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“A Woman’s Story at a Winter’s Fire”: Gender Performativity and the Intrinsic Power of the Feminine in Shakespeare’s Macbeth

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“A Woman’s Story at a winter’s Fire”: Gender Performativity and the Intrinsic Power of the
Feminine in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

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Undergraduate Thesis

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--1--

“I dare do all that may become a man;
who dares do more is none” (1.7.46-47)¹

Early modern scholars have made significant strides in understanding how gender was performed in early seventeenth century England, as well as how it was performed and constructed on the London stages during this time. What now becomes necessary is an exploration of the connection between these gender constructions. What amount of influence does the theater have on surrounding culture and to what extent is the theater a direct product of that culture? Shakespeare is an obvious choice for an exploration of gender and theater because, as a playwright, he seemed drawn to plots in which the performance of gender, or gender ambiguity, was a central conflict. He uses the model of theatrical women, who we know were played by boys or men, to explore these gender conflicts and experiment with new ways of performing femininity and masculinity. His fascination with gender boundaries is ubiquitous throughout his works, but culminates in rare form in *Macbeth*. In this play, he allows the characters to step out of what were traditionally restricting gender definitions and into a realm of power that combines elements from both the male and female spheres of influence, ultimately presenting a gender continuum inherent within both this play and the world of early modern theater. In order to facilitate a clear understanding of the gender relations at work in *Macbeth*, it is first important to recognize the extent of the patriarchal gender ideals in Shakespeare's England. Armed with this knowledge, we can then examine the ways in which the theater of early seventeenth-century England endorsed a socially progressive notion of gender and how, through *Macbeth* and many other plays, Shakespeare used theater's model of gender performativity to question the fixed gender structures of the patriarchal system.

In his study of gender performance in early modern England, Stephen Orgel reminds us that men and women “were often presented within Renaissance culture as a binary opposition.”² The two genders were “each treated as...a separate species” and the divisions between the ideals of masculine and feminine were extremely rigid.³ This gender categorization was a direct result of the hierarchal and patriarchal nature of English Renaissance society and implies “a political agenda” that kept women “firmly ensconced below men in the hierarchy.”⁴ Men were masters of the political domain, and were acknowledged as the more rational of the two genders, while women were obligated to perform domestic tasks and were considered the more irrational gender, ensuring they remained in their subservient positions.⁵ However, for the purposes of this essay, I would like to define the early modern genders in a more nuanced way, using Coppelia Kahn as a starting point. Kahn argues that these ideal perceptions of masculinity and femininity conceded a certain amount of control to women, who had “the power to validate men’s identities through their obedience and fidelity as wives and daughters.”⁶ In order for men to be the dominant gender, women were necessary to fill the role of *dominated* gender, to validate the social and political structures of the patriarchy. Kahn adds that “a woman’s subjugation to her husband’s will was the measure of his patriarchal authority and thus of his manliness.”⁷ Most importantly, as the bearers of legitimate male heirs, women served as “the continuation of the patriarchy.”⁸ In these subtle ways, femininity actually *defined* masculinity, a crucial concept I shall return to later when I discuss the gender relationships at work in *Macbeth*. Kahn’s argument highlights the irony of gender structures in early modern England. Although the patriarchal ideal viewed women as subservient and distinctly powerless, women actually held a great deal of unacknowledged power that, if recognized, would have violated the very core of the patriarchal system.⁹

In a society built on the basis of patriarchal structures, there was a great deal of anxiety surrounding any variation from ideal gender definitions.¹⁰ There was a “general fear of blurred...sexual boundaries,” apparent in the extreme forms of punishment dealt to violators.¹¹ For instance, crossdressing, which posed an obvious, visible threat to gender norms, was a risky action with severe consequences.¹² Jean Howard gives examples of some of these consequences in his essay on crossdressing, explaining that “lower-class women were pilloried and whipped and merchant wives were harangued from the pulpit” as a result of their transgression. Given the anxiety surrounding gender role complications, it is noteworthy that these same subjects emerged as popular forms of entertainment within the world of theater during this time period. Plays written during the English Renaissance contain substantial evidence that points to the theater as an active outlet for experimenting with gender complications. The early modern English theaters inherently contained violations of gender boundaries because of the exclusive male and boy companies. Although there is some evidence of actresses and female performers in countries on the continent during this time, the English stages remained noticeably male.¹³ I will save further discussion of the male stage for the end of my essay because it is first necessary to introduce *Macbeth* in order to use the play as a lens through which to highlight the crucial connection between theater and Shakespeare’s notion of gender.

As a playwright, Shakespeare took every advantage of the theater’s inherent gender complications in what Orgel calls ‘self-reflexive moments,’ specifically when “Shakespeare makes the practice of his theatre, the substitution of boys for women, into the subject of his drama.”¹⁴ Shakespeare’s plays are especially interested in men and women who step out of their prescribed gender roles. The most popular character examples with scholars are Viola in *Twelfth Night* and Rosalind from *As You Like It*. I would like to briefly discuss these two characters with

the ultimate intention of arguing that the characters in *Macbeth* challenge gender ideals in a much more complicated manner than these earlier plays. Often in his works, as Shakespeare breaks down gender boundaries inherent within his society, he also reinforces them. Viola and Rosalind are perfect demonstrations of this dramatic paradox within Shakespeare's work.

According to Howard, in *Twelfth Night*, "the whole thrust of the dramatic narrative is to release [Viola] from the prison of her masculine attire and return her to her proper and natural position as wife."¹⁵ The audience can see that Viola's disguise is merely utilitarian, a means of survival and hardly a threat to the hierarchal order. Several times throughout the play she reminds the audience of her disguise and remains intrinsically feminine as she falls in love with Orsino and sympathizes with Olivia's plight. Therefore, although Viola is dressed as a man, her character remains firmly positioned within the boundaries of the female sphere and there is no real evidence that her disguise is empowering in any significant way, although her crossdressing does function as more than mere comedic plot device.¹⁶ Similarly, in *As You Like It*, Rosalind constantly reminds the audience that she is in disguise and does not take on any masculine qualities other than her clothing. Her disguise, like Viola's, remains purely utilitarian, a way to escape into the Forest of Arden unnoticed. Apart from her male clothing, Rosalind is the essence of femininity in the play. Howard sums up this visible contradiction nicely when he writes, "she *could* be a threatening figure if she did not constantly, contrapuntally, reveal herself to the audience as the not-man, as in actuality a lovesick maid...who faints at the sight of blood."¹⁷ In these comedies, Shakespeare skims the surface of gender boundary violations and uses the theater's inherent gender challenges as a means to a comic end, a theatrical design that was no doubt tolerated by his original audiences.

In his argument, Howard talks about “the contradictory nature of the theatre,” the stage as both an extension of ideal gender structures (as we see Shakespeare subtly reinforcing in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*) and a site for challenging and questioning those same structures.¹⁸ As long as this contradiction remained within the four walls of the playhouses, it seems that the audience was able to tolerate, and even enjoy, some adjustments to the prescribed definitions of male and female.¹⁹ However, it is possible, and probable, that their tolerance had severe limitations and there was no doubt a visible anxiety at some of the more suggestive references to gender breakdowns. Why, then, is there such an extraordinary number of plays from this time that complicate the issues of gender?²⁰ If the public truly was threatened by these topics, perhaps the plays were meant to alleviate cultural anxiety. Possibly, in a similar way that entertainment today often circles around our fears and anxieties, the playwrights regarded their work as a form of catharsis. If this were the case, plays like *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* would probably have been well received, because the gender complications are sorted out and patriarchal order is restored at the conclusion. On the surface, this type of restoration is what we see in *Macbeth*, but, in a much more complicated way and on a much deeper level, Shakespeare allows this play and its characters to be particularly threatening to the gender structures of early modern England. In *Macbeth*, gender role violations prove imminently destructive as Shakespeare takes punishment to the extreme and asks his audience to reexamine the core of gender structures within his society.

Before exploring the unconventional gender relations within this play, it is important to discuss how gender definitions are *initially* constructed in *Macbeth*. In a much more nuanced way than in *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* the playwright initially reinforces the societal ideals of gender, only to deconstruct and challenge these ideals as the play

progresses. Within the very first act of *Macbeth* the audience is presented with concrete versions of what it means to be “male” and what it means to be “female.” Robert Kimbrough compares these ideals to the broader definitions of early modern England when he writes, “in *Macbeth*, and elsewhere in Shakespeare, as in Elizabethan literature in general, to be ‘manly’ is to be aggressive, daring, bold, resolute, and strong, especially in the face of death, whether giving or receiving. To be ‘womanly’ is to be gentle, fearful, pitying, wavering, and soft.”²¹ However, within the complex layers of this play, there are moments when it seems that Shakespeare only presents these gender ideals in order to question them.

The audience is introduced to the title character through the mouth of a blood-drenched soldier—the perfect image of the quintessential man. When Duncan asks, “what bloody man is that,” he articulates his inability to recognize the individual, but automatically defines the soldier as a *man* because of the blood on his body (1.2.1). The entire second scene, during which we have our first preview of Macbeth’s character, is staunchly masculine. The conversation centers on politics and war, subjects that fall distinctly into the masculine sphere. Only male characters are present onstage during this scene and when Macbeth’s name is mentioned, his reputation precedes him—a reputation swollen with ultimate maleness.

“For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
 Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel,
 Which smok’d with bloody execution,
 Like Valour’s minion, carv’d out his passage,
 Till he fac’d the slave;
 Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
 Till he unseam’d him from the nave to th’ chops,
 And fix’d his head upon our battlements.”

