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**GENDER IN SHAKESPEARE'S MACBETH: PERFORMANCES AND
PERFORMATIVITIES**

by

CHRISTA REAVES

A THESIS

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts**

in

The Department of English

to


The School of Graduate Studies

of

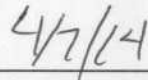
**The University of Alabama in Huntsville
HUNTSVILLE, ALABAMA**

2014

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Submitted by Christa Reaves in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English and accepted on behalf of the Faculty of the School of Graduate Studies by the thesis committee.

We, the undersigned members of the Graduate Faculty of The University of Alabama in Huntsville, certify that we have advised and/or supervised the candidate on the work described in this thesis. We further certify that we have reviewed the thesis manuscript and approve it in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English.

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ABSTRACT

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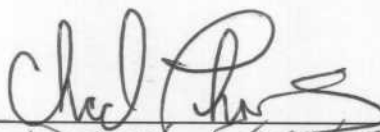

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Title Gender in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: Performances and Performativities .

Critics and audiences alike have been guilty of reducing Lady Macbeth and Macbeth to the most basic form of their characters—evil. Because of their non-normative, complex gender roles, they are often misunderstood. Through the application of gender theory and performance theory, the anxieties within *Macbeth* surrounding and concerning gender can be explained as an issue of performance. With the understanding that gender is performative, I argue that the key to portraying the humanity within these characters is through performance of the text. In examining various stage and screen performances of *Macbeth*, I demonstrate that portraying these characters as realistic and human, the overall cathartic effect of the tragedy has greater value and opens up multivalent performance possibilities for the text.

Abstract Approval:

Committee Chair
Department Chair
Graduate Dean

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To my parents, Bill and Cindy, who listened to me talk about the Scottish play *ad nauseum* for the past two years.

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CHAPTER ONE

Lady Macbeth's (Gender) Troubles

"I dare do all that may become a man/Who dares do more is none." *Macbeth* 1.7.46-47

In my first year of graduate school, I studied *Macbeth* in my Shakespeare seminar class. During our classroom discussion of the play, one of my classmates bluntly stated that Lady Macbeth is crazy. Although I am certain that this was not the first time I had heard this sentiment expressed, it struck a nerve. I began a feminist investigation into the play centered on the figure of Lady Macbeth, and in my seminar paper, I discovered that the dismissive attitude of my colleague toward Lady Macbeth appeared throughout the scholarship I encountered in my research, but the reasons for Lady Macbeth's "craziness" tends to be reductive: she is a "difficult" character. In this era of criticism, why were students and scholars content to write off a major character simply because she was difficult? Where was the Shakespearean humanity, so prevalent in consideration of other difficult characters (Othello, Prospero, Richard III), in this treatment of her? Why did scholars, in print and in the classroom alike, refuse to accept her as a person?

The more I researched this question of Lady Macbeth's humanity, the more I became convinced that critical reduction of her was due to the performance of the text—or rather the performativity of *Macbeth* (the play itself). My personal history as an actor

perhaps gives me a unique perspective on this issue, but I wanted to make a connection, both as a scholar researching a text and as an actor preparing a script, because academics and theatregoers alike are consumers of Shakespeare's plays. This insight led me to a new set of questions issues: As scholars and as performers, how can we understand this character and make her relatable to our students and our audiences? Is it not possible to relate to her? Why do we hold ourselves back from connecting to the humanity in her? In attempting to answer these questions, I found that rather than the interpretation and reception of Lady Macbeth directly affected our interpretation of Macbeth himself, and as such, my research became more about the performance of gender within the play and less about feminism. In examining the way scholars and performers interpret these characters in terms of gender, our cultural expectations of masculinity and femininity are exposed along with the anxieties concerning gender within the text.

As my initial investigation into feminist scholarship concerning *Macbeth* indicated a dearth of critical work sympathetic to the character of Lady Macbeth, subsequent research demonstrated an inability on the part of scholars to categorize her. The gender of the witches is textually called into question and thus easy to dismiss in an examination of gender. Lady Macduff, although an intriguing feminine figure, only appears in one scene, and as such is not the focus of the critical conversation. Lady Macbeth, despite being both a character of significant textual importance and the major female figure in the play, appears in scholarship in simple, unflattering, reductive terms. The more she was reduced, the more the interpretation of Macbeth's character was reduced as a consequence. If Lady Macbeth was an unsexed shrew instead of a lady, then Macbeth became a man cowering before a harpy rather than a king and a warrior. In

short, in limiting the interpretation of one character who exhibits anxiety over gender, the other characters who interact with him or her will be limited as well, even the tragic hero of the text.

In order for *Macbeth* to work as a tragedy, the audience (either readers or viewers) must be able to sympathize with the Macbeths. According to Aristotle's conception of tragedy, the goal at the end of the play is catharsis (an affective reaction to a character's pain and suffering); moreover, the key to this catharsis is sympathy. In the introduction to his critical edition of *Macbeth*, Harold Bloom (who famously argued that Shakespeare "invented" our modern conception of humanity) investigates a literary stumbling block that surfaces throughout scholarship on the play—the concept of the Macbeths' likability. Bloom, like many of his colleagues, works to shed light on Shakespeare's ability to produce sympathy within his audience for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, characters who perpetrate unambiguously evil acts against the innocent. Whatever explanations the individual critics offer, there is scholarly consensus that audiences find the characters of *Macbeth* affective, yet surprisingly, recent productions of Shakespeare's work and much of the recent scholarship on the play do not necessarily reflect a view of *Macbeth* that takes this audience connection into account. Additionally, scholars and theatre practitioners remain unaffected by the cultural progression toward a more evolved understanding of gender as a factor into the interpretation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. If scholars agree that the Macbeths are meant to be sympathetic, that audiences will relate to their story, then it must follow that they are not characters to be reduced to the easiest terms.

What is within Macbeth and Lady Macbeth that creates this connection to the audience and the sympathy such connection inspires is their innate humanity. These individuals, as is typical of Shakespeare's characters, possess an essential humanity—a kernel of universal essence that gives a person her personhood. This part of these characters speaks to audiences despite their inhumane actions (actions that betray that universal human essence in them or in others). Although an audience member (or a reader, for a reader is simply an audience of one with more creative control) may not relate to Macbeth's ambition specifically, he can relate to his suffering in the wake of his actions. Alternately, a woman may not understand Lady Macbeth's ambition to murder Duncan, but she may sympathize with her moments of hesitation in the action. When Lady Macbeth succumbs to madness, the audience *feels* something, because it is human nature to be haunted by our mistakes and it is human nature to sympathize with the suffering of others. Human nature, then, describes those behaviors that connect to the universal, essential humanity; as such, the term applies to both good qualities and faults. If humanity is essential in terms of this argument, then gender is constructed. Humanity then encompasses those qualities that we would define as human.

Whereas humanity is an inescapably inborn part of identity, each person creates individually. As opposed to a person's sex, which is biological, gender is a constructed identity that a person enacts constantly and continually. Gender is active, a performative process that melds cultural expectations with internal realities. To speak of femininity, then, is to consider the "femaleness" of a character, including qualities that tie in to biological womanhood but expand beyond that. Often, cultural expectations of femininity are at odds with the realities of a character's expression of femininity, particularly in the

case of Lady Macbeth. The same is true of masculinity and the expression of it. Then, gender is performative in *Macbeth*—meaning that audiences perceive gender only as it is performed, but also that gender is dependent upon performance because the text is being performed as well.

Furthermore, the spectrum of the natural, the unnatural, and the supernatural, emphasized throughout *Macbeth*, is essential to this investigation of gender. Shakespeare blurs the lines between natural and supernatural events in *Macbeth*'s Scotland through the inclusion of the witches, prophecies, and the disruption of the Great Chain of Being (a Neo-Platonic hierarchy important in medieval culture suggesting that everything in the world stems from God.) Shakespeare extends natural and supernatural to include a third category—unnatural—that makes the dynamics of the relationship between the ideas more like grades on a spectrum rather than diametrically opposed mutually exclusive concepts. Whereas the “natural” encompasses that which *is allowed for* in nature and the “supernatural” is that which occurs *outside the boundaries* of nature, then the “unnatural” is that which *should not* occur within nature. A common misconception among Shakespearean scholarship on the topic of gender (femininity in particular) is the idea that non-normative behavior, especially when gender-coded, is unnatural. If Lady Macbeth is a sympathetic character, however, then her actions can be understood as natural even though they are outside of the cultural expectations of a female of her age and station; the same is true of Macbeth and his masculinity. This understanding of nature and the spectrum of the natural, unnatural, and supernatural becomes important to a critical interrogation of the text of *Macbeth* because the play complicates the binaries and dichotomies at work in the text. The Macbeths complicate the audience's expectation

of traditional, normative gender roles, contributing to the larger complication of diametrically opposed concepts within the play.

