form of sexlessness. In a play that treats the themes of succession, hierarchy, and order, Shakespeare’s perversion of orthodox concepts of manhood and womanhood, in terms of physical anatomy and mental sensibilities alike, may be mapped onto the presence, within the play, of the disruption of the so-called natural order.

Through *Macbeth*’s androgynous witches, whose beards cloud the distinction between male and female physical attributes, Shakespeare associates the conflicting presence of masculinity and femininity simultaneously with a parallel distortion of natural harmony and the eerie consequences of supernatural interference. Whereas the androgyny of *Macbeth*’s witches constitutes a combination of masculine and feminine elements, Lady Macbeth’s androgyny signifies a rejection of sex entirely. Nonetheless, said defeminisation of Lady Macbeth, as she pursues her unsexing, is, likewise, accompanied by an indication of the unnatural ruthlessness and civil chaos which she engenders as a result of her purported rejection of the course of nature. Just as Lady Macbeth rejects her femininity, Macbeth himself is emasculated. Formerly the embodiment of the warmongering and virulent masculine ideal, Macbeth’s personal and political unravelling is concomitant to his compromised manhood, indicating a distortion of masculinity that is mirrored in the disruption of mental and societal order.

That the corruption of environment and administrative order is resolved by the reintroduction of masculine hegemony at the play’s climax demonstrates most explicitly the association of order with masculinity and femininity that is distinct and orthodox. Equally, Shakespeare’s perversion of traditional notions of masculinity, femininity, through androgyny, is evocative of environmental and political chaos.

Liston asserts that “[p]robably none of Shakespeare’s plays is so explicit in demarcating man from woman as is *Macbeth*” (232). Though it is certainly true that notions both of manhood and womanhood are scrutinised at length within the play, with “man” and its derivatives appearing more than 40 times in the play, and “woman” approximately a third as frequently (Liston 232), a conception of *Macbeth* as a text that seeks to separate and differentiate man and woman is unwarranted. Rather, Shakespeare’s demonstration of an aberrant interplay of the sexes, both in terms of anatomy and of temperament, generates a dislocating perversion of conventional notions of masculinity and femininity. The occult androgyny of *Macbeth*’s witches, the brutal defeminisation of Lady Macbeth, and the ineffectual emasculation of Macbeth, contrasted with the virulent manhood of Macduff, exemplify, through the subversion, and, at times, explicit rejection, of orthodox gender roles, a deformation of the natural order. That natural order that is restored at the end of the play, wherein masculine dominion defeats the disquieting corruption of what “should be” (1.3.45), constitutes a condemnation of the uncanny distortion of conventional models of man and woman.

Shakespeare’s association of the disruption of masculinity and femininity with the perversion of societal order is perhaps most evident surrounding the androgynous witches, whose muddying of gender boundaries is translated into a debasement of societal harmony. The witches’ introduction is one that immediately conveys an aura of unnatural distortion: the witches’ promise of “a general season of inversion” (Ramsey 287) with “[f]air is foul, and foul is fair” (1.3.45) is mirrored by Macbeth’s observation, just before encountering them, of “[s]o foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.38). This baffling disfigurement of regularity, wherein the repellent and the pleasant are equated, is developed by Banquo’s confusion by their sexually ambiguous anatomy: with “[y]ou should be women,/ And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/ That you are so.” (1.3.45–47). Here, Shakespeare’s employment of the modal verb “should” indicates an disturbance of what ought to be, and develops this through the disquieting incongruence of the “fair” beauty associated with “women” with the contemporaneous “foul” quality of their abnormal beards, which La Belle labels “the most obvious outward sign of their defeminisation” (384). Just as the androgyny of the witches’ appearances “forbid” Banquo “to interpret” (1.3.46) their gender, the parallel ambiguity of their prophecies, such as “[I]esser than Macbeth, and greater” (1.3.65), which continues the dislocating technique of simultaneous discordance, refuses to permit interpretation. Instead, Shakespeare demonstrates a continuation of the association of their

muddying of gender binaries with the obfuscation of their divinations through the unnatural combination of dissonant elements. The disharmony associated with witchcraft, demonstrated by the aberrant forcing together of partitioned human and animal organs, such as “[l]iver of blaspheming Jew” (4.1.26) with “[n]ose of Turk” (4.1.29) into one grotesque corporeal form, is translated into perturbances in the natural world, such as a “falcon towering in her pride of place” being “by a mousing owl hawked at and killed” (2.4.12-13), exemplifying the inversion of order that is caused by the murder of a superior by an inferior, an act that is mirrored by Macbeth, and thereby demonstrating that the witches’ discordant combination of femininity and masculinity in their physical appearance is concomitant to parallel disruptions of harmony in their environment and government. Indeed, that the witches “vanish” (4.1.143) before order is restored upon Macduff’s definitive victory compounds the impossibility a harmonious coexistence of these disruptive entities and political stability.