(1.2.16-23)

Although the audience does not see witness Macbeth physically performing these actions onstage, the image in the above report is enough to categorize Macbeth as a true inhabitant of the

idealized masculine sphere.²² Only a true man would be capable of “disdaining Fortune,” a figure distinctly aligned with the feminine sphere and the prophetic power of witchcraft. Macbeth’s status as a man is heightened by his ability to defeat Fortune and defy the strong figure of feminine power Fortune comes to represent. Consequently, it becomes apparent that society’s ideal masculine status depends on the complete excision of everything female. Furthermore, Macbeth’s sword smokes “with bloody execution,” the implication being that Macbeth has killed so many that his sword is hot with the blood of his victims, suggesting that “killing power” is another of society’s ideal masculine traits. Subsequently, the description of Macbeth’s killing of Macdonwald—“he unseam’d him from the nave to th’ chops”—further suggests that the killing power of the ideal man must be ruthless and unforgiving, reinforcing the complete excision of any feminine qualities of compassion or remorse.

Immediately after this gruesome battle report, Duncan praises Macbeth’s performance on the battlefield by pronouncing him to be a “worthy gentleman” (1.2.24). During this time period, the term “gentleman” was more a distinction of noble birth, rather than the particular connotations of “gentle behavior” the word has been endowed with through time.²³ However, Duncan’s use of the adjective “worthy” before the distinction clearly illustrates the societal reinforcements of this blood-drenched image of the ideal male (1.2.24). The soldier, too, is praised for his blood sacrifice when Duncan hails him with “so well thy words become thee, as thy wounds:/ they smack of honour both” (1.2.44-45). Here, the soldier’s words, heavy with images of blood and battles, are equated with his wounds, which become the physical manifestation of his honor and courage on the battlefield.

Directly after the report of Macbeth’s proud display of masculinity on the battlefield, the audience is introduced to his wife and the image of the ideal male immediately dissolves. The

Macbeths seem to share a relationship that is contradictory to traditional and ideal gender structures. In his letter about the witches' prophecies, Macbeth greets Lady Macbeth as his "dearest partner of greatness" (1.5.11). These words suggest that this couple has a close relationship, perhaps parallel rather than hierarchal. "Greatness" is not a quality that the ideal woman was supposed to possess or aspire to at this time and "partner" suggests an equality rather than a hierarchy. Already, without even seeing the pair onstage together, Shakespeare hints that Lady Macbeth holds an acknowledged degree of power over her husband.

This hypothesis is strengthened when, shortly after reading the letter, Lady Macbeth comments on her husband's gentle nature and the image of Macbeth's glory on the battlefield is tainted by feminine underpinnings. Lady Macbeth's description of Macbeth's nature is less than flattering to his masculine countenance and is the beginning of the 'unmanning process' that will unfold throughout the first act of the play:

"Yet do I fear thy nature:
It is too full o'th'milk of human kindness,
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it."

(1.5.16-20)

She accuses Macbeth of being "full o'th'milk of human kindness," too full of feminine qualities that will halt his masculine ambition. By distinctly associating "human kindness" with "milk" in these lines, Shakespeare places compassion firmly in the realm of the feminine. Also, when Lady Macbeth speaks of Macbeth's "nature," the term serves a dual purpose. First, we know that she is talking about human nature, his essence of being. The Oxford English Dictionary defines this use of the term as "the inherent and inseparable combination of properties essentially pertaining to anything and giving it its fundamental character."²⁴ But, there is also the underlying context of "nature," associated with the feminine sphere of influence and allied with

the “green” world of innocence. As I touched on earlier, in Renaissance England, nature was juxtaposed to the political, female to male domains respectively.²⁵ In the first line of this passage, then, when Lady Macbeth expresses her fear of Macbeth’s nature, that fear is intimately connected to Macbeth’s compassion, a trait she worries may overshadow his ambition. This image of Macbeth, presented by his wife as full of “human kindness” and allied with nature, strongly opposes the hyper-masculine Macbeth from the battlefield report.

By Lady Macbeth’s definition, then, the key to Macbeth’s success as a man lies in his rejection of “human kindness,” a decision he struggles with throughout the play. Before Macbeth makes the decision to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth has to harden his nature and, several times before the murder, she attempts to stamp out his human kindness by comparing him to her definition of the ideal man, which mirrors the report of Macbeth from the blood-drenched soldier. However, Macbeth’s definition of the ideal man seems contradictory to Lady Macbeth’s version, an opposition that he voices when he says, “I dare do all that may become a man;/ who dares do more, is none” (1.7.46-47). Macbeth hesitates to fulfill his wife’s definition of masculinity, which begins with Duncan’s murder, and defines her ideal male as less than human, almost a machine-like status that he does not fully embrace until the final act of the play. He does, however, eventually kill Duncan, but Lady Macbeth is forced to directly threaten his manhood and question his love before he makes the decision. She threatens his masculinity with:

“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.”

(1.7.49-51)

There is an implicit ultimatum in this statement; In order for Macbeth to become the man she envisions, the ideal male and the ideal king, he must perform the bloody deed of killing Duncan.

Now that I have established Shakespeare's reinforcement and subsequent deconstruction of ideal masculinity, it is necessary to do the same for femininity using Lady Macbeth as a starting point. Similar to Macbeth's initial introduction as the ideal male, within the first few lines of Lady Macbeth's entrance she establishes the boundaries of the ideal female. Especially noteworthy, though, is that Shakespeare does not set up feminine expectations through Lady Macbeth in the same way that he defines masculinity through her husband. In fact, any ideal female characteristics are established by Lady Macbeth either *rejecting* her female traits or accusing Macbeth of possessing those same traits. Unlike the bloody soldier scene, when we learn about the exemplary male through Macbeth's display of hyper-masculinity in battle, here Shakespeare defines femininity through Lady Macbeth's rejection of her female qualities:

Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of Direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on Nature's mischief!"

(1.5.40-50)

With these lines, Shakespeare establishes the definition of the ideal female in all of the qualities Lady Macbeth rejects. Lady Macbeth requests that the spirits harden her "nature" by filling her "from the crown to the toe, top-full/ of Direst cruelty." By thickening her blood, the spirits can both stop her menstrual cycle, a key indication of femininity, and "stop up th'access and passage to remorse," which will ensure that her "human kindness" does not shake her "fell purpose." In her request to become more masculine, Lady Macbeth steps into a realm of heightened power

and influence, accepting a more masculine identity into her life in order to convince her husband to conform to that same identity.

With her transformation, Lady Macbeth's newly hardened nature allows her to play a more influential role in Macbeth's decision about murdering Duncan. Consequently, though, as she pushes Macbeth to perform the deed and become "so much more the man," she essentially pushes him into a version of maleness that can only be achieved by a complete rejection of his femininity—his "human kindness" (1.7.51). In this way, Lady Macbeth becomes the enforcer of societal ideals of masculinity and continues to push Macbeth toward these ideals. However, even as she becomes the representation of societal ideals in her vision for her husband, she rejects the feminine societal ideals in her role as wife. Wielding her power and influence over Macbeth, she steps out of the conventional feminine role of submissive, domestic wife. Ironically, then, as Lady Macbeth forces her husband to adhere to gender norms, she subverts them.

Lady Macbeth continues to reject her feminine qualities throughout the first act of the play, consciously presenting an ideal female quality only to immediately dismiss it. Her image of perverse motherhood is a perfect example:

"I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this."

(1.7.54-59)

This rejection of female nature is particularly crucial because she makes it in front of her husband and actually compares his softer, weaker nature to her own, newly hardened self. The implication here is that, while she would dash the brains out of her smiling babe, Macbeth would

not. In this particular moment, as she rejects motherhood and any semblance of nurturing qualities, she dumps the shards of those qualities on Macbeth. Macbeth recognizes her new, hardened countenance and it seems his masculine pride has been sufficiently threatened because, shortly after these lines, he accepts his wife's plans for Duncan's murder.

However, it seems that Macbeth's acceptance and performance of the "bloody business" does not have the desired transformation because he continues to distance himself from Lady Macbeth's definition of masculinity. Even after he kills Duncan, Macbeth questions his judgment and is visibly anxious when he asks Lady Macbeth, "wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?/ I had most need of blessing and 'Amen' / stuck in my throat" (2.2.30-32). Her frustration is obvious in the following lines:

"My hands are of your colour; but I shame
To wear a heart so white. I hear a knocking
At the south entry:--retire we to our chamber.
A little water clears us of this deed:
How easy is it then! Your constancy
Hath left you unattended."

(2.2.63-68)

Once again she emasculates her husband even as she empowers herself, saying that they are both guilty of the deed but she has hardened herself against that guilt while his heart remains "so white." At this point, she brings her husband's emasculation to a more threatening level and begins to equate him with a child:

"Infirm of purpose!
Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead,
Are but pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil."

(2.2.51-53)

She endows Macbeth with the "eye of childhood," which implies a natural sense of right and wrong, aligned with the female sphere. She continues to play the dominant role in the

relationship, but that role takes on a more nurturing appearance as she shuffles him off to bed and comforts him saying, “a little water clears us of this deed.” Lady Macbeth maintains substantial power and influence over Macbeth until the end of the second act, when Macbeth finally becomes the man she envisions and cuts himself off from the feminine sphere, including Lady Macbeth herself, a transformation I will discuss in detail later in this essay.