Therefore, performance is the key to an audience's acceptance of non-normative behaviors and blurred binaries. As a text, *Macbeth* inspires various responses in scholars, performers, readers, and audiences alike—it has for centuries. In the same way, individual performances—hereafter performance-texts—reach audiences independently of the source material. The range of performances in the last fifty years alone indicates that performance allows for new, specific interpretations to play into cultural changes and trends. The response of the audience, their acceptance or rejection of the production, their reactions, both positive and negative, makes a performance complete. The ability of an audience to perceive at once the actor and character, the gender and the sex, the culture of feudal Scotland and the contemporary cultural understandings at work on the stage or screen, and the implications thereof are all explored in this paper. The successful collaboration of the academic understanding of the text, the representation on the stage in the bodies of the actors, and the reception of the audience come together to allow for new understandings of the text, both in performance and in the classroom, which in turn leads to new possibilities in both venues.

CHAPTER TWO

Gender, Performance, Performativity

In the last few decades, scholarship on *Macbeth* has yet to fully reflect the evolution of critical thought with the influence of newer critical theories and literary fields; specifically, the portrayal and analysis of gender in the play demands more attention. Initially, my research reflected a dearth of scholarly writing dealing specifically and definitively with the females in *Macbeth*, and what existing material that was found pertaining to them often failed to offer progressive views on the subject. In addition, typically *Macbeth* is too easily written off as emasculated, with gender represented in a very limited manner. With the advent of feminist theory, gender studies, and performance theory in the latter part of the last century, the approach taken to Lady Macbeth, the Weird Sisters, and *Macbeth* should reflect more sophistication, seeking to overturn centuries of parochial thought on the representations of gender in this play.

In pondering Bloom's insistence on the appeal of *Macbeth*, which I introduced in the previous chapter that in spite of their actions the *Macbeths* elicit sympathy, I question the emotional appeal of the *Macbeths* as one-dimensional and unmotivated when there is clear turmoil and instability surrounding their gender identities. Through a gender-

conscious investigation of *Macbeth* that focuses both on the text and the text in performance, it becomes apparent that an expanded view of these characters (particularly Lady Macbeth) as fully developed, complicated people struggling with their identities, as well as against society and the supernatural, allows for a greater cathartic theatrical or reading experience.

In this chapter, I shall discuss the critical perspectives at work in this paper according to feminist works pertaining to Lady Macbeth and the witches, articles dealing with Macbeth's internalized conflict with himself and external struggles with his environment, and scholarship concerning the performance of *Macbeth* on stage or in film as well as performativity in general. Through this examination, the humanity within the characters (or, their ability to elicit a cathartic response) can be found and related to; conversely, I shall expose a few reductive readings and rationalizations of these characters as well.

The key to the tragedy of *Macbeth* is in an audience's identification with the characters. Returning to Bloom's provoking question of the ability of the audience to sympathize with Macbeth (8), Bloom suggests "imagination" can contribute to a better understanding of this sympathy with the Macbeths. "Macbeth's imagination," Bloom argues, "is at once his greatest strength and his destructive weakness, yet it does not provoke an ambivalence in us. We thrill to its poetic, expressionistic strength, whatever its consequences." Macbeth's imagination, then, creates the person he becomes throughout the action of the play—the killer, the tyrant, the obsessive and obsessed. In taking his thought one step further, Lady Macbeth's imagination, her ability to foresee

Duncan's murder and Macbeth's succession to the throne, also invented her own destruction.

Using Bloom's concept as a starting point concerning the ability to provoke sympathy, the universal concepts of covetous desire and remorse displayed by Lady Macbeth throughout the action of the play should be felt and comprehended by her audience. We may be morbidly drawn in through her strength of purpose to advance herself in society and her determination to murder innocents, but we identify with the emotional journey she experiences after the deeds have been done. In the same way, perhaps more apparently, the audience understands and sympathizes with Macbeth's inability to back off from his destructive course of action once he commits to it. Our imagination, as well, becomes engaged, allowing us to become Macbeth in our own minds and feel his ambition and outrage at his circumstances. This phenomenon, as well as the lingering effects on the audience of a beheaded tyrant Macbeth, Bloom terms "negative transcendence" (10). He juxtaposes the "positive transcendence" of Hamlet's charisma to Macbeth's existentially bleak situation at the end of the play. Positively or negatively, either way, the audience is taken in.

Gender

I shall appropriate Bloom's ideas of negative transcendence and the power of imagination in relation to Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's gender identities; basically, their negative imagining of their gender based on their individual insecurities and societal pressures created their fractured identities which prove so problematic for audiences and scholars alike. Despite the almost universal inability to pin down the complexities of

gender within this play (or a disinterest in doing so), the essential problems that these characters struggle with throughout the play—how to be a husband/wife, king/queen, man/woman—transcend the stage or page and haunt the audience. The audience identifies with Lady Macbeth and Macbeth despite their actions and flaws, to which this negative transcendence contributes; the anxiety of gender we observe in the Macbeths lurks in all of us.

In the study of feminism and performance alike, gender is defined not as something that is a state of being but rather as something one performs, consciously or unconsciously. As Judith Butler posits, “gender is in no way a stable identity...rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (519). She goes on to trace the idea of “woman” as opposed to “female” to Simone de Beauvoir’s work, arguing that there is a distinction between “sex, as a biological facticity, and gender, as the cultural interpretation or signification of that facticity” (522). To clarify, if male/female are biological distinctions and man/woman are gender identities, then the insecurity, instability, and anxiety within the play are concerned with gender—that is to say, they are concerned with the cultural significance or interpretation of manhood/womanhood.

Lady Macbeth’s anxiety over gender in particular is most problematic for scholars to come to terms with; yet it is in her suffering over her actions that Shakespeare displays her humanity. Traditionally, scholarship has been unwilling to consider the implications of her descent into self-destructive insanity. The rather strong impression Lady Macbeth leaves on the audience in her initial scenes (her invocation to the spirits and the spurring of her husband into action) is seemingly insurmountable for some critics (Rosalind S.

Meyer and Bryan Adams Hampton, to name a few). Others, such as Paige Martin Reynolds and Joanna Levin, consider the madness and the apparent angst she feels later in the play to be the most telling facets of Lady Macbeth's femininity. Although she has greatly contributed to this situation of disorder for herself and for the whole of Scotland, she has not gotten rid of the core of humanity inside of her that will be affected by her choices and their consequences. Beyond functioning as a critique of the patriarchy and the limited, restrictive roles of women (which I believe that she does), Lady Macbeth is also instrumental in showing an audience that humanity in oneself, even when rejected or suppressed, is very hard to extinguish.

The trend among feminist critics of *Macbeth* is either (1) to focus on Lady Macbeth's desire to be "unsexed" in an effort to subvert the patriarchy or (2) to examine her "insanity" and suicide as indicative of a patriarchal oppression that eventually crushes her. This points to critics' reading in Lady Macbeth the desire not to become not-female, and not to become male, but to find an alternative for her strictly defined gender role. As Stephanie Chamberlain points out, "although she may well fantasize killing an infant, Lady Macbeth expressly rejects the masculine power which would allow her to wield a dagger... [she] ultimately refuses masculine authority. What she craves instead is an alternative gender identity, one which will allow her to slip free of the emotional as well as cultural constraints governing women" (79-80). Scholarship on Lady Macbeth should interpret her desire to be unsexed not as a desire to be male, which undermines the entire point of feminism, but as a desire to not be limited to the socially constructed idea of femininity.

Inversely, some scholars explain her anxiety over gender to be entirely self-inflicted. Richard Kimbrough asserts that gender is a matter of the mind, and as such, Lady Macbeth has imprisoned herself rather than been imprisoned by society (175). Thus when she falls into insanity, it is her mind rejecting her transition from traditional womanhood to this demonized murderous witch figure. Unfortunately, this anxiety stems from a misinterpretation of what she has rejected. Kimbrough claims that “Lady Macbeth and her society have labeled remorse and pity as merely ‘feminine.’ She and her society confuse womanhood and humanhood” (181). In asking for her milk to be exchanged for gall, while she is asking for her maternal nurturing instinct to be replaced with cruelty, she is really intending for her humanity to be replaced with inhumanity as opposed to her femininity being replaced by masculinity. It is not a question of gender, though she and her society perceive it as such; it is a question of what it means to be a person with moral and ethical sensibilities.

In an attempt to marry these two seemingly disparate images (Lady Macbeth as the strong, unfeminine traitor and as the tormented woman crying in her sleep), Joanna Levin argues that Lady Macbeth is split between the “demonic matriarch,” which ties her to the witches, and the “secular mother,” a woman who is clearly fertile and capable of being a mother, but focuses on her sexuality and individuality rather than her nurturing maternal instinct. “As dominant representations of femininity came to emphasize the good mother over and against the threatening witch, the hysteric stood as an intermediary figure,” she writes, explaining the Early Modern thinking on the different female figures of *Macbeth*, with Lady Macbeth’s insanity marking her as the hysteric; “combining features of both prototypes, she exposed the instability of patriarchal classifications” (38).

Unwilling or unable to be the good mother, but not conforming to the role of the ostracized witch who fights the established societal structure from the outside, Lady Macbeth stands in between, clearly illuminating the failings of these polarized gender roles long established by the patriarchy. As she collapses in on herself, she demonstrates the tension between these archetypes and how they are clearly not mutually exclusive.