Whereas *Macbeth*’s witches combine incongruous facets of masculinity and femininity to achieve corporal androgyny, the play’s distortion of conventional notions of gender manifests itself, in Lady Macbeth, through a process of defeminisation affects both her anatomy and her temperament, exemplifying how her unorthodox rejection of gender norms results in callous brutality. Lady Macbeth’s command that spirits should “unsex” her (1.5.41) contains, as La Belle asserts, “suggestions of biological unsexing” that “foreshadow Lady Macbeth’s mental de-feminization” (382). This translation from the anatomical to the emotional first surfaces with Lady Macbeth’s request to be divested physically of “menstruation” (La Belle 382) and “reproductive function” (Levin 40) with her urging that spirits cease her “compunctious visitings of nature” (1.5.45). This signifies a yearning, through the disruption of natural physical processes of female fertility to pervert the allegedly natural mental processes of femininity, namely sympathy and sorrow, in order to block of “th’access and passage to remorse” (1.5.44). Moreover, the image of the nourishing fluid of her “milk” (1.5.48) being replaced by bitter “gall” (1.5.48) is evocative of Lady Macbeth’s rejection of her feminine anatomy instigating a corruption of the innate compassion and sweetness associated with it; mirrored later with her admission that she would not hesitate, while breastfeeding her baby, to have “plucked the nipple from his boneless gums,/ And dashed the brains out” (1.7.57-58). Here, Shakespeare demonstrates the explicit distortion of any natural maternal instinct in Lady Macbeth through his juxtaposition of the “tender” (1.7.55) description of the act of breastfeeding and the vulnerability evoked by the baby’s “boneless gums” (1.7.57) with the immorality and viciousness of committing

infanticide for the sake of political power. Nonetheless, equivalent to the discordance caused by the witches' blurring of gender binaries is the chaos triggered by Lady Macbeth's defeminisation: not only does the creation of a political vacuum through her instigation of the murder of Duncan "nurture... social and political chaos" (Chamberlain 79), but Lady Macbeth's attempt to minimise her femininity in order to act with unfeeling ruthlessness culminates in her downfall. Her endeavour to block the "passage to remorse" (1.5.44) ultimately fails, as initially alluded to her reticence to carry out the murder she implores Macbeth to effectuate, claiming "[h]ad he not resembled/ My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12-13)), and compounded by her guilt-induced delusions of a "damned spot" (5.1.35) of blood following the deed, in addition to her subsequent suicide. Lady Macbeth's attempts to defeminise herself thus constitute a "great perturbation in nature" (5.1.9), that prompts a calamitous and unstable attempt to embrace the conventionally masculine authority much more fruitfully exercised by Macduff.

Just as Lady Macbeth's efforts to defeminise herself in pursuit of masculine influence prove her downfall, the emasculation of Macbeth himself corroborates the ill-fated consequences of an allegedly aberrant interplay between masculinity and femininity. Macbeth, upon the play's opening, appears to conform to an unconfused ideal of exaggerated manhood: the audience is informed of his military prowess by the sergeant praising his bloody ruthlessness, encouraging classifications of the warrior as "brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name)" (1.2.16), and "valiant cousin, worthy gentleman" (1.2.24), thereby demonstrating Liston's conclusion that Macbeth conforms to a definition of a man as "a being who is valiant, courageous, and essentially a person committed to direct, unreflective physical action" (233). Nevertheless, the distortion of this masculine ideal is quickly evidenced with Lady Macbeth's ascribing of feminine corporeal characteristics, namely the implication of being suffused with milk, to him, with her confession "[y]et I do fear thy nature,/ It is too full o' th'milk of human kindness" (1.5.16-17); an emasculation of Macbeth that is developed by Lady Macbeth's questioning of, "[a]re you/ a man?" (3.4.54-55), and her assertion that he is "[q]uite unmanned in folly" (3.4.71). Furthermore, just as Lady Macbeth's attempted acquisition of sterile cruelty, inharmonious with her natural feminine sympathy, is the origin of her delusion, it is Macbeth's excess of unmasculine remorse that triggers his delusions, both of "a dagger" (2.1.33), and of Banquo's ghost seated at the table, thereby demonstrating that the couple's betrayal of what is societally expected of their genders, whether feminine compassionate guilt or masculine unremorseful action, leads to

chaos in the form of the perversion of their perceptions of reality. Indeed, Macbeth's attempt to reassert his masculinity upon the delusion's end, with "I am a man again" (3.4.106), indicates that his temporary insanity has compromised his masculinity in a manner reminiscent of notional female hysteria. Macbeth's inability to embody the masculine ideal of virulent warrior, unburdened by hesitation, empathy, or regret, proves to be his undoing: it is the wholly masculine Macduff, empowered by his marked lack of any affinity with womankind through being "none of woman born" (4.1.79) and "from his mother's womb/ Untimely ripped" (5.8.15-16), hereby profiting from the violent connotations of "ripped", who succeeds in defeating Macbeth, signalling that "Macbeth is forced to accept a concept of manliness that consists wholly in rampant self-seeking aggression" (Ramsey 289). Macduff's victory, that of a warrior defeating a tyrant through said "self-seeking aggression", signals the restoration, by a wholly masculine entity, of a social harmony and natural order once threatened by Macbeth, his wife, and the witches, through their dislocating and purportedly unnatural perversion of masculinity and femininity.

Liston affirms that "the norm against which *Macbeth* works is a traditional definition of man as valorous, firm, commanding... and a traditional definition of woman as soft, maternal, nourishing, a help meet to her husband" (238). Shakespeare's demonstration of the distortion, corruption, and perversion of these traditional definitions of man and woman, through the androgynous witches, the defeminised Lady Macbeth, and the emasculated Macbeth results in an apparent interruption of the natural order, wherein "[n]ature seems dead" (2.1.50). The multifaceted, transitory, unfixed, and ambiguous presentations of gender in *Macbeth* occur against a background of political and environmental chaos; chaos that is demonstrated to be unsupportable, and reversed by the play's end, wherein fixed masculine dominion is restored.

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