Many scholars connect Lady Macbeth’s power over her husband with a version of maternal power. In “‘Born of Woman’: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*”, Janet Adelman argues that “the whole of the play represents...both the fantasy of a virtually absolute and destructive maternal power and the fantasy of absolute escape from this power.”²⁶ In other words, *Macbeth* is essentially a struggle between a world of influential maternal/female power and a world completely devoid of feminine influence. While I do support Adelman’s broader arguments about the gender battle throughout this play, in the remainder of this essay, I hope to challenge some of her finer details, beginning with her sub-argument that Lady Macbeth, and not the witches, is the more “frightening figure” and “the fears of female coercion, female definition of the male...find their ultimate locus in the figure of Lady Macbeth.”²⁷ Although I have just presented evidence that points to Lady Macbeth as a clear catalyst for the transformation of Macbeth throughout the play, the connection between Macbeth and the witches is much more complete, and ultimately at the core of this play’s complications of gender and power.

However, it is important to note that scholars have often explored the relationship between the witches and Lady Macbeth, and some have even categorized her as the “fourth witch”. There are, no doubt, a large number of similarities between these characters. Like the witches, Lady Macbeth is a powerful female presence and is able to use her words to entice her husband into action—“Hie thee hither,/ That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,/ And chastise

with the valour of my tongue” (1.5.25-27). As I have just mentioned, Lady Macbeth is able to persuade Macbeth to murder Duncan, setting off the avalanche of “bloody business.” Though, even with these similarities, Lady Macbeth remains in a separate category of feminine power and it is unfair to analyze such a distinct, complex character as a “fourth witch.” Unlike the witches, who I will discuss in the following section, she does not maintain significant power through the entire play, nor is she able to sustain her influence over Macbeth. Once her husband is crowned king, barring one minor reversion in the banquet scene of act three, she becomes a hysterical female, completely unraveled by sympathy and guilt as a result of her murderous actions. Her overtly feminine behavior after the discovery of Duncan’s murder forces Macbeth to leave her ignorant of his subsequent actions. Far from Macbeth’s “dearest partner of greatness,” as he plans Banquo’s murder, Macbeth insists that she “be innocent of the knowledge...till thou applaud the deed” (3.2.45-46). With this line, Lady Macbeth transforms back into the ideal, submissive wife, simply allowed to applaud her husband for his masculine displays of power. The audience observes the return of Lady Macbeth’s rejected female qualities and her full character transformation in the final act of the play.

“Out, damned spot! out, I say!—One; two:
 why, then ‘tis time to do’t.—Hell is murky.—Fie,
 my Lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard?—What need
 we fear who knows it, when none can call our power
 to accompt?—Yet who would have thought the old
 man to have had so much blood in him?”

(5.1.33-38)

These are not the words of a “fourth witch,” but rather the ramblings of a scared wife, helpless under the power of the supernatural realm inhabited by the witches.

Scholars often use Lady Macbeth’s transformation in the first act of the play as an argument for her intimate connection with the witches. However, the witches’ prophecies are the

motivation for her transformation—“Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be/ What thou art promis’d—suggesting that their influence affects her as much, if not more, than it affects her husband (1.5.15-16). Because she is so affected by their presence in the play, we cannot bestow Lady Macbeth with the witches’ amount of feminine power. In the witches’ characters, Shakespeare further complicates the gender relations in *Macbeth* and presents females that ultimately prove much more threatening than Lady Macbeth. The witches inhabit an illegitimate sphere of female power, the same power that Macbeth must reject in order to fulfill his wife’s definition of the ideal male and, I shall argue, the same power that is intimately connected to Macbeth’s defeat. Also, because these characters are women from the supernatural realm, they are automatically endowed with a kind of ambiguous power that Shakespeare’s audience would have recognized and feared. Through these characters we can begin to understand Shakespeare’s nuanced gender definitions and Macbeth’s vulnerability to their power introduces the idea that the masculine sphere is constantly threatened by an innate presence of feminine influence and power. By exploring the specifics of the witches’ power, we can then use the information to connect the gender relations in *Macbeth* to the gender complications of the London theater.

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“O! These flaws and starts
(Impostors to true fear), would well become
A woman’s story at a winter’s fire,
Authoris’d by her grandam.” (3.4.62-65)

Many scholars in the field have argued against the importance of the witches in *Macbeth*, dismissing them as “nothing more and nothing less than *Macbeth*’s missing comic sub-plot.”²⁸ Diane Purkiss narrows in on the “sensational value” of the Weird Sisters and labels them as “a low-budget, frankly exploitative collage of randomly chosen bits of witch-lore.”²⁹ Her argument rests on the notion that the English public in the early seventeenth century was skeptical of witchcraft, a sentiment echoed by Christina Larner in *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*. As evidence of this skepticism, Larner points to King James I, a monarch eager to please the skeptic English public by emphasizing “that his interest in demonology was not over credulous or unsophisticated.”³⁰ However, it is very possible that the public was so skeptical *because* of King James’ intense interest in and emphasis on witchcraft during his reign in Scotland. By the time he took over the English throne, James was already associated with absolutist propaganda and was a known, self-proclaimed expert on the subject of witchcraft. There is strong evidence showing that witchcraft in England was taken less seriously than on the continent but, as Peter Stallybrass points out, “in England...there was already a clear connection between prophecy, witchcraft, and monarchy before James ascended the throne.”³¹ With these connections already in place, and in an age of scientific discovery and recent collision of world cultures, witches came to embody a fascination with the wondrous, the exotic, and the infectious. *Macbeth* is a byproduct of this fascination and was quite possibly performed for the benefit of a new English king still subconsciously attracted to notions of witchcraft. Larner concludes this possibility when she writes about “the unusually short length...the flattering references to

Banquo's line and the centrality of the theme of prophecy by witchcraft" in *Macbeth*, evidence of James' continued interest in the subject of witches. Under his belief of divine kingship, James wanted his people to believe that the monarch had a special ability to perceive witches and overcome them, an idea that saturates this play. Evidently, the public and its monarch, although perhaps slightly skeptical of witchcraft, nonetheless believed in its existence and, consequently, the witches in *Macbeth* serve a much higher dramatic purpose than mere entertainment value.

A brief look at a production in which witches do, in fact, primarily serve the purpose of spectacle will reinforce the dramatic importance of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters. Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens* was presented for James I of England and his wife Queen Anne around 1609, only a few years after *Macbeth* is thought to have premiered. The purpose of a masque is to praise the monarch and his family, who were often asked to participate. As Stephen Orgel explains in *The Jonsonian Masque*, with such a high level of involvement by the royal family, it was imperative that any sort of ambiguity was left out of these productions. Consequently, in Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, the witches are presented as unambiguous, stereotypical representations of disorder and chaos, "everything we acknowledge to be evil and false."³² In his prologue, Jonson specifically states that the witches are meant for entertainment purposes.

"...twelve Women, in the habit of *Haggs*, or Witches, sustayning the persons of *Ignorance*, *Suspicion*, *Credulity*, &c. the opposites to good *Fame*, should fill that part; not as a *Masque*, but a spectacle of strangeness..."³³

Here, Jonson emphasizes his intentions by setting up a very literal antithesis between good (the twelve Queens) and evil (the Dame and her hags). The hags, or witches, are characters of the "anti-masque", a dramatic device that adds tension to the strong form of the masque itself by setting up a deliberate dichotomy between the masquers and the professional actors who play their enemies.

In *Night's Black Agents*, Anthony Harris points out that there are similarities between Jonson and Shakespeare's witches because both "perform elaborate rituals and incantation ceremonies" that, at the narrative level, aim for "universal discord and the destruction of specific persons," while reproducing the monarchical court's mystical powers at the level of ideology.³⁴ However, in Jonson's masque the witchcraft performed is safely contained within the anti-masque; the witches do not converse with the queens because "they defy...the order of the natural world" and must be kept very separate so that order is maintained throughout the theatrical display.³⁵ In contrast, the witches in *Macbeth* directly interfere with the royal family because Macbeth and his wife make specific choices that allow the witches to become intertwined in their lives, ultimately allowing the witches to create considerable chaos because of their heightened positions of power and influence. Compared to Jonson's witches then, Shakespeare's Weird Sisters are crucial to the main action of the play. Purkiss herself moves toward a similar conclusion at the point in her essay when she writes that "chaos *is* the witches' meaning."³⁶

I would like to take this statement from Purkiss a step further and argue that the chaos the witches embody is a direct result of the gendered power imbalance that pervades English early modern culture. The witches in *Macbeth* inhabit a socially offensive realm of feminine power, socially offensive because it feeds on the masculine insecurities of a patriarchal society. Recalling Kahn's argument and the nuanced gender definitions that I am using, while patriarchy "gives men control over women, it also makes them dependent on women indirectly and covertly for the validation of their manhood."³⁷ It is the threatening dependence on women that I would like to focus on, narrowing Kahn's argument to specifically examine subtle female power exhibited through oral tradition and storytelling. In *Macbeth*, we need to interpret the Weird Sisters not only as representations of the supernatural and occult beliefs of the English public,

but more important as the ultimate embodiment of female power revealed through orality, a dangerous display in early modern England where, although Latin (male language) dominated mercantile and legal power spheres, English (female language) had the power to influence the masculine realms of society. “Oral English,” the language of female narrative, was reproduced in pamphlets, ballads, and stories as the language with the power to move the masses. Mary Ellen Lamb reminds us that “the caricature of the ignorant female narrator heightened an awareness of the sophistication of a highly literate authorship represented as predominantly male.”³⁸ With the widening of this social gap came the realization of the potential power and influence of the female language.

The witches represent the full realization of this potential power as vocal women who constantly discuss and meddle in spheres that are traditionally masculine in early modern England. Even within the first several lines of *Macbeth*, the witches speak of politics, planning to meet again “when the hurlyburly’s done,/ when the battle’s lost and won” (1.1.3-4). The world of battles and warfare falls distinctly into the masculine realm in patriarchal gender definitions, a delineation reinforced in the second scene of the play, which is comprised entirely of males. However, the audience learns about the battle, not through the mouth of the king or one of his soldiers, but through the witches in the very first moments of *Macbeth*. This first scene introduces a feminine sphere of vocal power right from the outset of the play.