These ideas support the interpretation that Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff, and the Weird Sisters are portraits of unnatural femininity in terms of the Early Modern understanding of the feminine—meaning they are not silent and obedient; they stand in opposition to patriarchal expectations for women. As Elizabeth Klett puts it, the women of *Macbeth* “are all, to varying degrees, ‘unnatural,’ not because they are necessarily evil, but because they critique their roles, either directly or indirectly, in an oppressive patriarchal world” (53). Not only do they themselves stand as figures of criticism of the patriarchal system, but they actively, verbally criticize the men of the play. Aware of the gendered anxieties of her husband (which mirror her own), Lady Macbeth plays on them to spur him into action (Bruckner 195). Lady Macduff, though technically acquiescent to her gender-specific lot in life, rants against the norms of the system, showing that her true loyalties are not to the king and the body politic, but only to her family (Klett 54). The witches, ostensibly utilizing chaos to return the world to order, keep their ultimate motivations a mystery; however, they clearly exist outside of society, demonstrating a powerful existence separate from the dictated gender roles defined by the patriarchy.

Some critics read Lady Macbeth as an extension the witches; that is to say that her actions and her suffering stem from her alterity, not the tension that results from it, an existential crisis of identity rather than an emotional response to societal pressure.

However, in reducing Lady Macbeth to another of the witches, it eliminates the tensions specific to her character and situation produced within the play. Bryan Adams Hampton cites Lady Macbeth as a witch, saying that her “unsex me” speech is her calling upon her familiars to contaminate her metaphorical milk with which she will suckle and nurture Macbeth (341). Drawing even more firmly upon Lady Macbeth’s ties to the witches, Rosalind S. Meyer argues that Lady Macbeth is intentionally a figure meant to call to mind Seneca’s Medea—the destructive maternal sentiments found in *Macbeth* I.vii, coupled with her bloodlust, “marks her as a Medea-figure” (88). Such suggestions, while useful in other ways and certainly in other readings of *Macbeth*, do not serve to expound upon the humanity and femininity of these characters. Allowing her to be female and human while committing atrocities brings her closer to the audience and creates a powerful pathetic appeal.

A more developed, less reductive reading of Lady Macbeth calls for a new reading of *Macbeth* as well. Hampton’s essay investigating the supernatural elements of the play equates Macbeth to a poison or parasite that must be purged from Scotland, or perhaps to a possessed individual in need of an exorcism. In doing this, and as mentioned previously, making Lady Macbeth a witch figure, Hampton explores the many binary relationships found within the play—sacred/profane, healthy/unhealthy, good/evil, alive/dead. Though these elements are found in the play, Hampton reminds us that Macbeth’s Scotland is a land where “fair is foul and foul is fair” (*Macbeth* 1.1); all the binaries become complicated, the divisions blurred. Thus the binary nature of gender identities, male/female, is eliminated, leaving the Macbeths without the security of clearly delineated gender roles, creating an atmosphere of anxiety and unrest. But again,

Kimbrough's insistence is that the problem of gender is created within the mind, giving credence to Hampton's analogy of a sickness. Is gender for Macbeth, then, a disease of the mind, an anxious disorder? Lady Macbeth certainly seems to lose herself to the prison of her mind; Macbeth initially displays such anxiety over his masculinity. Kimbrough's work, while focusing on gender, takes the focus away from gender, or manhood/womanhood, and places it on their humanity. I offer a reading that allows for both gender anxiety and questions of humanity rather than considering them mutually exclusive.

Performance

So many of these questions (especially regarding "gender" and "humanity") depend upon the way the play is performed; simply put, the performative aspects of Shakespeare cannot be divorced from the textual content. However, before I can contend with the portrayals of gender in performances, the performativity of gender itself must be addressed as it applies to this project. As Judith Butler argues, "gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed" (527). In other words, Butler says that gender is basically a mask that is "put on with anxiety and with pleasure," a necessary fiction humans create and maintain (531). Therefore, the daily performance of gender can easily be compared to a theatrical performance, or in Butler's terms, "the acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts" (521). Because there is a natural commonality between dramatic performance and gender performance, I also consider the theatrical performance of gender.

In part, my conception of performance is grounded in this idea of that gender and theatrical performance can be understood cooperatively. The concept of gender in addition to the concept of performance is encapsulated in Erika Fischer-Lichte's work "Reality and Fiction in Contemporary Theatre." She explains that audiences at once perceive an actor's phenomenal body (the physical body the audience perceives) and her dramatic body (the character) at once, although those bodies can be in conflict with each other, creating a unique tension. She calls this phenomenon perceptive multistability (88). An actor is at once himself, unavoidably, and the character; while directors can exploit this by casting abnormal or unexpected bodies in conventional or traditional roles, normally the process of shifting between awareness of an actor and awareness of a character happens seamlessly and constantly in a successful performance (that is, a performance that is well executed by the actor). So while an audience can be continually aware of the gender of the actor playing Lady Macbeth, they can question her femaleness through her portrayal; likewise, the actor playing Macbeth can reinforce the audience's masculine perception of him from his body through his acting.

The performance of these characters onstage can either progress our understanding of them in terms of our modern understanding and the forward momentum of scholarship on the subject; however, it can also continue to reinforce old or bad readings of the text, missing the opportunity for change and regressing in sophistication of the ideas portrayed. For example, critic Julie Barmazel points out Lady Macbeth's fixation on her body in her initial scene of the play, questioning the accepted idea of her barrenness and suggesting that Macbeth struggles with impotence (121). Can this subtlety within the text of the scene be explored if Lady Macbeth is simply labeled as evil or

witchlike? Perhaps an actress or director could find ways to communicate such anxiety, but they are restricted by the limitations they have set upon themselves at that point.

So much of the scholarship concerning the performance of Lady Macbeth focuses on her baser appeal, and the attraction/repulsion necessary for this character creates extremely polarized responses. In his notes on Lady Macbeth for his opera, Verdi wrote “Lady was to be ugly and evil...have a harsh, stifled, and hollow voice” (qtd. in Bernstein 39). By contrast, director Geoffrey Wright portrays Lady Macbeth in his 2006 film “as the alluring villain who exploits her sexuality to negotiate and maintain power” (Rooks 151). Wright’s adaptation also includes the witches in this category, as they are portrayed as mischievous schoolgirls, libidinous and destructive. The commonality in these two disparate ideas is the idea that Lady Macbeth has a power that is threatening, whether it is encased in an off-putting, unappealing shell or an attractive and pleasing one. Both interpretations here point to a dark creature who is to be feared, not a person with complex motivations and desires.

Such limited portrayals disregard more evolved portrayals of Lady Macbeth and the femininity within the play that existed as far back as the Eighteenth Century (if not farther). In her work analyzing Welsh actress Sarah Siddons, who played Lady Macbeth late in that century, Laura Engel quotes the actress as saying Lady Macbeth is essentially “feminine, nay perhaps even fragile” (244). Engel goes on to describe Siddons’ portrayal of the character as someone who “should be pitied because she is suffering so much from the dreadful knowledge of the crime she has participated in committing” (250), not as a bloodthirsty, with-holding, cold woman. James Wells reinforces this idea of a character suffering from her crimes, pointing out that the strides she and Macbeth take to create

new identities for themselves are the actions that destroy those identities (and their old ones as well) (234). The transition into a new person, one who should be regal and powerful but instead is fragile and damaged, should be reflected onstage or onscreen in an internal struggle, something restrictive one-dimensional interpretations do not allow.

The, looking at the text in terms of performance opens the play to many richer interpretations, both generally and specifically in terms of gender. By studying Lady Macbeth's emotional appeal, for instance, scholars can not only identify the humanity within the character, but they can shed some illumination upon the reason the audience sympathizes with her in a more specific manner. Paige Martin Reynolds addresses this, pointing out that thinking of characters such as Lady Macbeth from an actor's perspective helps combat reductive and restrictive interpretations; after all, an actor is a person, not an abstract concept, so when they portray a character onstage, they are not "evil" or "happy," but they indicate such large ideas through many small choices that build into a larger character. In this manner, the Lady Macbeth that we encounter on the page or onstage is made of many developmental emotions, choices, and experiences that an audience member may not have personally experienced, but they can identify it or understand it. Therefore, as actors or as scholars or enthusiastic audiences, "the objective in our analysis is not to determine precisely what this derailed dream is (a child, a crown, and so on) but to explore how the feelings potentially produced by such a disappointment—desperation, longing, grief, envy, for example—might drive the character's life onstage, rather than pure 'evilness'" (166). Through our readings, analyses, and onstage portrayals, we can find the humanity in her by taking what we know of her (anxiety over gender, lust for power, and a crisis of conscience) and breaking

down the reasons behind it. As Reynolds suggests, even if we have not personally felt her pain, we are aware of it, and it makes us feel for her rather than dismiss her.