According to Howard, “women who talked too much...were put upon a cucking stool and dunked in water to stop the incontinence of the mouth.”³⁹ Vocally powerful female in early modern England posed such a threat because of the traditional patriarchal structures that I discussed in the first section of this essay. If we narrow the focus, though, to look specifically at the threat posed by the female narrative, we find a close connection to wetnurses, lower class

women who were essentially in charge of essentially raising children into adulthood, clothing, washing, and feeding the children of the elite. According to Lamb, “wetnursing represented the earliest and most intense interaction between women of lower status and the more elite children in their charge.”⁴⁰ This social care system resulted in extreme “cultural anxiety” because of “the formative power of interaction” between the upper class children and these lower class women.⁴¹ Perhaps one of the most powerful forms of interaction was through stories. It is easy to imagine a wetnurse telling her charges stories throughout the day to keep them entertained, or using anecdotes and songs to put them to sleep at night. These stories, or “old wives’ tales” as Lamb calls them, were not the typical fairy tales that we would imagine today, but can be defined in broader terms as any story that would have had an influence on the children. There is strong evidence of this influence “in productions of popular culture by Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson.”⁴² Lamb argues that “the telling of old wives’ tales, and the memory of the women who told them, left a lasting impression on the subjectivities of many early moderns.”⁴³

Consequently, the influence surrounding old wives’ tales resulted in an anxiety that permeated both gender and class power relations in early modern England. Not only did the job of wetnursing give the lower classes power over the higher classes, more importantly it gave women power over men. Until they reached “manhood” and entered school, elite male children were completely reliant on the women who took care of them.⁴⁴ Children wore skirts throughout their childhood, resulting in a type of gender neutral status, which Orgel terms a “common gender.”⁴⁵ Women were constantly present in children’s daily lives as both comforting and dominating figures. One result of these gender neutral children was the cultural notion that “masculinity represented an achieved characteristic more than a biological given.”⁴⁶ Masculinity was a fluid concept and male children were pushed to achieve the highest degree of maleness, a

status achieved when they reached adulthood.⁴⁷ The sole obstacle in their struggle for manhood was the influence of women, which, according to Lamb, “represented an ever-present threat to this achievement of masculinity.”⁴⁸ Old wives’ tales, then, became a reminder and a remainder from a time in a man’s life when he was dominated by and reliant upon women—essentially a time when matriarchy, instead of patriarchy, reigned. Therefore, the witches in *Macbeth*, as representations of both elements from old wives’ tales and powerfully vocal females, are, at levels not even entirely available to conscious consideration, a palpable threat to Shakespeare’s original audiences.

The witches’ words are endowed with a great deal of power throughout the play, reinforcing the connection between these characters and the female narrative. Compared to the other characters, they speak in an odd rhyme scheme, in triplets. The following passage is representative of the witches’ use of language in this play:

A sailor’s wife had chestnuts in her lap,
 And mounch’d, and mounch’d, and mounch’d: ‘Give me,’ quoth I:—
 ‘Aroynt thee, witch!’ the rump-fed ronyon cries.
 Her husband’s to Aleppo gone, master o’th’ *Tiger*:
 But in sieve I’ll thither sail,
 And like a rat without a tail;
 I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do.

(1.3.4-10)

Throughout this sequence, the Weird Sister speaks in triplets, first with her repetition of “mounch’d, and mounch’d, and mounch’d,” a word when, repeated enough times, is onomatopoeic. The last phrase, also repeated three times—“I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do”—is ominous because it promises action, perhaps in the form of a curse or hex. Also noteworthy is the blank verse form in the first three lines, a rhyme scheme often reserved for the more refined and powerful characters in Shakespeare, most often the upper classes.⁴⁹ Through this

combination of speech patterns, then, the witches are elevated to a level that demands respect and, possibly, anxiety.

The language patterns of this passage invite the audience to hear these lines as a story. In the context of the play, this witch is essentially telling a story to her companions as she recounts her interactions with the “sailor’s wife.” Shakespeare makes an early connection between the witches and female narrative with these lines and, if we are to read them as a story, then the content of the passage is also revealing as we attempt to decipher the dramatic purpose of these characters. Specifically, the idea of the witch taking revenge on the “rump-fed ronyon” through her husband is indicative of the connection these characters assign to husband/wife relationships. The other husband/wife pair these witches interfere with is the Macbeths and, other than this small hint, we hear no motivation for the attention the witches’ devote to our title character. This passage, then, suggests something, never stated, about a possible encounter between Lady Macbeth and the witches. Throughout the play, Lady Macbeth never associates with the Weird Sisters; the witches work exclusively through Macbeth, which suggests the possibility that Lady Macbeth is more familiar with the witches than she appears.

The witches woo Macbeth with their words, using prophecies, as a wetnurse might use stories, to influence Macbeth’s actions. The language patterns of the prophecies have a distinct story-like quality:

1 Witch:	All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
2 Witch:	All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
3 Witch:	All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be King hereafter.

(1.3.48-50)

The repetition of the prophetic words and Macbeth’s name, along with the tiered titles, foreshadow the story of the play. In their subsequent prophecies, directed at Banquo, the sing-

song quality of the witches' lines suggest a strong connection to old wives' tales and the traditional patterns of nursery rhymes:

1 Witch: Hail!
 2 Witch: Hail!
 3 Witch: Hail!
 1 Witch: Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
 2 Witch: Not so happy, yet much happier.
 3 Witch: Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
 So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!
 1 Witch: Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

(1.3.62-69)

The witches mold their prophecies into stories in order to wield a very feminine power over these two grown men. The witches' language, then, becomes a threatening source of potential power, a power that hovers and finally comes to fruition when Macbeth accepts the prophecies, the stories, as truths and acts on them.

Shakespeare further emphasizes the power of the witches by presenting these women as if they, themselves, are characters in the very stories they are telling. For instance, the first scene of the play has a heightened dramatic quality and immediately transports the audience into the theatrical world of storytelling. The stage directions call for "thunder and lightening" as the witches enter and the three women speak of these threatening weather patterns in their first few lines (1.1.2). Before they exit, the witches "hover through the fog and filthy air," reinforcing the unnatural aura surrounding these characters and the theatricality surrounding the entire scene (1.1.12). How can we interpret Shakespeare's choice to begin *Macbeth* with these suggestive elements? It seems likely that this mature playwright is intentionally inciting fear in his audience members, not just by presenting them with three witches right from the outset, but also by using elements of old wives' tales to deliberately upset the power norms of the patriarchal ideal.

Shakespeare's audiences would, no doubt, have recognized several parallels drawn between the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* and the subversive females of early modern English society, the females who were often condemned for witchcraft. As I mentioned earlier, although the English were slightly skeptical of witchcraft during this time period, witches had become something of a cultural trope and by connecting his witches to the common witch-lore of the time, Shakespeare was drawing on the audience's heightened anxiety surrounding the topic of witchcraft. His witches may be slightly overdramatic for entertainment purposes, as Purkiss suggests, but the common elements associated with English witchcraft are unquestionably present underneath the dramatic exterior, elements which would have resonated with his audience, forcing them to associate these women with a threatening sphere of feminine power.⁵⁰

Peter Stallybrass argues that the Weird Sisters "have features typical of the English village 'witch'" and he compares their physical appearance to the stereotypical image of the old, wrinkled witch of early seventeenth century England. We see other cultural similarities in the actions and behaviors of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters. "Witches" were often accused of "killing swine" or raising storms to wreak vengeance on their enemies, two punishments used by the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* (1.3.2, 1.3.7).⁵¹ Also, the motive of vengeance, in this scene as well as in common witch-lore, was often perceived to be something insignificant, such as refusing chestnuts or other food (1.3.6). Perhaps the most threatening element of all to Shakespeare's original audiences would have been the vocal power of these characters, not just as representations of female narrative, but also as a means to curse or hex enemies. Many women condemned in early modern England for witchcraft were accused of using their words to bring harm to others, muttering curses under their breath and punishing their enemies with evil spells.

Though these women were often helpless in every other respect, they still had “the power of words—to defend...or to curse.”⁵²

Women in early modern England were condemned for witchcraft primarily because of their disassociation with the societal ideal of the “perfect” female. Subversive, outspoken women, like the witches in *Macbeth*, represented complete and utter chaos, a foreshadowing of the upset of patriarchal power. The Weird Sisters, in perhaps an even more threatening way, also physically embody an inversion of patriarchal power because of their facial hair. Bearded women invoked alarm and anxiety in early seventeenth-century England. Will Fisher suggests that the *humanity* of these women was called into question and they were labeled “monsters” because their very existence threatened the structure of the patriarchy.⁵³ Shakespeare could not have complicated the gender of the witches any more successfully than by giving them facial hair—endowing them with the mark of masculinity in a much more intimidating way than by merely dressing them in men’s clothing.⁵⁴ Facial hair is an innate, physical feature of men, not something artificial or external, and the beards imply that these characters are powerful enough that their bodies have the ability to produce this essential indicator of masculinity.

The most obvious display of the extraordinary power of these characters is their influence over the sovereign. Stallybrass argues that “*Macbeth* is constructed around the fear of a world without sovereignty.”⁵⁵ It seems to me that, rather than a world completely devoid of sovereignty, in this play Shakespeare questions the consequences of a world ruled by a female-influenced sovereign. Macbeth’s becomes entirely reliant on the words of the Weird Sisters, even seeking them out in the final scenes of the play, demanding, “I conjure you, by that which you profess,/ howe’er you come to know it, answer me” (4.1.50-51). Disorder ensues when a male monarch allows himself to become an agent of feminine power. The women in this play

control the masculine realm of politics and, in the end, the play as a whole condemns a female-run world as unnatural, illegitimate, and destructive.

The most obvious display of the witches' influence is apparent in *Macbeth*; however, the influence of the witches' power stretches far beyond the title character. In fact, the witches' influence pervades the entire play and they continue to create chaos and disorder through to the very end. Darkness, settled over Scotland for the majority of *Macbeth*, can be contributed to the witches—"by th'clock 'tis day,/and yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp" (2.4.6-7). Similarly, the unnatural animal behavior mentioned throughout the play reflects the unnatural elements at work under the power of the witches. Even when the Weird Sisters are not physically on stage, their presence lingers.⁵⁶ In fact, it is possible to attribute all of the inexplicable happenings within the other character's lives to the presence of the witches in this play. The hallucinations that the Macbeths experience—the air dagger, Banquo's ghost, and the bloody hands—are, perhaps, visions set in place by the witches meant to manipulate the royal couple. The voices and dreams that haunt the minds of the Macbeths and allow them to "sleep no more" may be supernatural elements at work (2.2.42). The Doctor's comments on Lady Macbeth toward the end of the play—"Unnatural deeds/ do breed unnatural troubles"—even hint at the possibility that her death is caused by the witches (5.1.68-69). With the use of the word "unnatural," it becomes evident that the cause of Lady Macbeth's "infected mind" may be uncontrollable by the natural realm and may, in fact, be a product of the supernatural.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, the instruments of the witches' power, both die at the end of the play, but the witches themselves remain a threat because their fate is left open-ended. It is important to question Shakespeare's choice to leave the witches alive in Scotland, with

patriarchal order only newly reinstated. Did he simply forget about the witches? It seems not, since Macbeth mentions them in his final lines:

“Accursed be that tongue that tells me so,
For it hath cow’d my better part of man:
And be these juggling fiends no more believ’d”
(5.8.17-19)

With these final words, Macbeth realizes the immense power the witches have had over him throughout the play. Their influence has “cow’d” his “better part of man”; in other words, their power has shrouded his masculinity, both turning him from the compassionate part of his masculine nature and transforming him into an irrational being, too full of the wild, unpredictable “milk” of the feminine sphere of power. He curses the witches and finally breaks their influence over him with his final line—“be these juggling fiends no more believ’d.” But the harm is already done and Macbeth dies a prisoner to the feminine sphere of power.

Malcolm, too, unintentionally reminds the audience of the witches’ lingering presence with the last lines of the play. He promises his kingdom that everything “needful” will be performed “in measure, time, and place,” a sentiment that, in this final scene, cunningly connects back to the witches’ introduction (5.9.37-39).

1 Witch:	<i>When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain?</i>
2 Witch:	<i>When the hurlyburly’s done, When the battle’s lost and won.</i>
3 Witch:	<i>That will be ere the set of sun.</i>
1 Witch:	<i>Where the place?</i>
2 Witch:	<i>Upon the heath.</i>
3 Witch:	<i>There to meet with Macbeth.</i>

(1.1.1-7, emphasis my own)

Here, the witches introduce all three of these same elements of measure, time, and place that Malcolm reiterates at the conclusion of the play. We have to question this significant connection made between the witches and the new, seemingly legitimate, monarch. Unexpectedly, the

possibility of a re-cycling of Macbeth's story seems plausible. With the witches and their feminine power still a threat to the kingdom, is it possible for Malcolm's new patriarchal order to be maintained? Their presence questions the strength and power of even a legitimate, masculine monarch, possibly as vulnerable to the feminine sphere of power as a man, like Macbeth, who has all the appearance of a usurping tyrant. Shakespeare, then, raises the possibility that all men are intrinsically vulnerable to feminine power, a relationship that suggests an intimate connection between the two genders. In the following section, I will explore this connection and introduce the idea of a gender continuum within *Macbeth*, a continuum that explores the idea that masculinity is achieved directly out of and forever remains contingent upon femininity.

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“Boundless intemperance
 In nature is a tyranny; it hath been
 Th’untimely emptying of the happy throne,
 And fall of many kings.” (4.3.66-69)

Having established the subtle feminine powers at work in *Macbeth*, we may now return to the link between gender and theater that I briefly touched on during the first few pages of this essay. The theater was an active outlet not only for the manipulation of gender ideologies, but specifically for the spectacle of the unacknowledged sphere of feminine power. In his detailed study of playgoers in early modern London, Andrew Gurr looks specifically at the “high proportion of women at the playhouses” and presents records showing that many of these women were merchants’ wives or other urbanites, the same women who were beginning to have an increasing amount of acknowledged power during this time period.⁵⁷ This power was not only evident within the audience members, but also within female characters on stage, as we have seen with Lady Macbeth and the witches. This important connection between gender on stage and gender in the audience allows us to think about gender relations in the streets of early seventeenth-century London in increasingly nuanced ways. I would like to argue that Shakespeare recognized the complicated gender relations of the theater, and used these relations as a model within his plays to send a very specific message to his audience members.

Shakespeare’s ideas surrounding notions of gender are directly tied to the concept of gender performativity. Because of the inherent gender complexities within the institution of theater, stage spectacles already present gender as a fluid, manufactured concept. Here, I would like to briefly reintroduce Jean Howard, who specifically discusses “the fact of crossdressing as a daily part of dramatic practice.” The idea of crossdressing, at its very core, suggests gender performativity and the possibility for a fluid continuum between genders. Overlooked in

Howard's argument, though, and perhaps the most important element of the gender equation, is the specific connection between gender performativity and boy players, who played the roles of *both* men and women.⁵⁸ These young actors highlight the most important gender continuum inherent with the early seventeenth century English stage. Picking up where scholars like Orgel and Kahn have left off, we can understand that, rather than seeing males and females as "separate species," as the patriarchal ideal prescribes, Shakespeare realized that the two genders are uniquely and intimately bound, perhaps complementary to one another. Therefore, I would like to further Jean Howard's idea of crossdressing and gender fluidity on stage to argue that, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents a very specific gender continuum, not tied by masculine and feminine extremes, but by maturity—with one extreme being "boys" (considered a third gender in early modern definitions) and the other extreme being society's ideal sense of "maleness," completely severed from any amount of effeminizing "human kindness." Each notch on the continuum from "boy" to "man" represents the repression of another degree of human kindness, a trait Shakespeare aligns with "milk" early in the play, placing compassion securely in the realm of the feminine. It is specifically Shakespeare's work in the theater, with boy players stepping into the roles of both men and women, that allows him to recognize gender on such a continuum. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare moves his title character around on the continuum to show his audience that masculinity is never fixed, but instead is in constant flux, at the same time threatened, challenged, and augmented by the very elements that construct masculinity in the first place—"human kindness" and other traces of female nature.

How Shakespeare recognized these progressive notions of gender is perhaps the most important question at the core of my argument. The answer is tied intimately to the way boy players were viewed in early modern England. According to Will Fisher, "boys'...were quite

literally a different gender from men during the early modern period,” a distinction which allowed them to be set up in opposition to men on a gender continuum.⁵⁹ However, we have to remember the mindset from this time period: boys went through a stage during which they “achieved” their masculinity, leaving the essentially gender neutral world of children and entering into adulthood. This seamless track from boyhood to manhood translates into a fluid continuum in the theatrical world, in which boys not only played female roles, but donned beards and played adult male characters.

As I touched on earlier in my discussion of the witches in *Macbeth*, during this time period the beard emerged as a physical representation of achieved masculinity. Fisher argues that, consequently, prosthetic beards “were used predominantly as a means of *producing masculinity*, in much the same way as dresses or wigs might have been used to *produce femininity*.”⁶⁰ Therefore, producing masculinity on stage can be directly equated to achieving masculinity in life—a relationship that Shakespeare obviously recognized because we see it acknowledged in so many of his plays, *Macbeth* being only one example. The difference, though, is that, on stage, unlike in the streets of London, this masculinity can be achieved with just the simple application of a prosthetic beard, with “differing styles of facial hair [used] to confer differing styles of masculinity.”⁶¹ Interestingly enough, femininity, was not seen to be “achieved” in society as masculinity, yet it was produced on stage as Fisher implies with dresses and wigs to an even higher degree because of the prohibition against female actors. Producing both genders on stage through costuming raises the possibility that gender off-stage is in some way performed as well. An actor can put on a “costume” (beard or dress) and perform a specific gender as his part requires.⁶²

This idea of gender performance is central to Shakespeare's notion of a gender continuum. Shakespeare uses gender crossover that is already intrinsic within the world of theater to question notions of gender within his plays. Using the concept of gender performance, he sets up characters in a sliding continuum, specifically between men and boys, to question degrees of masculinity. Working in the gender-complicated world of theater and writing parts for both men and women would have turned him into an objective observer, with an increased sense of gender complexities compared to other types of artisans in this time period. As a man, he wrote some of the most psychologically realized female characters that came out of early seventeenth-century English plays, so there is no doubt that he had a very successful perspective on gender relations.⁶³

To take a closer look at Shakespeare's acknowledged gender continuum between boys and men, I would like to turn back to *Macbeth*. Within this play there is strong evidence for my claim that working with boy players and the world of theater allowed Shakespeare to replace the more conventional continuum (from man to woman) with a continuum from boy to man. As I touched on briefly in my discussion of Macbeth's masculinity in the first section of this essay, both Lady Macbeth and the witches often equate him with a child throughout the play, a classification I will now explore in greater detail. Their reinforcement of Macbeth's child-like status presents the possibility that, psychologically, Macbeth reverts to a state of childish vulnerability and behavior. If this is the case, then it is possible to view his hyper-masculine actions late in the play as an attempt to achieve (or re-achieve) his masculinity. Here, Janet Adelman's argument that "*maternal power...is diffused throughout the play, evoked primarily through the figures of the witches and Lady Macbeth*" and that this maternal power is what forces Macbeth to violently repress the feminine sphere of power, is important.⁶⁴ However, I am

extending Adelman's definition of "maternal power" to include wetnurses, whose power I am arguing, borrowing from Lamb, is ideologically based in the female narrative.