The specific performances that will inform the majority of this project examine a range of *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* interpretations. Although not all of these performances interpret gender in a progressive way, each of them delves into the humanity of the characters rather than the supernatural elements of the play. As a touchstone performance, the Royal Shakespeare Company's 1979 *Macbeth* directed by Trevor Nun starring Ian McKellan and Judi Dench serves as an exceptionally well-acted minimalist interpretation of the play that focuses on the character development and interactions. For an examination of the interpersonal relationship between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, I will examine Roman Polanski's 1971 film which uses voiceovers and out of sequence monologues to emphasize the dynamics of their relationship. For an interpretation that lends itself to criticism for emphasizing and portraying the flaws in our modern conceptions of the play, Geoffrey Wright's 2006 film *Macbeth* exists as an updated version that focuses (however intentionally) on gender-specific tension in the text. In a completely reimagined setting and text, the British Broadcasting Company's 2005 version of *Macbeth* featured in *Shakespeare Retold* eliminates the supernatural elements of the play, but it retains all the male/female issues, as well as the themes and tensions of the original work. The 2010 *Macbeth* that went from the London stage to Broadway to film directed by Rupert Goold and featuring Patrick Stewart and Kate Fleetwood is also updated in setting, but it is textually sound and brilliantly executed in performance; it is this performance that I will point to as a potential guidepost for furthering the scholarship on this play.

These performances offer viewers a variety of interpretations of gender. Through examining the portrayals of men and women in addition to their interpersonal relationships as they progress, gender can be understood as a spectrum, not as a binary. As we examine these performances, both as individual performances and in relation to each other, multiple gender possibilities emerge. Multivalent gender identities become potential interpretations. In acknowledging and analyzing these possibilities, scholars, academics, and teachers can begin to explore new levels of humanity, masculinity, and femininity within the play which will then inform our cultural interpretations of gender.

CHAPTER THREE

The Performance of Gender: Masculinity and Femininity

More often than not, contemporary scholars want to examine the feminine elements in *Macbeth* in terms of something besides gender, often the supernatural elements of the play. While something rotten in the state of *Hamlet*'s Denmark trickles down through the body politic from the evil Claudius has committed, the spiritual well-being of Scotland in *Macbeth* suffers from an infection that festers as the play continues. Where "fair is foul and foul is fair" (1.1.12), the basic binary relationships become blurred—good and evil, right and wrong, sickness and health. In *Macbeth*, the binary of the sacred and the profane breaks down and Scotland becomes a liminal space that is neither supernatural nor natural, but both.

The portrayal of the female characters in *Macbeth* (Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff, and the Weird Sisters) highlights the dissolution of boundaries between the natural and supernatural. For example, while rooted in the natural, the witches embody the supernatural elements of the play, though Lady Macduff is purely natural, being all that a good wife ought to be. Lady Macbeth, however, embodies the liminal space between natural woman and supernatural sexless being. In these characters, Shakespeare presents

a feminine spirituality that is rooted in the natural; when the natural woman taps into the supernatural in the form of Lady Macbeth, she presents a picture of female power with detrimental potential, both for those under her influence and for herself. In examining these women in terms of this supernatural/natural binary, I demonstrate how *Macbeth's* women occupy this liminal space, and while this space is empowering, the environment is ultimately destructive to the feminine. As the play breaks down the barriers between the natural, unnatural, and supernatural, so gender theory offers a way to see these character not as natural or unnatural, but as normative and non-normative.

Femininity in *Macbeth*

As *Macbeth* opens, the Weird sisters are calling upon natural images—thunder, lightning, rain— a permanent association of the witches and nature for the audience; these beings, which set in motion the events of *Macbeth* use their supernatural presence to affect nature and use natural things to create supernatural resonance. As the scene progresses, the images become that of a dark, disturbed nature—“Fair is *foul* and *foul* is fair/Hover through the fog and *filthy* air” (1.1.12-13) (emphasis mine). Later, Macbeth finds the witches speaking their famous “double, double, toil, and trouble” speech (4.1.10) as they toss animal bits into their cauldron—eye of newt, tongue of dog, scale of dragon, tooth of wolf (4.1.12-37). This suggests that the witches derive their power from nature, and that while they are rooted in nature, the natural elements allow them to enact their will supernaturally. So, from the raising of the curtain, Shakespeare introduces immediately this dichotomy of beings that are immersed in nature but in apparent possession of supernatural powers.

However, this does not take into account their femininity—or apparent lack thereof. One assumes they are female because Shakespeare refers to them as “the Weird Sisters” in the *dramatis personae*, and they refer to each other as sisters in Act 1.3. Yet, based upon the description Macbeth gives of their physicality, their gender is called into question—“You should be women,/And yet your beards forbid me to interpret/That are you are so” (1.3.45-47). Macbeth here implies that they do not conform to a socially acceptable version of female behavior and appearance. As the witches are shrouded in mystery, the meaning of Macbeth’s reaction is open to interpretation. Are the witches using a glamour to protect and conceal themselves, or have they given up their femininity in exchange for power and influence? Perhaps the possibility that they have always been unattractive gives them the best excuse for a motivation—rejected by society for their looks, or their “otherness,” they turn to the dark arts to strike back at the patriarchy; “the play...reveals that stories about witches are also stories about their persecutors” (Kolb 346). However an audience or director interprets their appearance, it is clear that these women set in motion an attack against the patriarchal society of Scotland by inspiring Macbeth to commit regicide. As females with powers beyond the natural with unnatural intentions, they are meant to be fearsome beings, and as such, they are certainly outside of the idea of Jacobean femininity—they certainly are not silent and obedient, and depending on the production, their chastity is unknowable or completely questionable. Their performance of gender, then, is not one that connotes a socially desirable femininity.

On the other hand, Lady Macbeth stands as a figure in between the natural and the supernatural—the unnatural, if you will. While she is definitely a natural woman who

inhabits the natural world (and not an apparent witch), she also seems out of place in the natural world she inhabits, due largely to her childless state. In addition, Lady Macbeth circumvents the natural order of the patriarchy through assisting in the murder of Duncan. The unnatural execution of a king, in addition to the emasculating speeches she delivers to her husband to push him into committing the murder, further remove her from the standard of a Jacobean woman (as illustrated in Lady Macduff). So while Lady Macbeth is a female, she has not successfully tapped into her ability to produce and sustain a child, setting her outside of what is natural. She transgresses further against Nature by plotting against the king and circumventing the Natural order—the great chain of being.

Further complicating her character, in her appearance, Lady Macbeth decries her female nature and all that is maternal about her, which has caused critics and audiences alike to discount her femininity altogether. Beyond just lamenting her circumstances, she cries out to “you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,/And fill me from the crown to the toe topful/Of direst cruelty!” (1.5.40-43). As the play is invested in the supernatural, presenting the audience with witches in earnest, the audience must take her plea to these spirits seriously. Her subsequent actions, then, which are decidedly unfeminine in nature, are the results of her demand for her mother’s milk to be exchanged for gall. This lack of femininity is notably remarked upon by her husband, saying “Bring forth men-children only!/For thy undaunted mettle should compose/Nothing but males” (1.7.72-74); he essentially expects her to do the female job of bearing these children, but he thinks her unfit to train up a daughter. Her reprieve from feminine sensibilities and obligations, supernaturally achieved, leads to the violent murder of Duncan and several

others, and eventually her own death. Not only has she not done her feminine duty for society, but she has actively brought about its ruin.

Conversely, Lady Macduff presents a strong juxtaposition with Lady Macbeth (and of course to the witches as well). In the brief time she is featured, the audience gleans all the information needed about her femininity. She is a mother, multiple times over, and she tends to the home and children while her lord and husband is out doing the work of the kingdom; however, perhaps the most significant of these details, she genuinely cares for her husband. Despite all the ranting against him in Act IV, her son interprets for the audience that her underlying emotion is concern. This makes her the polar opposite of the witches and the standard of womanhood that Lady Macbeth cannot achieve. While the witches attack the patriarchy by targeting its head, Lady Macduff reinscribes the system, being the obedient, faithful wife and mother she would have been taught to be from childhood. She is also juxtaposed against Lady Macbeth, because she has achieved the domesticity, that appearance of femininity, that eludes Lady Macbeth. She is rooted in the natural, symbolizing the power of life within a woman—which unfortunately leads to her downfall as well; natural femininity and the female life force has no place in this diseased Scotland.

Within this world of complicated representations of females, the natural and the supernatural are almost indistinguishable. The witches draw their power from nature, as noted, but they are supernatural beings. Between delivering prophecies that influence the government of Scotland and vanishing into thin air when questioned (perhaps being received back into the elements?), they are not bound by natural, physical restraints. However, they are invested in nature. Through this complication of being both in nature

and beyond it, these mysterious beings overthrow the patriarchy and then destroy its transgressive usurper, restoring the order they upset. Regardless of their unclear motivations, the witches destroy the constructed society, and through a more Nature-centric, entropic period of anarchy, restore order. Through their supernatural means, they act in the interest of the natural.