Wetnurses were not mothers of the children they took care of, but they did hold a form of maternal power over their charges. His relationship to the female characters in the play serves as a reminder to both Macbeth and the audience members of childhood, a time spent in the feminine domain of the household, where females dominated. As I discussed earlier, Lady Macbeth and the witches are able to persuade and influence Macbeth with their words, using the power of the female narrative to maintain a hold on him throughout the play.

Because I spent the majority of the first two sections of this essay discussing the female realm of power that manipulates Macbeth, it is important, now, to connect those examples to the moments in the play where Macbeth himself shows significant child-like vulnerability and behavior. Macbeth seems to be at the extreme of achieved masculinity only at the very beginning and very end of the play. For the majority of the play he seems to move back and forth on the continuum, almost like a pendulum swinging towards one extreme or the other but never remaining in one place for more than a brief moment. The moments when Macbeth reverts to childhood and slides back down the masculine continuum are moments in which Shakespeare specifically highlights the fragility of achieved masculinity. As I established in the first section of this essay, our first report of Macbeth's skill on the battlefield paints the image of the perfect societal ideal of maleness, a status that is quickly dissolved after we hear from Lady Macbeth and also in the scene when he first meets the witches, a moment I would now like to focus on.

This scene is very revealing of Macbeth's character because he is pinned against Banquo, who scholars claim is representative of King James' descendent in the play and, therefore, would

have been painted in a positive masculine light by Shakespeare. In the bloody soldier's report of the battle, Macbeth and Banquo are both mentioned, but it is Macbeth who comes out looking like the true hero and the ideal male because of the emphasis placed on his ruthless behaviors and Duncan's praise of his deeds. However, in this following scene, because Macbeth and Banquo meet the witches together, we can compare their reactions to reveal Macbeth's degree of masculinity at this moment in the play.

When the witches first appear, Banquo's first response is to question the reality of these characters, acting in a very rational, logical manner when he asks, "Live you? or are you aught/ that man may question" (1.3.42-43). Macbeth, instead, does not question the reality of the witches and only asks, "What are you," displaying a child-like credulity in his instantaneous acceptance of these characters within reality (1.3.47). Similarly, once the witches have disappeared, Banquo continues to question the truth/reality of the experience.

"Were such things here, as we do speak about,
Or have we eaten on the insane root,
That takes the reason prisoner?"
(1.3.83-85)

In contrast to this, Macbeth's reaction is suggestive of a child's temper tantrum. He has eagerly accepted the witches' prophecies, believing their words as a child would believe a story from his wetnurse. He unquestionably accepts the truth of the situation and only wishes he could hear more from the witches—"Would they had stay'd" (1.3.82). Setting these two characters against one another highlights the differing degrees of masculinity between Macbeth and Banquo at this point in the play and we see that the report from the soldier in the previous scene swells Macbeth's masculine reputation to an unwarranted level.

Macbeth remains in this position on the continuum, gullible and eagerly trusting, through the next few scenes as his wife tries to convince him to murder Duncan. As I discussed in the

first section of this essay, he finally performs the murder after she threatens his manhood, but he still feels guilty and vulnerable to disgrace afterwards. It is not until the murder is discovered and Macbeth brutally kills the two grooms by Duncan's bedside in an attempt to keep his own reputation safe, an act he blames on his "fury," asking "who can be wise, amaz'd, temperate and furious,/ loyal and neutral, in a moment? No man" (2.3.106-107). Even though he answers his own question, he answers incorrectly with "no man" because he has actually taken a step *closer* to ideal manhood. By murdering Duncan's innocent grooms, Macbeth suppresses another level of "human kindness" and moves toward society's version of the ideal male on the continuum—hardhearted and action-driven.

His newfound level of masculinity continues through Banquo's murder. He cuts Lady Macbeth out of his plans—"be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,/ till thou applaud the deed"—in an attempt to release himself from the power of the feminine (3.2.45-46). As he does this, he continues to move toward ideal masculinity on the continuum. In spite of these efforts, his "success" is short-lived and he swings back toward the other side of the continuum during the banquet scene of the third act. Macbeth reverts back to a child-like state as he balks in fear of Banquo's ghost, exclaiming, "Avaunt! and quit my sight! let the earth hide thee!" (3.4.92). Shakespeare acknowledges this reversion with Lady Macbeth's frantic lines to her husband, lines I used in my discussion of feminine power and old wives' tales, but which are also relevant here to highlight Shakespeare's purposeful gender continuum:

"...O! These flaws and starts
 (Imposters to true fear), would well become
 A woman's story at a winter's fire,
 Authoris'd by her grandam. Shame itself!
 Why do you make such faces? When all's done,
 You look but on a stool.

(3.4.62-67)

Not only, as I discussed earlier, does this overtly imply elements of old wives' tales and their influence over adult males, but it also shows that Shakespeare acknowledged this reversion to childhood as a very real possibility. It is indeed child-like gullibility and imagination that will fabricate a ghost even as one looks "but on a stool."

Again, Macbeth remains in his vulnerable place on the masculine continuum only for a brief moment before reestablishing some semblance of masculinity as he attempts to cut himself off from all elements of the feminine sphere and "human kindness." After he meets with the witches and watches the apparitions and the line of kings, he makes an immediate decision, acting without mercy or even a hint of "human kindness" as he decides:

"The castle of Macduff I will surprise;
Seize upon Fife; give to th'edge o'th'sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
This deed I'll do, before this purpose cool."
(4.2.150-154)

Here, toward the very end of the play, he finally unites with his reputation from the battlefield report. His promise to meet Macduff's family with "th'edge o'th'sword" evokes the original image of Macbeth's "brandish'd steel" smoking with the blood of his victims in the initial battle scene. The ruthless display of masculinity we hear about in that earlier scene is now fully realized on stage as we watch Macbeth transform into society's ideal male.

However, Shakespeare exposes a complex irony surrounding gender here, because it is precisely at this moment, when Macbeth attempts to take the ultimate step into manhood by cutting himself off completely from feminine influence, that his masculinity fails and he is unable to achieve true "ideal" male status. Macbeth makes a conscious choice to cut off "human kindness," cursing the Weird Sisters and their sphere of feminine influence with "damn'd all those that trust them" (4.2.139). As he makes the decision to murder Macduff's family, he

asserts, “from this moment,/ the very firstlings of my heart shall be/ the firstlings of my hand,” a statement that demands action and drives him toward the ideal male end of the early modern gender continuum (4.2.146-148). The irony, though, is that his childlike gullibility motivates this action. Even as he makes these ruthless, dramatic decisions and curses the Weird Sisters, he continues to trust them and relies on their prophecies until the moment of his death. He goes into his final battle armed with a false sense of masculine security; false because he believes he has completely cut himself off from the feminine, even as he continues to rely on the prophecy that “none of woman born/ shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.80-81).

This particular prophecy—“none of woman born/ shall harm Macbeth”—haunts the last act of this play. Adelman points out that the phrase “becomes virtually a talisman to ward off danger” because Macbeth endows the words with a artificial sense of invulnerability.⁶⁵ But, as readers, we can recognize that the phrase is actually endowed with a complex paradox on two distinct levels. On the level of the play itself, Macbeth uses this prophecy as his shield, even as he cuts himself off from the feminine sphere of power—the sphere of power that is in existence because man is, by nature, of woman born. Accordingly, Macbeth is shielding himself with the very power he is fighting against. He carries the belief that he alone can transcend the order of nature—complete invulnerability—by arming himself *with* nature, or the feminine sphere of nature. Subsequently, on a broader contextual level, this statement highlights the intrinsic paradox within the societal ideal of masculinity. Organically, men are *always* born of women, no matter how hard they struggle to distance themselves from the feminine sphere. So, because all men are, in fact, born of women, this statement represents a status impossible to achieve, the same status that early modern gender ideals forced onto masculinity. This paradox is precisely what I am trying to argue: the idea that society sets up a masculine continuum that Shakespeare

recognizes as an inadvertent *gender* continuum, with achieved masculinity directly reliant on and complementary to femininity.

As evidence of this paradox, we can look another aspect of the irony of Macbeth's masculine status in the final scenes of the play. As Macbeth moves toward the ideal male extreme on the continuum and continues to cut off all connections to "human kindness," he becomes the version of maleness defined by the women in the play, specifically Lady Macbeth. As I touched on in the first section of this essay, Lady Macbeth's prescriptions for her husband come to represent society's ideal masculinity. She defines masculinity in bloody deeds and lack of guilt or fear, precisely what Macbeth becomes in the final act of this play. Unlike his hesitation before Duncan's murder, he feels no remorse or uncertainty before killing Macduff's family. Macbeth's nature is no longer "full o'th'milk of human kindness"; he now possesses the "rational" nature of masculinity. But, in his submission to his wife's ideologies and his continued reliance on the witches' prophecies, his repressed feminine and child-like nature continue to be a subconscious part of his achieved masculine status. This newly achieved status, then, comes loaded with underlying feminine power. Macbeth has fallen into the trap the early moderns feared by following a woman's misguided reasoning and allowing himself to be subjected to the untamed nature of the feminine. Interestingly enough, this untamed feminine nature is physically realized in Birnam Forest, which substantially contributes to Macbeth's ultimate destruction. The forest comes to conquer Macbeth as a physical manifestation of his suppressed qualities, ideologically aligned with women, an ironic course of events considering the witches' prophecy warned him of this possibility. However, Macbeth disregards the possibility of this prophecy, responding with "that will never be," because he is too dismissive of the power of nature within the final moments of this play (4.1.94).

The result, then, is that, even though Macbeth thinks he is ultimately achieving ideal masculinity in these last moments of the play, he is perhaps at his furthest point *away* from that very masculinity. He seems to be missing a crucial step because, while he is finally fulfilling the roles and qualities society assigns to the ideal male—he is hardhearted, action-driven, and devoid of all feminine qualities—his masculine achievement comes at the cost of his downfall and death. In this particular play, Shakespeare connects the ultimate step into masculinity with fatherhood, a role that Macbeth never achieves, which may explain his downfall. This point is especially important because of Macbeth's status as the Scottish monarch in the play. There is significant evidence from this time period that the king was viewed as the political father of his country.⁶⁶ In *Basilikon Doron*, King James himself leaves directions for his son on how to be a good king, intimately connecting the ideologies of fatherhood and leadership. The ideal leader in early modern England is male, father of his people and protector of the women and children of the realm. Is Macbeth's version of leadership at the end of this play, then, representative of fatherly behavior? By the end of the play, Macbeth has turned into a killing machine, brutal and violent towards even innocent victims (like Lady Macduff and her son). It is possible, then, that Macbeth's noticeable lack of children comments directly on his warped, aggressive leadership style which, accordingly, prevents him from achieving ideal masculinity—a masculinity both the playwright and his monarch achieve in their roles as biological fathers.

If male power in this play is, in fact, justified by children, then I would argue that part of the reason Macbeth is so vulnerable to feminine power and child-like tendencies is because he is missing this particular step into manhood. The men in this play who have sons/heirs become the source of ideal male power. Duncan's son, Malcolm, holds the most powerful role at the end of the play, so even though Duncan himself is dead, his son is able to carry on his name and his

legacy. Banquo also dies, but in the witches' apparitions, his line lives on through his son and a multitude of descendants who succeed him as rulers. Macduff, too, has a son, but his son dies, leaving Macduff essentially as barren as Macbeth by the end of the play. However, just the fact that he did, at one point, have a son, evidently gives Macduff a more powerful position in this play than Macbeth, as he is the one who ultimately kills the title character.

If we turn for a brief moment to examine Macduff's reaction to his family's death, we see that he is more upset over the loss of his son and heir than he is over his wife. He only mentions his wife once in his grief, but continues to pose the question, "my children too," as if he cannot believe that his heir is gone.

"...All my pretty ones?
 Did you say all?—O Hell-kite!—All?
 What, all my pretty chickens...
 At one fell swoop?"

(4.3.216-219)

This reaction testifies to the importance of children in the establishment of masculinity. It seems that a male child, especially, reaffirms masculinity and allows men to feel more secure in their position as achieved males, perhaps because of the thought that, with a male child to carry on the legacy, masculine power can continue into the next generation.

The obvious question, then, is where on the continuum is Shakespeare's version of the ideal man? Macbeth moves around on the continuum throughout the play, but he obviously moves too far in one direction because he is ultimately defeated. Before answering this question, though, we must first ask ourselves if there even *is* a version of Shakespeare's ideal male within *Macbeth*. Duncan seems to fulfill society's version of the ideal man. He is a leader, with the respect of the people according to Macbeth who claims that Duncan "hath been/ so clear in his great office" (1.7.18). He also has a son who is able to succeed him after his death and, perhaps

most importantly, it seems that Duncan has succeeded in completely disconnected himself from the female sphere. He has a son, but no wife in the play, which hints at the reproductive power attributed to males during this time period (footnote—Goldberg and paintings showing reproductive power of men). Yet, Duncan is killed by Macbeth who, at the time of Duncan's murder, is still trying to achieve masculinity. So, although Duncan seems to fulfill society's ideal male role, Shakespeare allows him to be killed by a man who is still dangerously comparable to a child, a clear warning against the destructive power of the female sphere of influence.

Perhaps an easier way to answer this question is to consider what type of man this play rewards. Who is still alive at the end of the play and who appears to be successful? Macduff seems like the most obvious choice, here, because he is the one who ultimately kills Macbeth. But, Macduff has lost his family, most importantly his son, and at the end of the play has no heir. Perhaps he is the perfect soldier at the end of the play, but he abandoned his family in a time of need, which does not correlate with the image of a leader as a father-figure to his people, suggesting that Macduff still has more to learn. Malcolm is rewarded with the highest position of power at the end of this play and has no ties to any of the females on stage. However, he fled in fear after his father's murder and only towards the very end of the play does he begin to take confident steps toward the true, societal ideal of masculinity.

It seems, then, that no man in this play fulfills what Shakespeare believes to be an ideal form of masculinity for leadership. I would argue, though, that a version Shakespeare's ideal man may be a conglomeration of pieces of Macbeth in the first act, before Duncan's murder, and pieces of Macduff towards the end of the play, which would place the ideal man almost in the middle of Shakespeare's gender continuum. Before Duncan's murder Macbeth has a conscience,

is loyal to his king, and respectful to his wife. He maintains his child-like vulnerability, giving him an innocence that grossly contrasts with his actions on the battlefield. But, he is still a defender of his country, in a similar way that Macduff fights for Scotland at the end of the play. Macduff's short monologue about his country insinuates both Macduff's loyalty to his country and the loyalty Macbeth abandoned after Duncan's murder:

“...O nation miserable!
With an untitled tyrant bloody-scepter'd,
When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again?”
(4.3.31-34)

This fierce loyalty in both of these men fulfills an important element in the early modern definition of maleness. However, Shakespeare also endows both Macbeth and Macduff with compassion and “human kindness,” traits that are contradictory to the popular view of ideal masculinity.

Within these men, though, lies one very specific difference, recognizable as the reason Macbeth is defeated by Macduff, and perhaps evidence that Macduff is closer to Shakespeare's version of an ideal man. Macduff makes an observation toward the end of the play that directly relates to Macbeth's defeat:

“Boundless intemperance
In nature is a tyranny; it hath been
Th'untimely emptying of the happy throne,
And fall of many kings.”
(4.3.66-69)

Here is the clear, defining difference between these two men. Macduff realizes the temptations and limitations of “nature” and, consequently, carries the true invulnerability that alludes Macbeth in the final moments of the play. Macduff understands that the desire to control nature, aligned with the feminine sphere of power, “is a tyranny” that “none of woman born” should attempt. With these words, he foreshadows the roots of Macbeth's ultimate defeat.

If the gender continuum moves from boys to men and the production of a boy is, in fact, directly connected to the male extreme of the continuum, this raises an important question about femininity and its place within these notions of gender. In his article “Male Surplus Value,” Donald Hedrick discusses performed degrees of masculinity on the London stages in early seventeenth century England. He argues that Shakespeare’s specific novelty was a “choice of masculinities rather than a unique, never-to-be-repeated masculinity.”⁶⁷ Hedrick’s argument is important because, as we look at Macbeth in these last moments of the play, we have to question what Shakespeare is saying about Macbeth’s masculinity. He becomes a hyper-male, having moved back and forth on the gender continuum with alarming frequency throughout the action of the play, transforming from a complex model of masculinity to a one-dimensional, militant masculinity that deprives him of certain qualities inherent within the more balanced masculinity Shakespeare proposes. On the surface, these degrees of masculinity do not include femininity and Hedrick’s argument does not take into account the power of the female within early modern society. Will Fisher also introduces the idea of a “gender continuum” that “males...are arrayed along” in his discussion of degrees of maleness physically represented in the beards of early modern English men. The larger cultural perceptions laid out in his argument can be applied to *Macbeth*, however I am adding one crucial element that both Hedrick and Fisher overlook—the concept of femininity and its place on the gender continuum as an element contained within masculinity.⁶⁸

I would argue that Shakespeare’s gender continuum includes femininity *embedded within it*. In this play in particular, Shakespeare lays out a very clear message that masculinity and femininity are intertwined and, as individuals move from one end of the masculinity spectrum to another, it is precisely this innate femininity that allows for that movement. Each notch on the

continuum represents another degree of repressed “human kindness,” another small deviation from the feminine sphere. By repressing certain degrees of “human kindness” throughout different moments in the play, Macbeth is able to move closer to society’s ideal masculinity. Yet, for Shakespeare, the normative ideal is far from ideal. Remember, the men rewarded in this play, Macduff in particular, are men with the ability to mix the iron will of societal masculinity with the compassionate “milk of human kindness.” In fact, the moment when Macbeth vehemently cuts himself off completely (or so he thinks) from “human kindness” and attempts to achieve ideal masculinity mirrors the moment of Lady Macbeth’s suicide, almost suggesting an internalized alter-gender within these characters. Macbeth’s figurative repression of femininity, the death of his feminine side, coincides with the literal death of Lady Macbeth. The implication is that individuals need to internalize their alter-gender and allow it to have a certain amount of influence over their behaviors. Yet reason, and not credibility or superstition must guide this allowed influence. This very clearly connects back to the subtle power of women in Renaissance England, fulfilling the role of the “ideal” woman, but maintaining a subtle source of power, unacknowledged publicly but recognized within the domestic sphere.