However, Lady Macbeth does not exist outside of the natural realm as the witches do; she is still functioning within the patriarchy as the wife of Macbeth, and as she is not removed from the system and her natural femininity, she is not exempt from the guilt of her actions. Her feminine exceptionalism involving the murder at once allows her to do the deed, yet foreshadows her guilt and ultimate suicide. Even while she can muster the strength of purpose and courage in her convictions to cry “Infirm of purpose! Give me the daggers” (2.2.49-50), she also reveals a hint of the effeminate softness that she mocks in Macbeth, saying of Duncan “had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done’t” (12). So while she has been bold enough to call upon spirits to remove her femininity, she cannot supernaturally divorce herself from her nature, so she suffers the consequences of her ambition. In this, she accesses the universal humanity within her and elicits sympathy from the audience.

Critics on the Feminine in *Macbeth*

Considering the religious and philosophical sensibilities of the original audience, Shakespeare intended for them to make assumptions about the action based on the supernatural elements involved in the play; they certainly would have taken it more seriously than a modern audience. Mary Floyd-Wilson uses geohumoral theory to suggest

that it was the effect of the Northern elements that made the Scottish Macbeths susceptible to the demonic forces (the ones the Scottish King James was preoccupied with). Taking the idea of demonic influence further, Bryan Adams Hampton suggests (as noted earlier) that Macbeth's usurpation of the Scottish throne is comparable to that of demon possession, and as such "[*Macbeth*] is an exorcism in five acts, a play about domestic purgation that resonates keenly with the tension produced when the categories of material and spiritual, and sacred and profane, are collapsed" (331). Certainly audiences would have been aware of other distinctly religious principles at work in the play—the ghosts of Duncan and Banquo, condemned to wander the earth because their murders prevented them from making a last confession, Lady Macbeth's suicide and the condemnation that would have placed upon her soul, the pagan spirits Lady Macbeth calls upon in an unnatural attempt to alter her feminine nature, and the dark pagan prophecies of the witches. However, the lines between the supernatural influence and a polluted or corrupted nature are unclear—purposely, Hampton would assert, to create tension within the play and its audience. The phrase Floyd-Wilson utilizes to describe this atmosphere is "supernatural ecology" (150), saying that "lines between the natural and the supernatural may not exist in *Macbeth*" (155).

Through the lens of a supernatural ecocriticism, then, Lady Macbeth inhabits a natural world that is polluted by the supernatural influence of the witches' prophecies and her own unnatural desires. Furthermore, given Hampton's assertion that *Macbeth* is a demonic presence that needs to be exorcised from Scotland, Lady Macbeth's supernaturally achieved anti-femininity is a spiritual sickness that eventually overwhelms its host. As Hampton calls *Macbeth* a failed exorcism, since Macbeth (the demon's host)

was destroyed and not cleansed (342), then Lady Macbeth's suicide can be termed a desperate attempt by a mind driven mad to rid itself of the anti-feminine, "demonic" nature that torments it.

The witches, it should be noted, already exist outside of the "body" of Scotland, and as such, they are well enough removed from the situation and are allowed to continue on after the events of the play—after all, the play is interested in the tragedy of Macbeth, and their main function is to facilitate it. However, their supernatural presence is powerful and pervasive. According to David L. Kranz, it's not simply the supernatural knowledge that they give Macbeth that infects him or possesses him; it is the actual words themselves. When Macbeth first enters and repeats the witches' earlier phrase of "fair and foul," it becomes clear that the witches' influence has already reached him. Their very words are "the aural embodiment of their unholy spirit" (357). Even while they have yet to physically encounter Macbeth, he is tainted by their supernatural influence. Laura Kolb takes this idea a step further, suggesting that "the weird sisters' prophetic speeches are coextensive with, if not indistinguishable from, Macbeth's ambitious 'fantastical' thoughts" (346). Macbeth's ambition does not come from himself; rather, he is possessed by the ideas, even the words, of the witches.

The supernatural influence over Lady Macbeth involves destruction on a smaller scope, but it is no less devastating. Her application to the spirits to change her comes from within herself, from her unnatural ambition. It is this act of giving herself over to her evil desires that leads to her downfall. When Macbeth laments about the brevity and fragility of life at the news of her death in his famous "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech (5.5.19), he may as well be addressing the sad fate that awaited his

overly ambitious wife. This nihilistic speech becomes “a statement that captures eloquently the trajectory of evil...which is in the direction of utter non-being” (Hibbs 290); furthermore, it lays out the trajectory of a powerful female in such a hostile environment. Through tapping into the unnatural desire in herself and the supernatural power outside of herself, she is doomed to collapse in on herself.

As these women are viewed as antagonistic, even termed evil (see Hibbs in particular), the question of portrayal rises to the fore. These women are seen as threatening to the patriarchy and to Macbeth’s masculinity, and as such, they are often portrayed in an unflattering manner. The witches traditionally have been portrayed as unfeminine crones, terrifying androgynous spirits, or even men. They certainly are not usually seen as powerful, feminine women. Likewise, Lady Macbeth is often portrayed as cold, disconnected, insane, or emasculating (or some combination of these elements). This negative portrayal of these characters is largely due to their threatening of the male power structure. Through undermining their femininity and making them unsettling or unappealing to an audience, the validity of their experience and their nature is called into question.

Recent Gender Problems

One of the more recent interpretations of this issue is through the sexualized portrayal of Lady Macbeth and/or the witches. The idea that these women are sexual beings and that they derive power from their sexuality is not necessarily problematic; the issue comes from the treatment of such feminine power—or sexualized feminine power—as evil, even as supernatural evil. The empowerment of the female characters in

this manner threatens the patriarchy and the monarchy as well. The portrayal of Macbeth as nothing more than a pawn led about by women who have him in their sexual thrall is not only an oversimplification of the plot and his character, but it is also an unflattering, one-dimensional portrayal of these complicated women.

While the women in *Macbeth* inhabit a hostile, destructive environment, their natural or supernatural affinity allows the audience to comprehend the world they live in and why they cannot exist in such a world. The witches inhabit the supernatural world and exist outside of society; they are powerful and fearsome. Lady Macduff inhabits the natural world, which ends in her destruction through no fault of her own. There is no place for Lady Macbeth. She has failed to become the acceptable model of femininity that is Lady Macduff, and she becomes something to be feared and shunned by society, like the witches, except she does not have their power. She is Unnatural, not accepted by society but not outside of society, not fulfilling the duties of her nature, but not supernatural. The supernatural and the natural thus cannot be divided in *Macbeth's* Scotland as she is a character that is a part of both. She is not understood; she is feared, and the power of her own seized agency is her undoing. So at once, the ability to straddle both worlds is empowering for her, allowing her to rise to the top of the power structure with her husband through her own devices, yet eventually bringing about her self-ruin through the natural guilt and mental anguish from which she is not exempt. Powerful, powerless, or problematic, there is no place in this Scottish society for women to thrive. All versions of femininity are punished by this destructive cosmos.

Masculinity in *Macbeth*

If the feminine in *Macbeth* defies definition in terms of diametrically opposed ideas, then a scholarly audience must anticipate a similar resistance to definition in the representation of masculinity. Indeed, Macbeth could not be the tragic figure he is without possessing the deeply flawed characteristics that contribute to his downfall. Macbeth is the maker of his own demise, much more so than the paralytic Hamlet, the much plotted-against Lear, and the too-impressionable Othello; although Macbeth is an active agent in the play, Macbeth's internal struggle is more of a contributing factor in his destruction than any outside forces. I would suggest that Macbeth's anxiety over gender is an underlying contributing factor in his eventual self-destruction.

Macbeth identifies himself in comparison to "the other" throughout the play; more accurately, he constantly evaluates himself in terms of the expectations others project onto him. In the beginning of the play, he stands on his own merit, emerging victorious from the field of battle and being honored by the king—a stark contrast to the slain Macdonwald and the downcast thane of Cawdor (1.2). We hear of his achievements before we encounter Macbeth—we have our own expectations that we project onto this character as well. From his first entrance, he begins to struggle with unsolicited outside input. The witches plant the idea of kingship in his mind, suggesting that he is meant to be better than his current status. He shares this idea with his wife, who not only wants him to fulfill that expectation by any means necessary, but she repeatedly questions his resolve, his ambition, and his manhood when he hesitates and questions his choices. Having committed to the pathway of taking and securing the crown, Macbeth struggles to maintain his own expectations for his life, something that proves impossible to do.

Yet for all of this “othering,” Macbeth does not appear to plot against Duncan out of any idea that he would make a better king. Macbeth’s motivation is based solely on the idea of attaining that which has been promised to him. While this is still certainly an ego-centric move, its implications are very different. Perhaps we can call it purely ego-centric, as he is concerned only with himself, not with any of the implications or consequences of his actions. So how can an individual that is seemingly so self-involved be as self-conscious and self-doubting as Macbeth?

Macbeth’s struggle in his universe enacts the blurring of lines. He is the protagonist; Macbeth a title character, the focal point of the plot, and the driving force behind the action of the play. Beyond that, it is hard to commit to any one definition. Should Macbeth be called an anti-hero, then, a sort of tortured Byronic figure ahead of his time? Macbeth’s actions make him very difficult to classify as such; the term seems far too tame. Conversely, Macbeth cannot be termed merely a villain; we sympathize with him, and we feel comfortable categorizing him as a great man with a tragic flaw. In keeping with the other complicating issues of the play, Macbeth occupies a liminal space that eludes easy definitions.