Because of his work with theater, Shakespeare clearly defines boys as something of a third gender, evident in *Macbeth* with his use of a boy to man gender continuum. If femininity is embedded within this continuum, what do these unconventional notions allow Shakespeare to say about more traditional, early modern notions of gender that structured males and females as separate species? Here is where we can begin to draw solid connections between gender on the London stage and gender in the streets of early modern England. It seems that Shakespeare asks his audience to recognize that the three genders—man, woman, and child—are intimately bound. Perhaps in order to succeed and become what is, in Shakespeare’s mind, an “ideal individual,”

one has to consciously internalize all three genders.⁶⁹ Macbeth is in his finest form of masculinity when he takes into account his “human kindness” and allows the feminine sphere to have a hold over him, while still submitting it to the strength of his masculine power.

--Epigraph--

The final question to ask is how do these characters and Shakespeare's gender continuum within this play promote a more modern understanding of gender as being performed or constructed? Judith Butler has argued that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender...identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results."⁷⁰ In other words, gender expressions that society and culture deem acceptable and appropriate are what make up the ideological notion of "gender identity." Or, as Macbeth poeticizes after the death of his wife, his alter-gender:

"Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more: it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing."

(5.5.24-28)

In these lines reads the underlying theme of the entire play—false appearances and individuals as "walking shadows" performing identities throughout life. Here, Macbeth is saying that as we "strut and fret" through our own performances, we become characters in our own old wives' tale, in a sense under the subtle, internalized power of the female narrative.

 Notes

- ¹ All *Macbeth* references are from the new Arden Shakespeare edition, edited by Kenneth Muir, (London: Methuen, 2006).
- ² Orgel, Stephen, Impersonations: The Performance of Gender in Shakespeare's England, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996): 13.
- ³ Kimbrough, Robert, "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender," Shakespeare Studies 16 (1983): 175.
- ⁴ Orgel 24.
- ⁵ See Jonathan Goldberg's brilliant analysis of gender roles within artwork from the English Renaissance. Goldberg, Jonathan, James I and the Politics of Literature, (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1983).
- ⁶ Kahn, Coppelia, Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981): 12.
- ⁷ Kahn 15.
- ⁸ Kahn 13.
- ⁹ Women in different social positions at this time did have varying, acknowledged degrees of liberty. In "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggles in Early Modern England," Jean Howard points out that "cities...created new and unsettling positions for women (middle-class women, in particular) to occupy: positions as consumers of urban pleasures such as theatergoing and of the commodities produced by English trade and manufacture; positions of economic power as widows of merchants or as visible workers in their husbands' shops" (426). Also see Joan Thirsk's work for further examples.
- ¹⁰ It is, of course, essential to remember that before James I ascended the throne, Queen Elizabeth controlled the highest position of power in the country for almost half a century, greatly altering the traditional gender structures of the patriarchy. Many scholars have taken her influence on gender relations into consideration. See, for instance, Orgel's *Impersonations*, specifically his discussion of the image of Elizabeth in armor as indicative of "the changing nature of the ideological discourse of gender roles in the period" (117). Also see Goldberg's interesting analysis of English Renaissance paintings suggesting King James' public attempt to claim Elizabeth as his rightful mother, rather than Mary, Queen of Scots, perhaps hoping to smoothly fill Elizabeth's position both on the throne and within the hearts of the English public.
- ¹¹ Orgel 26.
- ¹² Howard, Jean, "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggles in Early Modern England," Shakespeare Quarterly 39.4 (Winter, 1988): 418. Howard argues that "crossdressing, as fact and as idea, threatened a normative social order based upon strict principles of hierarchy and subordination, of which women's subordination to man was a chief instance."
- ¹³ Orgel 1.
- ¹⁴ Orgel 53.

¹⁵ Howard 431.

¹⁶ See Howard for a much more thorough analysis of the function of gender complications in both *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*.

¹⁷ Howard 434.

¹⁸ Howard 435.

¹⁹ Orgel 106. Orgel argues that theater from Shakespeare's time "both reveals the malleability of the masculine and empowers the feminine."

²⁰ For instance, see Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*, Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*, Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*, among many others.

²¹ Kimbrough 177.

²² For a fascinating analysis of this first battle scene presented in *Macbeth*, see: Adelman, Janet, "'Born of Woman': Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*," *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987). She defines the battle as a struggle between genders, "a contest between the half-female couple Fortune/Macdonwald and the all-male couple Valor/Macbeth" and supports my argument that, in this first report, "Macbeth...demonstrates his own untainted manhood."

²³ "Gentleman," *The Oxford English Dictionary*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989): 452, 1a.

²⁴ "Nature," OED: 247, 1a.

²⁵ In his work with paintings from the English Renaissance period, Goldberg makes the observation that women were often painted in front of gardens, trees, or other elements of nature, while men were more frequently painted in front of stone structures. Even in a painting where the couple is set outdoors, Goldberg finds "flowers behind the woman, stone and statuary behind the man," a distinction that reinforces societal gender definitions (101).

²⁶ Adelman 90.

²⁷ Adelman 101.

²⁸ Purkiss, Diane, "Macbeth and the All-Singing, All-Dancing Plays of the Jacobean Witch-Vogue: *The Masque of Queens, Macbeth, The Witch*," *The Witch in History*, (London: Routledge, 1996): 214.

²⁹ Purkiss 207.

³⁰ Larner, Christina, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983): 20.

³¹ Stallybrass, Peter, "Macbeth and Witchcraft," *Focus on Macbeth*, Ed. John Russell Brown, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982): 191.

³² Orgel, Stephen, *The Jonsonian Masque*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1965): 131.

³³ *Ben Jonson [Works]*, Ed. C.H. Herford, Percy & Evelyn Simpson, (Oxford, 1925-1952): 282, 16-19.

³⁴ Harris, Anthony, *Night's Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth-Century English Drama*, (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1980): 67.

³⁵ Orgel 134.

³⁶ Purkiss 211.

³⁷ Kahn 17.

³⁸ Lamb, Mary Ellen, "Old Wives' Tales," *The Popular Culture of Shakespeare, Spenser, and Jonson*, (London: Routledge, 2006): 48.

³⁹ Howard 426.

⁴⁰ Lamb 50.

⁴¹ Lamb 49.

⁴² Lamb 45.

⁴³ Lamb 45.

⁴⁴ "Most children, male or female, in Shakespeare's time...are not only born but raised by women" (Kahn 10)

⁴⁵ Orgel 15.

⁴⁶ Lamb 49.

⁴⁷ "The 'breeching' of boys was the formal move out of the common gender of childhood, which was both female in appearance and largely controlled by women, and into the world of men" (Orgel 15).

⁴⁸ Lamb 50.

⁴⁹ For other examples of blank verse in Shakespeare, see Hamlet's soliloquy (*Hamlet* 2.2.550) and Prospero's monologue (*The Tempest* 5.1.33). In these instances and many others, Shakespeare reserves blank verse for characters with a significant amount of power. References taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed.

⁵⁰ Shakespeare does not underestimate the power of women, despite their repression by various institutions. He has grown up under the reign of a very powerful queen and is fascinated by the powerful women of legend, evident within his plays: *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Henry VI* (Parts I, II, and II—Queen Margaret), and *Coriolanus* (Volumnia) to name a few.

⁵¹ The use of "storm raising" as a particular element of common witch-lore could have been very deliberate on Shakespeare's part, since James' first encounter with witchcraft was on his ship's voyage from Denmark back to Scotland. The witches in the play threaten to raise a storm to disrupt the voyage of a ship.

⁵² Larner 84.

⁵³ Fisher, Will, "The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England," *Renaissance Quarterly* 54.1 (2001). Fisher writes that "in the case of abjected beings who do not appear 'properly' gendered, it is not their gender but their very humanity that is called into question" (170).

⁵⁴ According to Fisher, in early seventeenth-century England, "the beard made the man" (156).

⁵⁵ Stallybrass 192.

⁵⁶ Harris recognizes this in *Night's Black Agents* when he writes, "despite the comparative brevity of their actual appearances, the influence of the Weird Sisters is all-pervasive" (48).

⁵⁷ Gurr, Andrew, *Playgoing in Shakespeare's London*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004): 65.

⁵⁸ In Fisher's essay on the Renaissance beard, he discusses the frequent use of prosthetic beards in all-boy acting companies as "a means of producing masculinity" (180).

⁵⁹ Fisher 175.

⁶⁰ Fisher 180, emphasis my own.

⁶¹ Fisher 173.

⁶² Fisher suggests that these costumes, specifically the prosthetic beards, "might have helped fashion an historically specific vision of what it meant to be a man" (166). With this statement, Fisher reinforces the connection between gender performance on and off stage, but he also suggests that these costumes could potentially be worn by a character *unsuited* to this specific "vision of man."

⁶³ It is probable that some of these parts are so well-developed because of acting necessities. The young boys playing these roles needed to be trained, and playing strong female roles would have helped prepare them for later roles as strong adult males.

⁶⁴ Adelman 90, emphasis my own.

⁶⁵ Adelman 90.

⁶⁶ "Kings are also compared to fathers of families, for a king is truly...*the political father of his people*" (Carroll 217, emphasis my own).

⁶⁷ Hedrick 10—find full citation.

⁶⁸ Fisher 181.

⁶⁹ These three genders make up the ideal family in early seventeenth century England and reinforce the "proto-bourgeois" ideal with which critics have associated Shakespeare for some time.

⁷⁰ Butler, Judith, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (London: Routledge, 1999): 25.

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