Alluding back to the idea that *Macbeth* is a play of imagination, Macbeth’s imagination is then a double-edged sword, at once imagining his ascension to power and his inadequacies that stand in the way. The negative aspect of the power of the imagination is self-destruction. Macbeth reacts to a bizarre funhouse mirror that he holds up to himself based on the perceived expectations of others. For this play being so fast-paced and active, Macbeth’s internal crisis of self is still developed throughout the action

and through his speeches. What prompts Macbeth into action from reflection is the aspersion cast on his masculinity by his wife, as Macbeth perceives it.

The witches' prophecy rattles Macbeth's worldview; being so quickly fulfilled in part, the prophecy seems to promise such future security for Macbeth that he is willing to act against nature, custom, and his own conscience to make it come to pass. Initially, he demonstrates a passive acceptance of the promise, saying that "if chance will have me king, why chance may crown me/Without my stir" (1.4.148-9). When the opportunity to murder Duncan presents itself and Macbeth hesitates, Lady Macbeth questions the infirmity of his purpose. Macbeth's response is that "I dare do all that may become a man;/Who dares do more is none" (1.7.46-7). Although Lady Macbeth's remarks are pointed and provocative, Macbeth is the one who brings gender into the conversation. From this interaction, the audience sees that Lady Macbeth's strength of will threatens Macbeth's self-image. Again, he is responding to the expectations of others, projecting his own insecurities onto their words.

Although she does not initially incite the gender-centric part of the conversation with her husband, Lady Macbeth does pick up on the duality in Macbeth's nature, asking "Art thou afeard/To be the same in thine own act and valor/As thou art in desire?" (1.7.39-41). He does not address this, redirecting the conversation to affirm his masculinity; Lady Macbeth responds by saying that "When you durst do it, then you were a man;/And to be more than what you were, you would/Be so much more the man," pointing out that he is holding himself back from being the man he desires to be (49-51). As the audience has learned earlier in the play and confirms later in this scene, the Macbeths are childless; Macbeth's anxiety over gender, which he expresses and his wife

then takes advantage of to motivate him, potentially originates in a lack of fertility. Because the first mention of Macbeth's masculinity occurs in this private moment and is instigated by him, Shakespeare suggests that this is not the first time a conversation of this nature has occurred. Given Macbeth's military background and militaristic character, the hyper-masculine atmosphere of the rest of life contributes to the gender-specific anxiety he expresses. So when Macbeth says to his wife that "thy undaunted mettle should compose/Nothing but males" (73-4) as noted earlier, it indicates as much about his perceptions of masculinity as it does about his perception of his wife; in his mind, the ruthless goal-oriented mentality Lady Macbeth exhibits in their encounter exemplifies the masculine values Macbeth is accustomed to in the other men in his experience. Therefore he equates infirmity of purpose with the feminine.

Macbeth's entire course of action following this scene is a series of acts responding to a perceived threat to his masculinity. In response to his internal insecurities and heightened expectations of him, Macbeth becomes active. No longer does he merely question and posit—he spends the remaining four acts in forward motion, even while emotionally and mentally spiraling out of control. After the murder of Duncan, he then has to murder the guards to secure his secret. Since he has put so much faith in the witches' words and he has been successful, he has to consider Banquo and Fleance as threats and orders their deaths. He sets out to murder the entire Macduff family. As his actions lead to his mental deterioration, his wife's destruction, and the turmoil of Scotland, Macbeth continues to charge ahead, only to be threatened by one "not born of woman." His fixation on that idea, even while he knows he has been warned of the Thane of Fife, demonstrates a further subconscious obsession with gender, this time more

obviously linked to fertility. Rather than taking the statement as a promise that no one could harm him (after all, everyone is born of a woman), Macbeth fixates on that specific phrasing. He portrays an awareness of a woman's power in giving birth, suggesting that this prophecy taps into repressed fear tied to the feminine.

The potential of creating more situations that suggest masculine anxiety over the feminine lies in performance. Historically, some actors/directors have taken this facet of Macbeth's character and let it overpower the physical strength, the capacity for brutality, and the existential anguish of which he is capable. However, many actors/directors have found opportunities to portray a complex, complicated character who is sympathetic and tragic. The treatment of Macbeth's gender and gender-specific anxiety must be discussed in the same way as Lady Macbeth's. Though Macbeth's anxiety could be easily dismissed as incidental, its presence in the play was intentional on Shakespeare's part and, when examined in the context of his hyper-masculine surroundings and his wife's own concerns, leads to a more balanced interpretation of the play.

CHAPTER FOUR

Performances and Performativities

As Shakespeare wrote plays for the purpose of performance, directors and actors are excellent resources for interpretation; simply put, the subtleties of issues such as gender, which may not be explicit in Shakespeare's text, can vary from production to production. The previous chapters demonstrate that it is difficult for even scholars to agree on which is the "best" interpretation, what Shakespeare intended, what audiences might have expected, and what research leads us to believe; there are multiple interpretive possibilities without offering a singular "golden reading" of a text. The performance aspect of the play and the performative nature of gender lead us toward multivalent possibilities in performance of the play. What I intend to illustrate in this chapter is that while a multitude of possibilities are possible and valid, there are interpretations that advance our understanding of both literature and gender and those that hold us back. Through progressive, non-traditional, unconventional, and thoroughly textually supported performances and performance possibilities, actors and directors can begin to change the way scholars interpret Shakespeare, which in turn can change the way we teach him. Through multivalent performance possibilities within *Macbeth*,

specifically those that remove the limited perceptions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the play becomes opened up to new interpretations and new meanings for actors and scholars alike.

Performativity

Consider that performance relies not only on the scripted words on the page and the actions blocked by a director, but on the perceptions of the actors and those of the audience as well. The simplest ideas in *Macbeth* (Duncan being the king, for instance) must be conveyed through the careful cohesion of voice, body, costume, makeup, lighting, etc., in order for the entire production to be successful; this is not to imply that the smallest breakdown in the execution of a word or line will overthrow the entire production, but it is meant to underscore the complexity in theatre to convey the single idea of “gender” or “man” or “femininity.” When any of these elements are at odds, they complicate the audience’s perception of the action (e.g. Duncan is the king, but he is not dressed in kingly garb); when these elements are intentionally at odds, however (e.g. Duncan is the king but he is being played by a woman), the instability of our perceptions becomes a tool of the playwright or director (whichever the case may be) to question our basic understanding of these concepts.

Gender is a concept whose construction depends upon performance. Judith Butler argues that gender identity is performative, and as such, it can be compared to a performance on the stage or screen. In her words, “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an

abiding gendered self” (519). Sex, she goes on to argue, is biological; gender is the interpretation of that biological fact, usually culturally determined or at least influenced (522). Therefore, in order to portray one’s gender, a person either affects or elects not to affect cultural signifiers of their sex to convey their gender identity in society. This is a continual process that a person performs as they conform to or reject traditional or changing conventions of gender; society would have them conform for its ensured continuance, and extreme deviation can result in social ostracization. It is such then that “the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of its own production. The authors of gender become entranced by their own fictions whereby the construction compels one’s belief in its necessity and naturalness” (522). For this reason, certain bodily actions, mannerisms, vocal qualities, etc. connote and are recognized as cultural norms of the male or female gender.

In the process of film and theatre production, the portrayal of a character’s gender is heavily reliant upon the cultural implications of an actor’s physical interpretation. For example, in order to convey to the audience that Lady Macbeth is a woman, without directly addressing it before calling her “Lady Macbeth,” the director and actor rely upon cultural/societal signifiers of her gender; she can be put in gender-specific clothing that displays her female body while the tone of her voice affirms femininity. To portray a character accurately as she appears on the page, an actor must consider the textual suggestions as to her gender, or how much that character conforms to the societal expectations of a person of that sex with the physical descriptions laid out by the playwright.

This idea of finding a textually sound, normative representation of a character is complicated by pointing out the way an audience perceives the actor. According to Erika Fischer-Lichte, the audience at once perceives an actor's physical body and the character being portrayed. She calls this "perceptive multistability," and the process usually happens subconsciously (88). The attention of the audience, either individually or as a whole, can be diverted, either intentionally or not. It is unavoidable that the body, mannerisms, etc. of an actor may potentially take an audience member out of the action because that actor reminds them of someone from their own experience; this unintentional shift in perception from the dramatic body to the phenomenal body causes a rupture in the order of perception and creates meaning for that audience member in a unique and unforeseeable way (87). A director can choose to exploit this multi-perception by casting non-normative or unexpected bodies in roles that will create new and insightful meanings; a director or actor can also portray a character by acting in a way that is unexpected for their physical body. Acting choices can disrupt the seamless perception of both figures at once by drawing attention to the body in a way that highlights or brings out new meaning for the piece (e.g. using a visibly pregnant actress in the role of Katerina in *The Taming of the Shrew* gives new motivation for Baptista to marry off his daughter and for the town to revile her).

When an actor is performing a character, then, he/she is performing the dramatic figure (the character) while performing a gender identity as well while being perceived as both a character and a man/woman by the audience. Through the examination of five different performances of *Macbeth* (all films, two of which are filmed stage performances), I will describe the ways gender is portrayed in each and what that means

for the production. These films were chosen to exemplify the possibilities of interpretation in both normative and non-normative performances, both feminist and misogynistic. The reclamation of these characters through complex portrayals that include richly developed gender identities forwards the study of drama as well as the study and understanding of gender. The multivalent possibilities of both traditional and non-traditional interpretations of these characters broaden the scope for Shakespearean scholars as well as dramatists and actors.

In Performance: Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* (1971)

Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* employs Shakespeare's text in an internalized, seemingly more self-reflective production through cinematic devices. Polanski takes the viewer into scenes that the stage simply does not—when Macbeth kill Duncan, for example. This film portrays tremendous gore and brutality, which would be very difficult to duplicate on stage in the same scope, thus highlighting the violence inherent in the text and its effect upon the main characters. Polanski also slows down the action of the play considerably, giving the film a more thoughtful tone. The addition of voice-over in scenes where there is a monologue or soliloquy further accentuates a deliberate thoughtful in Polanski's presentation. For example, Lady Macbeth's first scene is done almost entirely in voice-over, as is Macbeth's "tomorrow and tomorrow" speech, giving the effect of it occurring in Lady Macbeth's mind. This internalization of these thoughts and feelings, otherwise expressed out loud, brings the audience closer to the mental and emotional breakdown of Polanski's characters. The emotional connection of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth gives the film almost a feeling of a domestic drama rather than a

great tragedy; although the scope of this film is grand, the slow dissolution of this once strong marriage again turns the focus of the action inward. When the once affectionate couple is seen lying in bed together, side by side with palpable emotional distance between them, the image implies a separation through internal strife while they still appear united.

Jon Finch's Macbeth is thoughtful, observant, and slow to act. He is open and affectionate with his wife in private, but as he watches her acting very flirty (i.e. feminine) with Duncan, he delivers his "bring forth men children only" lines as a voiceover, suggesting that he is privately very unsettled by her, no matter what their decision to act implies. Francesca Annis' Lady Macbeth complements him well, as she is softer and more feminine than a typical Lady Macbeth. She comes across as a sexual person through her mannerisms, her flirtation, and her occasional nudity, but not in a necessarily negative way. She is affectionate and comforting to Macbeth throughout. It is believable when she swoons after Duncan's death, as there has been a precedent for such stereotypically feminine behavior. She begins to cry over Macbeth's hesitation to act, as if she literally cannot comprehend his actions in that moment, then performing an emotional about-face when he makes the decision to commit murder, smiling at him through her tears. She sleepwalks nude before she commits suicide, implying that she has completely lost all sense of self-awareness and entirely vulnerable. Before she dies, she is portrayed as tearfully reading Macbeth's initial letter to her, suggesting that the memory of her early expectations compared to reality is what breaks her fractured psyche.

The witches in this production are unsettling portrayals of a diseased femininity, a menace that wields power over the patriarchy to its detriment. They appear as crones,

covered in boils and warts while surrounding themselves with the conventional trappings of witchcraft. When Macbeth returns to the witches, they have multiplied, they appear nude, and the suggestion that they have been controlling the events thus far cannot be missed.

The traditional, normative behaviors exemplified in the performances of Finch and Annis proves to the audience that such people can be capable of such terrible actions, that “evil” is not necessarily readily apparent, as it is with this film’s witches. Polanski’s characters do not sacrifice their ostensibly normative gender roles for their inhuman acts; while there is an apparent danger to reading Lady Macbeth as unfeminine and Macbeth as emasculated, there is an equally dangerous potential for portraying them as inhuman. Polanski’s work with Finch and Annis demonstrates that the capacity for terrible ambition lies even in those who seem to function properly within society.

In Performance: Trevor Nun’s *Macbeth* (1979)

The filmed stage production of the Royal Shakespeare Company’s *Macbeth* directed by Trevor Nun is fairly conventional in its interpretation of the text—the play is set in medieval Scotland with the trappings of that time and place, such as swords and crowns. However, Nun employs minimalism to draw attention to the actors and the action; there are no elaborate sets, there are few props, and the cameras often shoot in close-up, focusing directly on the actors’ faces. The background of the film is almost entirely black; the costumes, with a few notable exceptions (Duncan, Malcolm, Lady Macduff and her child) in white, are also black/dark neutrals. The effect is that the

audience feels immersed in the darkness of the play. Nun does not disrupt the audience's expectations through non-traditional casting.

Ian McKellen's Macbeth is emotive without compromising his masculinity—he laughs, he smiles, he is affectionate with his wife. As a couple, the Macbeths are physically affectionate, both in their reunion after a long separation and in comforting reassurance after their terrible crime has been committed. McKellen's Macbeth does not evoke the idea of a man who has anything to prove to his wife; when she becomes disdainful of his reluctance, he is firm with her, but not overly so. Though goaded by his wife, this Macbeth's decision to act comes from within himself. He is powerfully and immediately affected by his crime; McKellen takes advantage of Nun's close shots and displays wide eyes and a shaking body during his soliloquies and asides. In front of other characters, though, Macbeth's veneer of mental health returns, replacing his emotional duress with determined calm; Macbeth is harsh with other characters in his performance of well-being. Privately, though, he remains deeply aware and unsettled; McKellen delivers "tomorrow and tomorrow" in a very drawn out, deliberate fashion, implicating that Macbeth speaks those lines with a dawning realization of the futility of his life. Eventually, McKellen's Macbeth descends into madness, fully embracing his mental instability once he starts down that path. He caresses skulls and partakes in a bizarre ritual with the witches. Publicly, his character never falters from the military, masculine portrayal; in the privacy of his wife's company or when alone, McKellen's Macbeth ceases the performance and demonstrates his real thoughts and emotions.

Judi Dench as a dynamic Lady Macbeth delivers a bravura performance. Her costume renders her almost androgynous; the black dress completely covers her body and

blends with the background while a head covering is worn throughout the entire performance (she even wears her crown over this head covering). This forces Dench to rely upon her voice and her face more than anything else. Her Lady Macbeth is active and affective, literally invoking spirits to unsex her in a ritualistic speech, making the lack of femininity in her costume appear to be a deliberate choice on her character's part (a brilliant collaboration between actor and costumer). Dench as Lady Macbeth approaches Macbeth very openly, without hesitation or courtly courtesies, speaking to him as if they are equal partners in the relationship and not as if he is her lord and master. She does not approach Macbeth with the plan to murder Duncan as a wife would, but like a man; when she is rebuffed, she softens toward him, manipulating him. Her voice softens while going higher in pitch and taking on a breathy quality and she lets herself appear emotional; the viewer never suffers the delusion that she is not in control of the situation. She affects the expected femininity in moments when it will benefit her, such as imploring Macbeth to do the deed or building up to a believable faint when the act is discovered to imply her innocence. Dench plays Lady Macbeth as being very affected by the deed; her descent into madness is much sharper than Macbeth, as she almost immediately looks as if she regrets what they have done and unravels quickly afterward. Her sleep-walking scene is so believable, ending in a visceral cry that transcends gender in its grief.

This production serves as a solid performative standard of *Macbeth* interpretations. The interpretation does not take artistic liberties, and the actors give strong performances. Both actors in the lead roles are able to portray both believable, recognizable gender identities and the performances of that gender the characters

themselves adopt. This production is useful in supplementing a basic understanding of the play, especially for an audience who has never seen the play performed. The way the play transitions to the screen is very seamless in this production, and while the film is somewhat dated now, it is still relevant to a discussion of performances of *Macbeth*. Dench and McKellen give nuanced performances that acknowledge the gender-specific tensions, but still allow for the humanity in the characters to come through. They make themselves sympathetic while maintaining the non-normative aspects of their characters, giving them universal appeal and allowing critics to explore the multivalent meanings within their performances.

In Performance: *Shakespeare Retold's Macbeth* (2005)

As the BBC's production of *Macbeth* in the miniseries *Shakespeare Retold* takes place in a contemporary setting, the pressures of traditional masculinity and femininity are much more subtle, and the character's gender identity is much more easily expressed. Although this production completely reimagines the setting and the context of the play, the themes and the internal struggle of the original source remain intact. The language and the setting are the major deviations from Shakespeare's text. This is a modern-day reimagining of the play in which Joe Macbeth is the head chef in Duncan's gourmet restaurant. Instead of Macbeth's military prowess informing his character, Joe Macbeth's ambition and drive come from this young man's working his way up the chain in the highly competitive culinary world. The microcosm of the restaurant allows for Macbeth and Banquo to be the chef and sous-chef, Ella (Lady Macbeth, here given the basic female pronoun in both Italian and Spanish) to be the maître de, Macduff to be the head

waiter, and the witches to be portrayed as strangely prescient garbage men (binmen, in the British vernacular).

James McAvoy's Joe Macbeth is a driven, ambitious man who enjoys the boyish antics of his kitchen ("his" being the operative word, as he loudly proclaims it so many times in the film). His physique is often displayed, and his arms are covered in scars, which is reasonable for a man in his position; it also reminds us of the character's source, a brutal warrior. He displays his emotions fairly openly; he laughs and jokes with his staff, later raging at them, and he is openly affectionate with his wife and openly admiring of Duncan. Joe shares in Ella's grief over the death of their child, as they cling to each other and both shed tears. However, as he continues to lose sleep and fly into rages as his guilt wears him down, Joe mentally breaks down. When he learns of Ella's death, he says "I feel nothing" (a modern day equivalent to "tomorrow and tomorrow") even while choking back tears and screaming at the messenger. Clearly unstable, he taunts the vengeful Macduff, declaring himself immortal; when he realizes that the binmen's prophecy is coming to pass, he allows Macduff to stab him without any resistance. Joe accepts that the events of the film have been orchestrated by fate.

Keeley Hawes' Ella is at heart cold and in control, clearly manipulating the situation. She uses her feminine appearance and her charming mannerisms to her benefit. She flirts with Duncan, playing to his vanity, at one point slowly rubbing her hands down the front of his chef's coat, prompting him to say that "in another life, I'd make a pass at you." Her control over every situation does not go unnoticed, as Duncan remarks that what he loves about her is that "she has massive bollocks," again invoking Shakespeare's original text and her desire to be unsexed. Whereas her manipulation of Duncan builds

him up as a man, her playing on Joe's vanity tears him down. "He milks you for everything you're worth," she cries at Joe, suggesting that he's the reason for Duncan's success so he should reap all the benefits, "...and you say thank you, Duncan, for the slap on the back." As he nears his breaking point, the tension between them appears sexual, as if she not only has a larger endgame in this situation, but that she also receives pleasure from goading him. "What kind of man is it that doesn't feel humiliated in the position you're in?" she demands before he snaps and pins her to the bed. Her manipulation of him and the sexual pleasure she seems to derive from his humiliation undermine the traditional femininity that her public persona exemplifies, or what an audience may expect from a woman.

This dynamic between them, however, disappears as they both become unable to sleep and they mentally unravel. Before her suicide, Ella recounts the story of the delivery and short life of her baby while crying openly in the inhabited restaurant. She then is shown staring at her reflection in the mirror, and while trying not to cry, she repeatedly applies and reapplies her lipstick, as his performing the ritual of putting on her mask is failing to bring her back to normalcy. She then smears the lipstick across her face in a reflection of her internal strife and makes her way up to the roof. She jumps, after crying and whispering "help me, Joe," then calming before taking the plunge. With her death, we do not see another female in the film. Indeed, as the witches are male in this film, with the exception of incidental extras and a brief appearance of a Mrs. Macduff, she is the only female we encounter. This version of Macbeth's Scotland, just like Shakespeare's, is an environment that is not constructed for women and is destructive to the only woman we encounter.

In Performance: Geoffrey Wright's *Macbeth* (2006)

In director Geoffrey Wright's 2006 film adaptation of *Macbeth*, the action takes place in the underground crime world of modern-day Australia. Both the witches and Lady Macbeth were portrayed in a highly sexualized manner, which earned the disapproval of critic Amanda Kane Rooks, who said that this interpretation "not only highlights a fascination with noxious femininity, but also an anxiety over a weak, irresolute masculinity" (159). If these women have such power over men through their sexuality that men must attribute to them an unnatural or supernatural quality, then it speaks to a masculine fear of inadequacy or loss of power as much as a fear of powerful women. Women can also take offense that their innate power or sexuality is portrayed as something that should be feared by men and women alike, as it leads to the destruction of both sexes. Interestingly, the screenplay for this film was adapted by Wright and Victoria Hill, the actress that plays Lady Macbeth. Wright states in his production notes that *Macbeth* is essentially a love story, as "all he wants is love from his wife" (qtd. in Rooks 157). Sam Worthington's portrayal of the title character plays into this, as he appears weak and ineffectual, lead astray by the sexually aggressive witches.

Lady Macbeth's portrayal in Wright's film presents a complicated idea of femininity. While Lady Macbeth is highly sexualized in her costuming and her manner, she is unilaterally portrayed as cold toward her husband. While this seems to be a distinctly anti-feminist move, the film makes allowances for her attitude toward her husband that would not necessarily diminish her desire to capitalize on her innate attractiveness and the power she derives from it. The opening sequence takes place in a

cemetery where Lady Macbeth weeps over their lost child and Macbeth looks on. During their first exchange of dialogue, she faces away from him, unresponsive to his attentions. When he climbs atop her and proceeds to kiss her, she remains dispassionate, but tears begin to stream down her face. In terms of her motherhood and her wifely role (especially as Shakespeare's original audience understood it), Lady Macbeth has never recovered from the loss of her child, and so she has eradicated those parts of herself. She seeks to protect an obvious, glaring vulnerability; her actions are in the interest of self-preservation. She can still use her femininity, sexualized or no, to influence the other men in the film, but she is unwilling to open herself up to her husband; her coldness may be termed unnatural by the likes of Rooks, but her anxiety over wife- and motherhood is completely natural given these circumstances.

This portrayal of Macbeth's emasculation and Lady Macbeth's sexual thrall, while making them potentially relatable with these basic universal issues, reduces the tragedy of their story. If Macbeth is to be the Aristotelian Great Man who falls, his story arc cannot be about trying to get into his wife's good graces or succumbing to the witches' deviant sexuality. Likewise, Lady Macbeth being reduced to a hyper-sexual woman who withholds herself from her husband does not appeal to the sympathy of the audience. In barring her from demonstrating a fuller range of human emotions/actions, the film renders her ineffectual in the construction of the cathartic moment of Macbeth's tragedy; it also greatly reduces the tragedy of her own downfall.

In Performance: Rupert Goold's *Macbeth* (2010)

Rupert Goold's production of *Macbeth* in many ways follows the same formula as Nun's. This production was filmed for PBS's *Great Performances* because of the success of the stage production, and while it is not a filmed stage production, it still maintains the feel of the original. This production is updated to the modern day, but relies heavily on the militaristic undertones (and at time outright military setting) of the source material. The main benefit of experiencing this production on film is the unnatural quality that the witches' performances take on through studio editing. They are portrayed as nurses, female but covered in their uniform (surgical masks serving as the beards Macbeth finds so confounding), whose interactions with the dead and dying are used in their prophesying; these witches are truly unsettling, with voice alteration and the visual effects used to make them seem supernaturally empowered.

Patrick Stewart's Macbeth is militant and masculine, but a considerably older man than in other incarnations. This of course leads to another layer of anxiety when Macbeth becomes the king—producing an heir would undeniably produce a challenge. Stewart's Macbeth is in no way bullied by his wife; rather, he is seen as exerting his will over her when she balks before the banquet scene. As a speaker of Shakespearean dialogue, Stewart manages to make his mental instability uncomfortably unique by screeching in fear at Banquo's ghost and aggressively grabbing at a dagger that is not there while delivering his lines with determination. He speaks his speech of "tomorrow and tomorrow" with unusual accents, stressing the unstressed syllable, so as to make his speech sound halting and weary. His powerful Macbeth feels every bit like the tyrant he is professed to be, a menace that must be stopped.

Kate Fleetwood's dynamic Lady Macbeth is also a highlight of this performance. While her manner is very firm, hard, and cold, her appearance is always very feminized, often in low-cut, dramatic dresses. Her make-up is also very dramatic and striking, highlighting the sharp angles of her face. When Fleetwood's Lady Macbeth breaks down in the sleep-walking scene, she appears frail and vulnerable where she had been so strong before. Her face is clean, her hair is wet and hanging limply around her face, and her plain white robe almost blends into her pale skin. Fleetwood does not rely upon these physical traits; she adopts a sad, hunched posture, so different from her proud bearing of earlier, and she wails and wrings her hands as the tradition of the role demands. While sticking close to the traditional interpretation of the character, Fleetwood's even-handed portrayal of this character, at once fierce and fiercely afraid, reclaims the role from portrayals such as Hill's.

Reconsidering *Macbeth*

Both in academia and in entertainment, *Macbeth* has been reduced to basic, one-dimensional terms: the supernatural, murderous ambition, and a woman demanding to be unsexed. In order to experience Shakespeare's tragedy fully, the interpretation of the play (either in the classroom, on the stage, or at the cinema) must open up the many multivalent possibilities in the text rather than close them off with reductive readings. One way to explore the potential in the text for new readings is through a more developed understanding of gender theory. Instead of dismissing the characters that display non-normative gender identities, gender theory provides a gateway to the underlying humanity within them. With an academic understanding of the inherent performativity of

gender and the performative nature of the text, the many complications of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth come to light. In the last few decades of performances, actors and directors have reconnected with that essential humanity, portraying many different facets of the masculine Macbeth and the feminine Lady Macbeth. In allowing for humanity in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the audience sympathizes with them and the value of the tragedy of the play is greater.

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